THE COMPLETE WORKS OF PRIMO LEVI

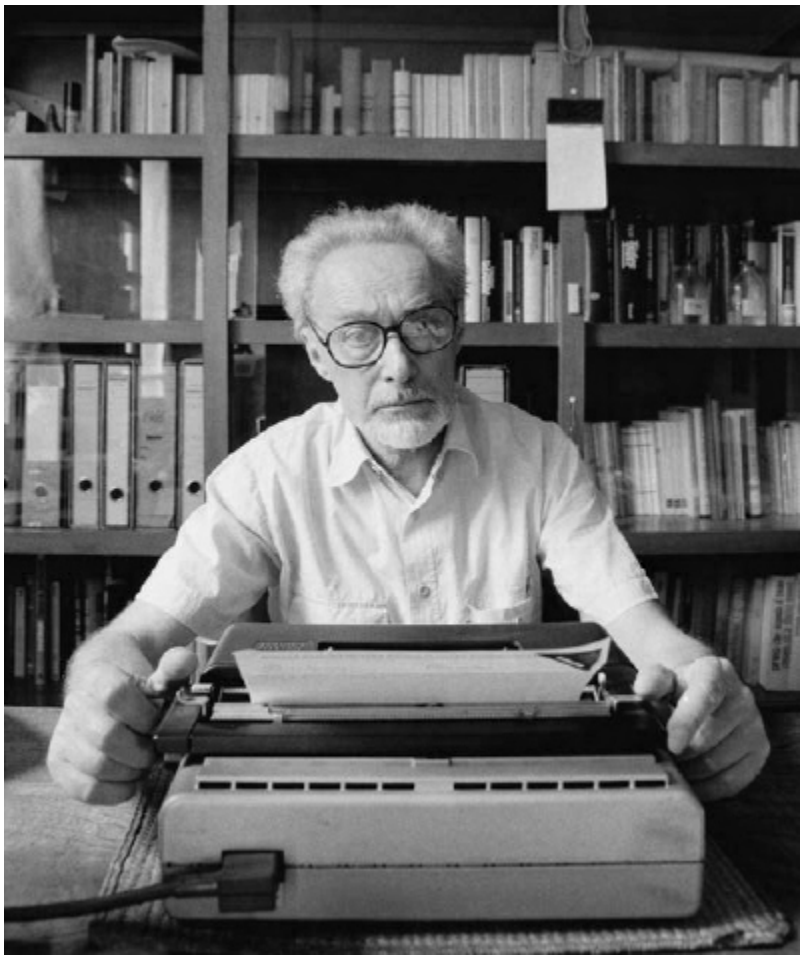
Edited by ANN GOLDSTEIN

Introduction by TONI MORRISON

VOLUMES I · II · III

The Complete Works of

Primo Levi



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Volume I



INTRODUCTION

The Complete Works of Primo Levi is far more than a welcome opportunity to reevaluate and reexamine historical and contemporary plagues of systematic necrology; it becomes a brilliant deconstruction of malign forces. The triumph of human identity and worth over the pathology of human destruction glows virtually everywhere in Levi's writing. For a number of reasons his works are singular amid the wealth of Holocaust literature.

First, for me, is his language—infused as it is with references to and intimate knowledge of ancient and modern sources of philosophy, poetry, and the figurative uses of scientific knowledge. Virgil, Homer, Eliot, Dante, Rilke play useful roles in his efforts to understand the life he lived in the concentration camp, as does his deep knowledge of science. Everything Levi knows he puts to use. Ungraspable as the necrotic impulse is, the necessity to "tell," to describe the "monotonous horror of the mud," is vital as he speaks for and of the throngs who died in vain. Language is the gold he mines to counter the hopelessness of meaningful communication between prisoners and guards. A pointed example of that hopelessness is the exchange, recounted in *If This Is a Man,* between himself and a guard when he breaks off an icicle to soothe his thirst. The guard snatches it from his hand. When Levi asks "Why?" the guard answers, "There is no why here." While the oppressors rely on sarcasm laced with cruelty, the prisoners employ looks, glances, facial expressions for clarity and meaning. Although photographs of troughs of corpses stun viewers with the scale of ruthlessness, it is language that seals and reclaims the singularity of human existence. Yet the response to visual images collapses before language—its stretch and depth can be more revelatory than the personal experience itself.

Everywhere in the language of this collection is the deliberate and sustained glorification of the human. Long after his eleven months in what he calls the Lager (Auschwitz III), as a survivor, Primo Levi understands evil as not only banal but unworthy of our insight—even of our intelligence,

for it reveals nothing interesting or compelling about itself. It has merely size to solicit our attention and an alien stench to repel or impress us. For this articulate survivor, individual identity is supreme; efforts to drown identity inevitably become futile. He refuses to place cruel and witless slaughter on a pedestal of fascination or to locate in it any serious meaning. His primary focus is ethics.

His disdain for necrology is legend. Dwelling on memories—his and others'—of survival rather than on the monstrous detritus of suffering, he is compelled by how suffering is borne whatever its consequence. Time and time again we are moved by his narratives of how men refuse erasure.

Melancholy and sorrow often reside more in his poetry than in his prose. There we find insects, accusatory ghosts, and the sadness of place. In two of his poems, "Song of the Crow I" and "Song of the Crow II," desolation is an inner reality monitored by a malevolent companion.

In the first, memory and sorrow are fixed and eternal.

"I've come from very far away
To bring bad news.
. . . . . .
To find your window,
To find your ear,
To bring you the sad news
To take the joy from your sleep,
To spoil your bread and wine,
To sit in your heart each evening."

The second "Song of the Crow" is even more resonant of despair.

"What is the number of your days? I've counted them:
Few and brief, and each one heavy with cares;
With anguish about the inevitable night,
When nothing saves you from yourself;
With fear of the dawn that follows,
With waiting for me, who wait for you,
With me who (hopeless, hopeless to escape!)
Will chase you to the ends of the earth,
Riding your horse,
Darkening the bridge of your ship

With my little black shadow,
Sitting at the table where you sit,
Certain guest at every haven,
Sure companion of your every rest.”

Clearly exposed in Primo Levi’s work, the violent guards, whatever their power, come across as cowards who are more dangerous than the brave. It is also clear that, upon reflection, defiant humanism must share its sphere with the Crow.

TONI MORRISON
January 2015

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Primo Levi is known to English-speaking readers mainly for his writings on the Holocaust, *If This Is a Man*, *The Truce*, and *The Drowned and the Saved*, and for the autobiographical *The Periodic Table*. Yet he did not want to be characterized only as a Holocaust writer, and the label does him a regrettable injustice, for he was also a prolific writer of stories, essays, novels, and poems, on a wide range of scientific, literary, and autobiographical subjects. He liked to refer to himself as a centaur: a chemist and a writer, a witness and a storyteller, an Italian and a Jew. Saul Bellow, referring to *The Periodic Table*, noted: "There is nothing superfluous here, everything this book contains is essential." The same could be said of virtually all Levi's works, even the so-called minor ones.

One of the reasons for Levi's specialized reputation may be that until now his works have been available to the English-speaking audience only in piecemeal fashion. Some stories and essays had not been translated; some that had been translated were hard to find; and, perhaps most crucial, there was no single edition in English that brought together his diverse writings in the form in which they originally appeared. There has thus been a real need for his works to be collected, scrupulously translated, and presented to an audience—both the general public and academia—that has long awaited access to his complete oeuvre. These three volumes are intended to address that need.

The project began some fifteen years ago, when Robert Weil, now the editor in chief of the newly revived Liveright imprint at W. W. Norton, had the idea for such an edition and began assembling the English rights to Levi's works. I joined the project in 2004. When we started looking at the current English editions, we realized that, given their incomplete nature, we had an opportunity to present Levi as he presented himself—that is, to present the books as they had appeared in Italian, chronologically and in the same format. Levi published most of his stories and essays—and, indeed, many of the chapters of his books—in newspapers and periodicals. Over

forty years, he himself put together three collections of stories (*Natural Histories*, *Flaw of Form*, and *Lilith and Other Stories*), one of essays (*Other People's Trades*), and one mixed (*Stories and Essays*). In addition, there were dozens of pieces—fiction, forewords, reviews, comments on and reactions to current events—that he did not organize into volumes himself but that were collected posthumously, as part of the Italian *Opere*, or *Complete Works*, edited by Marco Belpoliti and brought out by Levi's publisher, Einaudi, in 1997. None of the collections made by Levi had been published in English in their entirety. A selection of stories from *Natural Histories* and *Flaw of Form* was published as *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*, in 1990, and one section of *Lilith*, "Present Perfect," was published as *Moments of Reprieve*, in 1986. A version of *Other People's Trades* came out in 1989, containing thirty-nine of the original fifty-one essays plus four from *Stories and Essays*, and a selection of pieces from the latter was published in English as *The Mirror Maker*, in 1989. An Italian volume culled from the previously uncollected essays came out in English in 2005 as *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*. And *A Tranquil Star*, published in 2006, includes previously untranslated stories from *Flaw of Form* and *Lilith*, as well as some previously untranslated and uncollected stories.

In essence, the three volumes of this new *Complete Works* follow the *Opere* brought out by Einaudi in two volumes in 1997. In accord with the idea of a uniform edition, and in the interest of achieving a high degree of consistency and accuracy, we decided not only to translate new material but also to retranslate what had been previously translated. (The one exception is *If This Is a Man*: here we were fortunate to discover that Stuart Woolf, the original translator, had always wanted to revise his 1959 translation, and the revised version is the one that appears in this volume.)

In the Einaudi volumes, the books proceed chronologically, and the same has been done here. The material previously uncollected in Italian appears in two parts, entitled *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980* and *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1981–1987*. In addition, *If This Is a Man* is followed by an appendix in which Levi answered readers' questions, and which, starting in 1976, was, by Levi's wish, part of every edition of the book. The various story and essay collections—*Natural Histories*, *Flaw of Form*, *Other People's Trades*, and *Stories and Essays*—are presented for the first time in English in the formats that Levi gave them. And we have given the original titles to Levi's first two works, *If This Is a Man* and *The*

Truce, which had been published in America under what at the time were considered the more commercially viable titles of, respectively, *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening*. *The Wrench*, published in America as *The Monkey's Wrench*, has also had its original title restored. (Unlike the Italian *Opere*, this new English edition does not include *The Search for Roots*, an anthology of passages, chosen by Levi, from writers important to him.)

The first volume of the *Complete Works* contains *If This Is a Man*, Levi's memoir of Auschwitz, and *The Truce*, his account of the nine-month journey home after the liberation of the camp, along with *Natural Histories* (1966) and *Flaw of Form* (1971). These two collections, which appear at the end of the first volume, include stories in a gentle science fiction vein, of a type that Levi had been writing since the forties, each one based on a technical idea originating in the laboratory or the factory. The first volume also contains a chronology and maps showing Levi's world of Turin and Piedmont.

The second volume begins with *The Periodic Table*, an autobiography in which each chapter has the name of, and is based on, an element of the periodic table. It is followed by *The Wrench*, a cycle of stories in which a rigger named Faussone recounts his adventures on the job at construction sites all over the world, from India to Alaska; the first series of *Uncollected Stories and Essays*, covering the years 1949 through 1980; and *Lilith and Other Stories*, a three-part collection of tales written in the 1970s and 1980s. The first section of *Lilith*, "Present Perfect," consists of stories based on the Holocaust; the second, "Future Anterior," of Levi's particular sort of science fiction; and the third, "Present Indicative," of stories based in everyday life. This volume concludes with Levi's only real novel, *If Not Now, When?*, a "Western," as he called it, about a band of Jewish partisans in Russia and Poland during the war.

The third and final volume contains the *Collected Poems*; the essay collection *Other People's Trades*; the two-part *Stories and Essays*; Levi's more philosophical reflection on the Holocaust, *The Drowned and the Saved*; and *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1981–1987*. Levi may be least well-known as a poet, but upon his return from Auschwitz, as he was intensely writing the chapters of what became *If This Is a Man*, he was also writing poems about the experience, and he continued to write poems steadily, if irregularly, throughout his life. In a 1979 interview, he noted that his natural state was not that of a poet but that every so often

“this curious infection appears . . . which erupts in a rash. . . . One finds the kernel of a poem in one’s body, the first line or a line, then the rest comes out.” *Other People’s Trades* is a collection of essays on a broad array of topics, ranging from the characters in Aldous Huxley’s novels to the origin and use of lac (the resinous substance used chiefly in shellac), and from why poets and chess players are irritable to the language of smells. *Stories and Essays* is made up of pieces originally published in the Turin daily *La Stampa* between the midseventies and the mideighties. In the highly influential ethical and moral meditation *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi examined the experience of Auschwitz forty years later, confronting such themes as the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, the importance of memory and of bearing witness.

The third volume also contains notes on the texts, which provide the bibliographic and publishing history for each book; essays on Primo Levi in America and in the world; and a select bibliography. We did not want to overwhelm the text with annotation, but throughout we have supplied, in footnotes, basic information about literary and other works, people, places, and events that might not be familiar to the English-speaking reader. Each work has been considered a separate unit, and thus certain notes are repeated.

One of the first things that Levi realized upon arriving in Auschwitz was how crucial language can be: even his rudimentary German, his ability to grasp orders that, if not followed, could lead to death, gave him an advantage. At another extreme of language is the child Hurbinek of *The Truce*, encountered in a makeshift Russian hospital after the collapse of Auschwitz. Hurbinek has no language, yet is desperate to speak: “His eyes, lost in his pinched, triangular face, flashed, terribly alive, full of demand, of insistence, of the will to be unchained, to shatter the tomb of his muteness. The speech that he lacked, that no one had taken care of teaching him, the need for speech, persisted in his gaze with explosive urgency.” Hurbinek dies: it is only through Levi’s words that he speaks—that he exists.

Levi’s fascination with language and words is powerfully evident in “Argon,” the first chapter of *The Periodic Table*, in which he discusses the vocabulary of his Piedmontese-Jewish forebears, but also, on another level,

in a story like “Dizzying Heat,” in which he invents a series of palindromes. He strove in his writing for lucidity, precision, conciseness—qualities that he attributed in part to his training and profession as a chemist. He cited as a model the weekly report in the paint factory where he worked: clear, to the point, and understandable by everyone. Yet there is nothing cold or detached about this clarity; the tone is that of a scientific observer who is often humorous and sometimes moralistic but never pedantic or condescending. Although the structure of Levi’s sentences can be complex, it is not convoluted, and although he is not a fancy or elaborate writer, he often uses unusual words, especially technical and scientific ones, and so we find phenolic and maleic resins, a bevel gear and a centrifugal pump, the chemical formula for alloxan. He also liked to make up words, such as “disphylaxis” or “mnemagog.” His descriptions, whether of actual experiences or invented ones, are always meticulous; in a few pages he can create an entire world. In “*Cladonia Rapida*” (from *Natural Histories*) he gives us the full history of an automobile parasite, while in a single sentence, in the chapter “Zinc,” from *The Periodic Table*, we learn all the qualities of the element: “Zinc, *zinco, Zink:* laundry tubs are made of it, it’s an element that doesn’t say much to the imagination, it’s gray and its salts are colorless, it’s not toxic, it doesn’t provide gaudy chromatic reactions—in other words, it’s a boring element.”

Levi’s works have been newly translated here by Anne Milano Appel, Alessandra Bastagli and Francesco Bastagli, Jonathan Galassi, Ann Goldstein, Jenny McPhee, Michael F. Moore, Nathaniel Rich, Antony Shugaar, and Stuart Woolf, many of whom have also added an afterword to their translations. In an essay on translation, Levi enumerates some of the pitfalls in transferring a text from one language to another—false friends, idiomatic phrases, local terms—and points out that it’s not enough simply to avoid the traps: that the translator’s most effective weapon is “a linguistic sensibility.” In a note to his own translation of Kafka’s *The Trial*, he said that he had tried to find a middle course between a propensity “to smooth what was rough,” retelling the story in “a language that has nothing to do with the original,” and offering a line-for-line, word-for-word transcription:

“I made a determined effort to balance faithfulness to the text with the flow of expression.” Some of the specific problems of translating Levi have been indicated above: the sometimes complicated syntax; the science, including not just technical terms but descriptions of intricate biological or chemical processes or operations; the essays specifically about words or language, in which the English-language reader’s need for explanation might overwhelm the point, as in discussions of differences between Italian and the Piedmontese dialect. Finally, there is the obvious difficulty in these volumes of many voices attempting to represent the voice of a single writer, albeit in different works. We believe that the talents and the efforts of the individual translators and their sensitivity to the language and to the texts, guided by a uniform editorial standard, have resulted in a tone that is consistent and consistently recognizable, if you will, as Levian, and our hope is to have demonstrated that “linguistic sensibility,” keeping to a rigorous degree of accuracy without losing the eloquence, and purity, of the original.

Levi reflects on writing and language in a surprising number of essays. In his emphasis on the need for clarity, he didn’t mean that writing, or language, had to be simple; but it should be comprehensible, and it was up to the writer to be sure that the reader, “maybe with some effort,” could understand him. Looking back at his life as a writer, he described his feelings after the belated success of *If This Is a Man*: “I realized that I had a new instrument in my hands, intended to weigh, to divide, to verify—like the ones in my laboratory, but flexible, quick, gratifying.”

These new volumes, by presenting Levi in all his facets, will enable English-speaking readers to encounter for the first time the entire range of his versatile, inventive, curious, crystalline intelligence. In doing so, they will discover a writer they may not have fully known, one whom Italo Calvino called among “the most important and gifted writers of our time.”

ANN GOLDSTEIN

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ANN GOLDSTEIN

CHRONOLOGY

1919

JULY 31: Primo Levi is born in Turin, in the house where he will live for his entire life. His forebears are Piedmontese Jews, originally from Spain and Provence. Levi describes their habits, their style of life, and their language in "Argon," the first chapter of *The Periodic Table*, but he doesn't remember any of them apart from his grandparents. His paternal grandfather, Michele Levi, was a civil engineer who lived in Bene Vagienna, a village in the Piedmontese province of Cuneo, where he had a house and a small farm; he died, a suicide, in 1888. Levi's maternal grandfather, Cesare Luzzati, was a cloth merchant who died in 1941. His father, Cesare, born in 1878, graduated with a degree in electrical engineering in 1901. After various periods of working abroad, in 1918 he married Ester Luzzati (1895–1991). Levi recalls his father as an extrovert, modern for his time, a man who loved good living and good reading but was not much interested in family matters.

> He went to temple on Yom Kippur because he was a bit superstitious, but he also was friendly with [Cesare] Lombroso, the positivist physiologist, in Turin; he attended séances, not because he believed in spirits but in order to understand what was behind them.[1]
>
> We were very different. He was a fine person, but he didn't have much inclination for the career of father. . . . He left me a library, a love of books, a certain spiritual tension.[2]

1921

Levi's sister, Anna Maria, is born. Levi remained very close to her all his life.

1925–1930

Levi attends elementary school; his health is delicate, and for a year at the end of elementary school he has private lessons. He also attends Hebrew

School, in preparation for his bar mitzvah.

> Like all the children of the Jewish community in Turin, I was taught the basics of our religion. At the age of thirteen I had my "initiation," following which I was accepted as a full member of the community. This ceremony is called bar mitzvah, which means literally "son of the law." . . . I went through the ceremony passively. I have no pride in being Jewish. I never felt that I was a member of the chosen people who have made an iron pact with God. I'm Jewish because I happened to be born Jewish. I'm not ashamed nor do I boast of it. Being Jewish, for me, is a question of "identity": an "identity" of which, I have to say this, too, I do not intend to strip myself.[3]

1934

Levi enrolls in high school, at the Ginnasio-Liceo D'Azeglio, an institution known for its anti-Fascist teachers. With Mussolini's dictatorship firmly established, however, the high school has been "purged" and is now politically agnostic. Levi is a shy, diligent, but undistinguished student, far more interested in chemistry and biology than in history and Italian.

> My vocation for chemistry began at fourteen. My father cautiously pressured me to concentrate on science in high school. He loved books, he bought books randomly and had the passions of an autodidact. He had studied many things on his own and continued to study until the end of his life. He filled the house with strange books, some of which I still have.[4]

He forms friendships that will last his whole life. He goes on long vacations in the Italian Alps; this marks the start of his love for the mountains. He reads *Concerning the Nature of Things*, by Sir William Bragg.

> I was enthralled by the clear and simple things it said, and I decided that I would be a chemist. Between the lines I read a great hope: models on a human scale, concepts of structure and measurement reaching far, toward both the minuscule world of atoms and the boundless world of the stars—perhaps infinitely far? If so, we live in a conceivable universe, comprehensible to our imagination, and the anguish of the darkness gives way before the ardor of research.[5]

1937

OCTOBER: Having been held back in Italian at the end of high school, Levi retakes the final exam in order to graduate and get his diploma. He then enrolls as a chemistry student in the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Turin.

> Every year had its laboratory: we were there for five hours a day—it was quite a commitment. An extraordinary experience. In the first place because you were working with your hands: literally, it was the first time I'd done this, even though maybe you burned your hands or cut them. It was a return to origins.[6]

1938

AUTUMN: After a yearlong publicity campaign, the Fascist government promulgates the racial laws; Jews are forbidden to go to public schools, but those who are already enrolled in the university are permitted to continue their studies and get their degrees. Levi is friendly with students in anti-Fascist circles, both Jewish and not. He reads Mann, Huxley, Sterne, Werfel, Darwin, and Tolstoy.

> I read a lot because I came from a family in which reading was an innocent and traditional vice, a gratifying habit, a mental gymnastics, an obligatory and compulsive way of filling empty time, and a sort of mirage in the direction of knowledge. My father always had three books that he was reading at the same time; he read "when he sat in his house, when he walked by the way, and when he lay down and when he rose." He had a tailor make him jackets with large, deep pockets, each of which could hold a book. He had two brothers who read just as avidly and indiscriminately.[7]

> The racial laws were providential for me, but also for others: they constituted the *reductio ad absurdum* of the stupidity of fascism. The criminal face of fascism had been forgotten. . . . The idiotic one remained to be seen. . . . In my family Fascism was accepted, with some annoyance. My father joined the Party reluctantly, but still he wore the black shirt. And I was a Balilla and then an Avanguardista [the Balilla and the Avanguardisti were the Fascist youth organizations; enrollment was obligatory for all Italian youths]. I would say that for me, and for others, the racial laws gave us back our free will.[8]

1941

JULY: Levi graduates cum laude. His diploma notes that he is "of the Jewish race." Of his chemistry textbook and its author (Ludwig Gattermann's *Die Praxis des organischen Chemikers*), he writes:

> One feels in it something more noble than pure technical information: the authority of one who teaches things because he knows them, and he knows them because he has lived them; a grave but firm call to responsibility, the first I had had, at twenty-two, after sixteen years of studying and infinite books read. The words of the Father, then, which awaken you out of childhood and declare you to be an adult, conditionally.[9]

His father is dying of cancer. Levi searches frantically for a job to support the family. He finds one (semi-legal, because businesses are not

allowed to hire Jews) in an asbestos mine in Balanagero, near Lanzo. Officially he doesn't figure in the company's books, but he works in a chemical laboratory (see the chapter "Nickel" in *The Periodic Table*).

1942

Levi finds a better-paid situation in Milan, at Wander, a Swiss drug company, where he is assigned to research new diabetes drugs (see "Phosphorus" in *The Periodic Table*).

He has a group of friends from Turin, "boys and girls, who had for various reasons landed in the big city that the war made inhospitable" (see "Gold" in *The Periodic Table*). They included the architect Eugenio Gentili Tedeschi, Carla Consonni, Silvio Ortona, Ada Della Torre (Levi's cousin), Vanda Maestro (who later dies in Auschwitz), and Emilio Diena. Gentili Tedeschi recalls that the young Levi impressed them with the quality of his imagination, and the friends predicted for him a sure future as a scientist:

> Primo Levi explains our immaturity well. We lived in uncertainty and expectation. Each of us had been surprised by the racial laws at a vulnerable moment: at the end of the studies that were very important to us and that we wanted to finish. So we had missed the year, 1939, when one could still leave the country. We remained stuck here and we tried to survive, supporting what remained of our families.[10]

NOVEMBER: The Allies land in North Africa. Levi and his friends make contact with members of anti-Fascist organizations, and their political education is rapidly completed. Levi joins the clandestine Action Party.

1943

SUMMER: The Fascist government falls on July 25 and Mussolini is arrested. On September 8, the new government, headed by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, announces an armistice with the Allies. The German armed forces, considering themselves betrayed, occupy northern and central Italy. Levi joins a partisan group operating in Valle d'Aosta, in the Alps.

DECEMBER 13: At dawn Levi is arrested near Brusson with other comrades, including his Jewish friends Luciana Nissim and Vanda Maestro. Many years later, in 1980, he writes to Paolo Momigliano, president of the

Historical Institute of the Resistance in Valle d'Aosta: "My time as a partisan in Valle d'Aosta was undoubtedly the most opaque of my career, and I would not recount it willingly: it's a story of well-intentioned but foolish youths, and it's best left among the things that are forgotten. The allusions contained in *The Periodic Table* are more than enough." (See the chapter "Gold.") After his capture, Levi is sent to the transit camp of Fòssoli, near Modena.

> The Fascists didn't treat us badly, they let us write, they let us receive packages from home, they swore to us on their "Fascist faith" that they would keep us there until the end of the war.[11]

1944

FEBRUARY: Fòssoli is taken over by the Germans, who send Levi and some six hundred and fifty other prisoners off on a train whose destination is Auschwitz. When the train stops at Bolzano, the last Italian city before the border with Austria, Levi and his friends Vanda Maestro and Luciana Nissim drop a postcard, already stamped and addressed to their friend Bianca Guidetti Serra, from the car they are locked in. The card bears the motto of the Fascist regime in wartime: "Vinceremo" (We will win). Next to it, written in pencil, are the words "SEND, please." The card arrives at its destination: "Dear Bianca, all traveling in the classic manner—say hello to everyone—the torch to you. Ciao Bianca, we love you. Primo, Vanda, Luciana." The torch was the symbol of the Action Party, in which all four are active.

The journey lasts four days and four nights. At the end, ninety-five men and twenty-nine women are selected to enter the Lager. All the others—men, women, old people, children—are sent to the gas chamber.

> There wasn't one camp at Auschwitz, there were thirty-nine. There was the town of Auschwitz and in it was a Lager, and it was Auschwitz properly so-called, that is, the capital of the system; two kilometers to the south there was Birkenau, or Auschwitz II; that's where the gas chambers were. It was an enormous Lager, divided into four to six adjoining Lagers. Farther up was the factory, and near the factory was Monowitz, or Auschwitz III: that was where I was. The camp had been financed by the factory, and belonged to it. Around it were thirty to thirty-five smaller camps (mines, weapons factories, farms, etc.). In my camp there were about ten thousand of us.[12]

Levi attributes his survival to a series of fortunate circumstances. He had a good enough knowledge of German so that he could understand the orders of his jailers. In addition, by the end of 1943, the shortage of manpower in Germany was such that it became indispensable to employ even Jews, a reservoir of free labor, rather than kill them outright.

> We Italian Jews didn't speak Yiddish; we were foreigners to the Germans and foreigners also to the Eastern European Jews, who had no idea that a Judaism like ours existed. . . . We felt particularly defenseless. We and the Greeks were the lowest of the low; I would say that we were worse off than the Greeks, because the Greeks were in large part habituated to discrimination; anti-Semitism existed in Salonika, and many of the Salonikan Jews were used to anti-Semitism on the part of non-Jewish Greeks. But the Italians, the Italian Jews, so accustomed to being considered equal to everyone else, were truly without armor, as naked as an egg without a shell.[13]

> The most difficult thing to convey was the "boredom," the total boredom, the monotony, the lack of events, the days that were all the same. This is the experience of the prisoner, and it produces a curious effect, which is that the days are extremely long while they're being lived, but as soon as they're over they seem extremely short, because there's nothing in them.[14]

> At Auschwitz I became a Jew. The consciousness of feeling different was forced upon me. Someone, for no reason in the world, decided that I was different and inferior: my natural reaction was, in those years, to feel different and superior. . . . In that sense, Auschwitz gave me something that has stayed with me. By making me feel Jewish, it inspired me to retrieve, afterward, a cultural patrimony that I hadn't had before.[15]

JUNE: Levi is sent to work with a team of bricklayers who are building a wall. He meets a Piedmontese mason, Lorenzo Perrone, who works for an Italian company that has moved to Auschwitz, and who has a certain freedom of movement. Perrone takes Levi under his protection, and every day brings him an extra ration of soup, collected from the leftovers in his camp.

NOVEMBER: Because of his chemistry training, Levi is transferred to a laboratory.

1945

JANUARY: For almost his entire time in the Lager, Levi had managed not to get sick, but now he contracts scarlet fever. With the Russians approaching, the Germans evacuate the camp, abandoning the prisoners in the infirmary, including Levi, to their fate. The rest of the inmates begin a

forced march toward Buchenwald and Mauthausen, during which most of them die.

> I remember having lived my Auschwitz year in a condition of exceptional spiritedness: I don’t know if this depended on my professional background, or an unsuspected stamina, or on a sound instinct. I never stopped recording the world and people around me, so much that I still have an unbelievably detailed image of them. I had an intense wish to understand, I was constantly pervaded by a curiosity that somebody afterward did, in fact, deem nothing less than cynical, the curiosity of the naturalist who finds himself transplanted into an environment that is monstrous, but new, monstrously new.[16]

Levi lives for several months in a Soviet transit camp in the Polish city of Katowice, where he works as a nurse. At Katowice, at the request of the Soviet authorities, Levi and Leonardo De Benedetti, his friend and a doctor, write a *Report on the Hygienic-Sanitary Organization of the Concentration Camp for Jews in Monowitz (Auschwitz—Upper Silesia)*. The text appears in the scientific journal *Minerva Medica* in November 1946.



Turin

1. Corso Re Umberto 75: Levi lived in an apartment on the fourth floor of this building for his entire life.
2. Via Roma 37: Fabric store of Levi's maternal grandfather, Cesare Luzzati.
3. Via Po 24: Apartment of Levi's paternal grandmother, Adele Sinigaglia (Nona Milla); his father, Cesare, grew up here.
4. Via Giuseppe Gallieno 18: House of Levi's high school friend Mario Piacenza, "Enrico" in the chapter "Hydrogen" in *The Periodic Table*.
5. Via Montebello 15: Childhood home of Bianca Guidetti Serra, who fought in the Resistance and was active with Levi in the Action Party.
6. Corso Re Umberto 61: House of Leonardo De Benedetti, the doctor who, like Levi, was deported to Auschwitz and who appears in *The Truce*.
7. Felice Rignon school, Via Massena 39: Levi's elementary school.
8. 25–27 Corso Manzoni: Levi took classes in Swedish gymnastics here as a boy.
9. Ginnasio-Liceo d'Azeglio, Via Parini 8: Levi attended middle school and high school here, receiving his diploma in 1937.
10. The site of an already obsolete stadium, since demolished, where Levi and his schoolmates challenged one another in sports (see "A Long Duel" in *Other People's Trades*).
11. Institute of Chemistry, Via Pietro Giuria 1: Levi attended university here.
12. Hebrew School, Via Sant'Anselmo 7: In 1941 Levi attended, in the school's gym, a cycle of readings from the Bible in which it was interpreted in terms of current politics.
13. Goethe Institute, Piazza San Carlo 206: After he retired, Levi took advanced German courses here.
14. Temple of the Jewish Community, Via San Pio V (today, Piazzetta Primo Levi).
15. Luxemburg International Bookshop, Via Cesare Battisti 7: Levi's favorite bookstore.
16. Palazzo Lascaris, Via Alfieri 15: Here, on November 22, 1986, Levi made his last public appearance, at a conference organized by the National Association of Former Deputees on the theme "Lived History."
17. Teatro Carignano, Piazza Carignano 6: The dramatic version of *If This Is a Man*, mounted by the Teatro Stabile, played here in 1966.
18. Historical Institute of the Resistance in Piedmont, Via Fabro 6: Levi served as a member of the institute's board starting in 1985.
19. Via Massena 42: In 1947–48, Levi and his friend Alberto Salmoni worked as chemists and consultants here, operating out of Salmoni's bedroom.
20. SIVA, Corso Regina Margherita 264: Levi worked in this building from 1948 until 1953, when the factory moved to Settimo Torinese.
21. Via Bertola 40/1: Offices of De Silva, the first publisher of *If This Is a Man*.
22. Via Bonelli 3: Offices of Boringhieri, the scientific and technical publisher for whom Levi did work.
23. Via Umberto Biancamano 1: Offices of Einaudi, the publisher that in 1958 brought out the second edition of *If This Is a Man*, and from then on published almost all Levi's works.
24. Via Marenco 32: Offices of *La Stampa*, the leading daily newspaper in Turin.
25. RAI, Via Giuseppe Verdi 16: In 1964, the radio version of *If This Is a Man* was broadcast from studios here.
26. Cinema Romano, Galleria Subalpina: The Teatro delle Dieci company staged three stories from *Natural Histories* ("Sleeping Beauty in the Refrigerator," "The Versifier," and "The Sixth Day") here in 1966, in the theater's lobby.

JUNE: The journey of repatriation begins. Levi and his companions follow an absurdly labyrinthine route, which takes them first to White Russia and then through Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, and Austria. Levi arrives in Turin on October 19. (The experience is recounted in *The Truce.*)

> Family, home, factory are good things in themselves, but they deprived me of something that I still miss: adventure. Destiny decided that I should find adventure in the awful mess of a Europe swept by war.[17]

1946

Reintegration into Italy in the aftermath of a devastating war is difficult. Levi finds work at the DUCO-Montecatini paint factory, in Avigliana, near Turin. He is obsessed by the ordeals he has suffered and feverishly writes the accounts that will become *If This Is a Man*. Yet he manages to find relief in the experience of writing.

> Before I was arrested I had already written a story; I still have a copy, but I've been careful not to publish it. It was a mediocre flourish, with a little of everything in it. . . . There's a lot of the natural world, rocks and plants. Maybe that's what I would have written about, yes, that world fascinated me. But the experience of the concentration camp was fundamental. Obviously I wouldn't go back; yet alongside the horror of the experience, which I still feel, I can't deny that it also had positive results. There, it seems to me, I learned to understand the facts about men.[18]

> For the survivor, to tell is an important and complex undertaking. It is perceived, at the same time, as a moral and civic obligation, as a primary, liberating need, and as social capital: someone who has experienced the Lager feels that he is the repository of a fundamental experience, inserted into the history of the world, a witness by right and by duty, frustrated if his testimony is not asked for and acknowledged, rewarded if it is.[19]

> [In *If This Is a Man*] I tried to write the biggest, heaviest, most important things. . . . It seemed to me that the theme of indignation should prevail: it was testimony in an almost legal form, intended as an indictment—not for the purpose of provoking reprisal, revenge, punishment but purely as testimony. And so certain subjects seemed to me somewhat marginal . . . let's say, an octave lower, and these I wrote about much later.[20]

> The question that is often asked by high school readers ("If you hadn't been in the Lager and hadn't studied chemistry, would you still have been a writer? And, if so, in the same way?") could be answered logically only by taking another Primo Levi who didn't study chemistry and who began writing. The counter-proof doesn't exist. Sometimes, forcing the paradox a little, I've said that my model for writing was the short, end-of-the-week factory report, and to

a certain extent it's true. I was struck by a statement attributed to Fermi, who also was bored when he had to write a paper in high school. The only subject he would gladly have taken up was: Describe a two-lire coin. The same thing often happens to me: if I have to describe a two-lire coin I'm successful. If I have to describe something indefinite, for example a human character, then I'm less successful.[21]

He becomes engaged to Lucia Morpurgo.

1947

Levi leaves DUCO. For a short, frustrating period he works with a friend.

SEPTEMBER: He marries Lucia Morpurgo.

OCTOBER: *If This Is a Man* is published by De Silva, with a drawing from Goya's *Disasters of War* on the cover.

I had written some stories on my return from prison. I had written them without realizing that they could be a book. My friends from the Resistance, after reading them, told me to "fill them out," to make a book out of them. It was 1947, I brought it to Einaudi. It had various readers, and it fell to my friend Natalia Ginzburg to tell me that Einaudi wasn't interested. So I went to Franco Antonicelli, at De Silva.[22]

1948

Levi's daughter, Lisa Lorenza, is born.

APRIL: Levi accepts a job as a laboratory chemist at SIVA, a small paint factory in Turin. (In 1953, the plant moves to Settimo Torinese, on the outskirts of Turin.) Within a few years he becomes the technical manager and then the general manager.

I entered the paint industry by chance, but I never had very much to do with the general run of paints, varnishes, and lacquers. Our company, immediately after it began, specialized in the production of wire enamels, insulating coatings for copper electrical conductors. At the peak of my career, I numbered among the thirty or forty specialists in the world in this branch. . . . I don't believe I have wasted my time in managing a factory. My factory *militanza*—my compulsory and honorable service there—kept me in touch with the world of real things.[23]

1952

At the invitation of Paolo Boringhieri, Levi contributes to Einaudi's Scientific Editions, with translations, revisions, proofreading, and editorial opinions. The arrangement continues until 1957, when Boringhieri leaves Einaudi to start his own publishing company.

1955

JULY 11: Levi signs a contract with Einaudi for a new edition of *If This Is a Man*, for the amount of 200,000 lire. Publication is planned for 1956.

1957

Levi's son, Renzo, is born.

Levi starts writing the story of his return from Auschwitz, which will become *The Truce*. He writes one chapter a month, starting with a note on the journey written when he got back to Italy. He composes methodically, writing at night, on days off, during vacations. He makes regular journeys for work to Germany and England.

1958

The new edition of *If This Is a Man* is published by Einaudi. The initial printing is 2000 copies, which is followed by a second of the same size.

1959

If This Is a Man is translated into English and comes out in the United Kingdom and the United States, with very modest success.

1960

JUNE: Levi sends to Jerusalem the text of a deposition that will be added to the records of the trial of Adolf Eichmann.

> "Forgive" is not my word. It is inflicted on me, because all the letters I receive, especially from young, Catholic readers, have this theme. They ask if I have forgiven. I believe that I am

> in my way a just man. I can forgive one man and not another; I'm able to pass judgment only case by case. If I had had Eichmann before me, I would have condemned him to death. Indiscriminate forgiveness, as some have asked me for, is not acceptable to me.[24]

1961

The French and German translations of *If This Is a Man* appear. (Levi laments the poor quality of the former.)

In parallel with *The Truce*, Levi is writing the stories that will later be collected as *Natural Histories*. He tests the reactions of readers by publishing them in various periodicals and dailies, including *Il Giorno*, an innovative daily in Milan. He submits some to Italo Calvino, at Einaudi, who is favorably impressed.

> When this function of mine (as a witness of important historical events) was worn out, I realized that I couldn't persist in an autobiographical mode, and yet I was too "marked" to be able to slip into orthodox science fiction. Then it seemed to me that a certain type of science fiction could satisfy the desire to express myself that I still felt, and might lend itself to a form of modern allegory. For that matter, most of *Natural Histories* was written before the publication of *The Truce*.[25]

1962

Radio Canada completes a radio version of *If This Is a Man*, with which Levi is very pleased.

> The authors of the script, far away in time and space, and strangers to my experience, had drawn from the book everything I had put into it, and even something more: a spoken "meditation," on a high technical and dramatic level, and, at the same time, meticulously faithful to reality.[26]

Levi proposes to RAI, the Italian state radio-television company, an adaptation of *If This Is a Man* that would be different from the Canadian version, expanding the most suitable episodes but preserving the technique of a multilingual dialogue.

> At that time I worked in the factory until five-thirty in the evening, and then I went with the RAI people to Bròzolo—a little village in the hills—because they were trying, for the first time, to shoot outside the scenes that had presumably taken place outside. And they chose Bròzolo for this reason: that it's one of the few towns in Piedmont where the farmers still wear wooden clogs, and they needed the sound of people walking in wooden clogs. . . . For me it was a very odd way of reliving in my skin the environment of that time, because the idea of this radio transposition was to revive the multilingual world of the Lager. And so there

were French, Hungarian, Yiddish-speaking, Polish, and Russian actors—rather, non-actors, amateur actors. Now, to live in that reconstructed Babylon was truly to be plunged again—with quite penetrating effects—into the environment of that time. On the spot, that is, in the course of the broadcast, the radio recordings, the rather bold idea arose of making a theater version. And it was done using the same criteria.[27]

1963

APRIL: Einaudi publishes *The Truce*. The back cover copy is written by Italo Calvino, and on the front is a drawing by Marc Chagall, in which a man seems to be hovering in flight over a house. The critical reception is very positive, and includes praise of Levi's narrative skill.

The Truce was written fourteen years after *If This Is a Man*: it is a more "self-conscious" book, more methodical, more literary, the language much more profoundly elaborated. It tells the truth, but a filtered truth. Beforehand, I had recounted each adventure many times, to people at widely different cultural levels (to friends mainly and to high school boys and girls), and I had retouched it en route so as to arouse their most favorable reactions. When *If This Is a Man* began to achieve some success, and I began to see a future for my writing, I set out to put these adventures on paper. I aimed at having fun in writing and at amusing my prospective readers. Consequently, I gave emphasis to strange, exotic, cheerful episodes—mainly to the Russians seen close up—and I relegated to the first and last pages the mood, as you put it, "of mourning and inconsolable despair."[28]

JULY: *The Truce* comes in third for the Strega, the most important literary prize in Italy. Meanwhile, in Venice the jury for the Campiello Prize (newly established by a group of industrialists; among the jurists are many prominent Italian writers) chooses the book as one of the top five, to be submitted to a second jury, made up of three hundred ordinary readers.

SEPTEMBER 3: By a large margin, *The Truce* wins the first Campiello Prize. Levi says to an interviewer:

Look, maybe today it's more fun for me to write than to work as a chemist, and yet I have a secret ambition to find a point of connection between the two. That is, to explain to the public the meaning of scientific research, to document imaginatively, but not too much so, what happens in the world of the laboratory, so as to reproduce in a modern guise man's oldest, most mysterious emotions, the moment of uncertainty, to kill the buffalo or not kill it, to find what you're looking for or not find it. There is a whole narrative tradition that re-creates the life of miners, or of doctors, or of prostitutes, and almost nothing about the spiritual adventures of chemists.[29]

1964

Expanding on ideas suggested by his work in the laboratory and in the factory, Levi continues to write stories with a technological starting point, which are published in *Il Giorno* and elsewhere.

1965

Levi returns to Auschwitz for a Polish commemorative ceremony.

> The return was less dramatic than one might have imagined. Too much noise, scarcely any reflection, everything tidied up and in order, façades cleaned, a lot of official speeches.[30]

1966

Levi collects his stories in a volume entitled *Natural Histories*. The book is published, by Einaudi, under a pseudonym, Damiano Malabaila, in order to signal the difference between these fantastic tales and his first two works.

NOVEMBER 19: With the actor Pieralberto Marché, Levi produces a theatrical version of *If This Is a Man*, based on the version made for Italian radio. It is performed by the Teatro Stabile of Turin.

1968

DECEMBER 27: Levi starts writing for the Turin daily *La Stampa*, with an article on the Apollo 8 space mission. From 1975 on, he is a frequent contributor.

1971

Levi collects a second series of stories, *Flaw of Form*, and this time publishes it under his own name, also with Einaudi. Presenting a new edition at the beginning of 1987, he writes:

> It saddens me because these are stories related to a time that was much sadder than the present, for Italy, for the world, and also for me. They are linked to an apocalyptic, pessimistic, and defeatist vision, the same one that inspired Roberto Vacca's *The Coming Dark Age*. But the new Dark Age has not come: things haven't fallen apart, and instead there are tentative signs of a world order based, if not on mutual respect, at least on mutual fear.

MAY 3: In Turin, Levi testifies before a German prosecutor against the former SS colonel Friedrich Bosshammer, who is accused of deporting 3500 Italian Jews.

1972–73

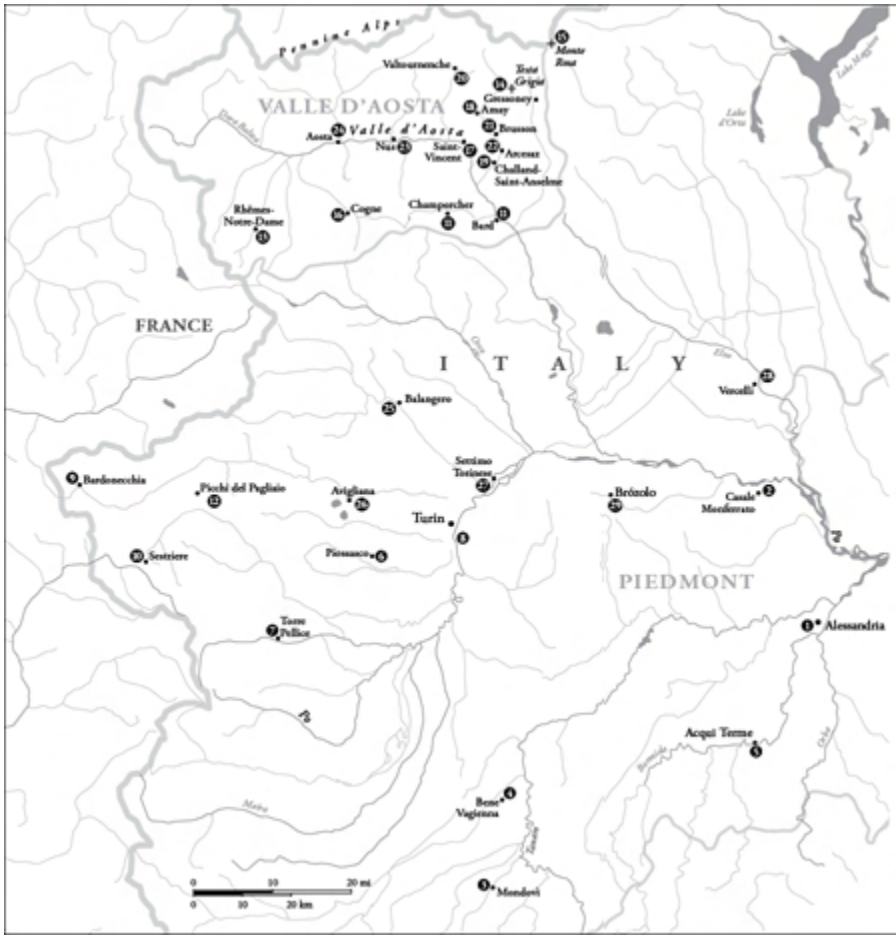
Levi travels to the Soviet Union several times for work (see the chapters "Anchovies I" and "Anchovies II" in *The Wrench*).

> I was in Tolyatti, and I noticed the respect with which the Soviets treated our skilled workers. This fact made me curious: those men sitting in the cafeteria with me, elbow to elbow—they embodied an enormous technical and human patrimony but were destined to remain anonymous, because no one had ever written about them. . . . *The Wrench* perhaps originated in Tolyatti: in fact, the story is set there, even though the city is never explicitly named.[31]

1975

Levi decides to retire and leaves his management job at SIVA; he remains as a consultant for two more years.

> I worked in a factory for almost thirty years, and I must admit that there is no incompatibility between being a chemist and being a writer: in fact, there is a mutual reinforcement. But factory life, and particularly factory managing, involves many other matters, far from chemistry: hiring and firing workers; quarreling with the boss, customers, and suppliers; coping with accidents; being called to the telephone, even at night or when at a party; dealing with bureaucracy; and many more soul-destroying tasks. This whole trade is brutally incompatible with writing. Consequently I felt hugely relieved when I reached retirement age and could resign, and so renounce my soul number one.[32]



Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta

1. Around 1735, Raffaele Vitrale Della Torre, an ancestor of Levi's mother, was considered "chief among the Jews of Alessandria."
2. A branch of Levi's mother's family lived here, including Levi's great-great-grandfather Leone (Nissim Lattes), born in 1804.
3. Giuseppe and Enrichetta Levi, Levi's great-grandparents, lived in the ghetto here until 1848.
4. Arriving after the emancipation of 1848, the Levis were the only Jewish family here. Michele, Levi's paternal grandfather, was born the following year.
5. A branch of the Levi family lived here, including Uncle Michele, the Barbaresille of "Argon" in *The Periodic Table*.
6. Levi spent many childhood summers in this village, in a family house.
7. In 1928, the Levi family spent a summer vacation in the nearby hamlet of Brusson.
8. In 1935, Levi's maternal grandfather, Cesare Luzzati, bought Il Sassarello, a large eighteenth-century villa, in the hills outside Turin.
9. Levi spent many vacations here during his adolescence, starting in the summer of 1932.
10. An elegant ski resort frequented by many of Levi's acquaintances, although not by him.
11. In 1935, Levi and two friends traveled on foot and on skis from Bard to Champorcher.
12. Levi went climbing here with his friend Sandro Delmastro (the Sandro of "Iron," in *The Periodic Table*).
13. Every year in late June, the publisher Giulio Einaudi hosted a meeting in this town, to discuss the program for the coming year. Levi was present in 1978 and 1981.
14. Levi came to the area around Gressoney after the war, to hike or ski, but no longer to climb. Once, however, he decided to climb this slope alone, so, in his words, "demonstrate to myself that I was still capable, even if I was over forty."
15. The Monte Rosa massif was the goal of many of Levi's hikes.
16. On July 31, 1985, his sixty-fourth birthday, Levi climbed the nearby Pian della Torretta, 2649 meters.
17. Levi reached Saint-Vincent on September 5, 1945, the day after Italy signed an armistice with the Allies. His mother and his sister, Anna Maria, joined him three days later.
18. Levi brought his mother and sister here on September 17, 1945, and they stayed until December 1.
19. After the armistice, Luciana Nissim, a friend of Levi and a member of his partisan band, took refuge here with her parents.
20. After the armistice, Levi's friend Vanda Maestro and her brother took refuge here.
21. In November 1943, Vanda Maestro and Luciana Nissim became members of the Aosta partisan band here, and then joined Levi in Amay.
22. A hamlet of Brusson where, in October 1943, a partisan group of around thirty people was established.
23. Levi's partisan group raided a hayloft here in search of machine guns, but found only wooden bullets, the kind used for drills.
24. After Levi and his comrades were captured, they were imprisoned for a month in a barrack on the outskirts of this city, before their transfer to Fossoli in January 1944.
25. In December 1941, six months after receiving his degree, Levi got his first job, in the asbestos mine of San Vittore, in the mountains above this town.
26. On January 21, 1946, three months after his return to Turin, Levi began work again as a chemist, here at the DUCO paint factory.
27. In 1951 SIVA, the Turinese paint business where Levi had worked since 1948, moved its factory here.
28. *Lavoro del popolo* (*Friend of the People*), the local Communist weekly, was printed here. In June 1946 the paper published Levi's poem "Buna" and, in the spring of 1947, the first drafts of five chapters of *If This Is a Man*.
29. Here, in 1964, the multilingual and choral scenes for the radio version of *If This Is a Man* were recorded.

> My chemistry, which after all was a “low,” almost a kitchen chemistry, provided me first with a vast assortment of metaphors. I feel richer than my writer colleagues because for me terms like “light,” “dark,” “heavy,” “light,” “blue” have a more extensive and more concrete range of meanings. For me blue isn’t only the blue of the sky, I have five or six blues available. . . . I mean that I had in my hands materials not in everyday use, with unusual properties, and they served to amplify my language precisely in a technical sense. So I have available an inventory of raw materials, of “tiles” for writing, somewhat larger than someone who doesn’t have technical training. Also, I’ve developed the habit of writing compactly, of avoiding the superfluous. Precision and concision, which are, I am told, characteristics of my writing, came from my work as a chemist.[33]

APRIL: *The Periodic Table*, an autobiography in twenty-one chapters, each of which originates in an element of Mendeleev’s table, is published by Einaudi. Later that year, Levi publishes a small collection of his poems, *The Beer Hall in Bremen*, with Scheiwiller, in Milan.

1978

Levi publishes *The Wrench*, about a Piedmontese rigger, Faussone, who travels around the world building trestles, bridges, oil rigs, and who tells stories of his encounters and adventures, and the daily difficulties of his trade.

> The book aims at a reassessment of “creative” work, or just work: work, besides, can be creative at the level of the thousand Faussones who exist, and in other jobs and at other social levels. . . . Faussone doesn’t exist in flesh and blood, as I let the reader believe, but he does exist: he’s a kind of conglomerate of real people, whom I’ve met. . . .
>
> Alongside an official, cynical rhetoric, which exalts work so as to exploit it, because a medal costs less than a raise, a second rhetoric appears, not cynical but profoundly stupid, which depicts work as a purely servile expression of humanity. That rhetoric, among other things, clashes with a workers’ culture, that of the Faussones, who make professional competence an indisputable value.[34]

> Writing the novel, I felt the need to give form to a mute polemic against literary people, who, unlike technicians, often do not feel responsible for their “products.” A badly made bridge and a defective pair of eyeglasses have immediate negative consequences. A novel, no.[35]

1979

The Wrench wins the Strega Prize.

1981

At the suggestion of Giulio Bollati, the editorial director of Einaudi, Levi puts together a "personal anthology," that is, a selection from writers who have been especially important in his cultural development, or, more simply, with whom he has felt some kinship. The volume appears under the title *The Search for Roots*. Levi writes in the Preface:

> While writing in the first person is for me, at least in intention, a clear, conscious, and daytime job, I realized that choosing one's roots is night work, visceral and largely unconscious. . . . I have to observe that really my deepest and most lasting loves are the least explicable: Belli, Porta, Conrad.[36]

> Even I was astonished by my choices. For example, my heavy past, the past of a prisoner, which is what made me a writer, doesn't have much to do with them. The anthology presents an image of me that I would say is not distorted, but different.[37]

Levi finds among his notes a story that his friend Emilio Vita Finzi had told him ten years earlier. In 1945 Finzi was volunteering in the Assistance Office on Via Unione, in Milan. A group of Russian Jews arrived, members of a partisan band that had formed in Russia and crossed Europe, fighting, and had ended up temporarily in Italy. Levi decides to give novelistic shape to this adventure, but before starting he spends a year doing research.

> The research was useful in determining that there was a much more substantial Jewish resistance movement—in number but also in moral value—than is generally thought. And the groups weren't made up exclusively of Jews; there were also Soviet groups, led by Jewish officers or soldiers. There is considerable Soviet documentation to prove it.[38]

NOVEMBER: Einaudi publishes *Lilith and Other Stories*, thirty-six short pieces written between 1975 and 1981.

> Sometimes, before a blank page, I find myself in a state of mind that I would call sabbatical: then I feel pleasure in writing odd or quirky things, and I cultivate the illusion that my reader feels a corresponding pleasure. It's true that some critics, and many readers, prefer my serious writings: it's their right, but it's my right to stray, if for no other reason than a kind of self-reimbursement; and also because, generally, I like being in the world.[39]

1982

APRIL: Einaudi publishes *If Not Now, When?*, with immediate success.

JUNE: The novel wins the Viareggio Prize; three months later, in September, it wins the Campiello Prize.

> I certainly didn't want to write a moral book. If it is, that's a by-product. I wanted to write an adventure story, a Western. . . . It's a real novel. It's a transgression in a positive sense. . . . It seemed to me that I had crossed a barrier. I spent a happy year writing this book. I've never felt so free to do whatever the hell I wanted on paper, to give birth not to one but to fifteen children, at once, and start them off: bring them into the world, let them fight, let them die.[40]

> The subjects of my book are essentially four: memory, pity, journeys, and the stories people tell. . . . Percentagewise I would say that the book is 40 percent humorous and epic, while I would say that only 20 percent is lyrical.[41]

Levi makes his second return visit to Auschwitz.

> There were only a few of us, and this time the emotion was profound. I saw for the first time the monument at Birkenau, which was one of the thirty-nine camps in Auschwitz, the one with the gas chambers. The railroad has been preserved. A rusty track enters the camp and ends at the edge of a sort of void. In front of it there's a symbolic train, made of blocks of granite. Every block has the name of a nation. That's the monument: the track and the blocks.
>
> I rediscovered certain sensations. For example, the smell of the place. An innocuous smell. I think it's the smell of coal.[42]

SUMMER: Israel invades Lebanon. Massacres take place in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila. Levi takes a position in, among other places, an interview in *La Repubblica* on September 24.

> There are two arguments that we Jews of the Diaspora can oppose to Begin, one moral and the other political. The moral argument is the following: not even a war justifies the bloody arrogance that Begin and his men have demonstrated. The political argument is equally clear: Israel is rapidly falling into total isolation. . . . We must choke off the impulses toward emotional solidarity with Israel to reason coldly on the mistakes of Israel's current ruling class. Get rid of that ruling class. Help Israel find its European origins, or rather the equilibrium of its founding fathers, of Ben Gurion, of Golda Meir. Not that they all had clean hands, but who of us does?[43]

If Not Now, When? is translated into French.

At the invitation of Giulio Einaudi, Levi undertakes the translation of Kafka's *The Trial*, for a new series, Writers Translated by Writers.

> I didn't find it difficult, but it was very painful. I fell ill doing it. I finished the translation in a deep depression that lasted six months. It's a pathogenic book. Like an onion, one layer after another. Each of us could be tried and condemned and executed, without ever knowing why. It was as if it predicted the time when it was a crime simply to be a Jew.[44]

1983

Levi translates *The Way of the Masks*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

APRIL: The translation of *The Trial* is published.

1984

Levi translates *The View from Afar*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

OCTOBER: Garzanti publishes the collection of poems *At an Uncertain Hour*, which includes the twenty-seven poems from *The Beer Hall in Bremen*, and thirty-four others that appeared in *La Stampa*, plus translations of poems by Heine, Kipling, and an anonymous Scot.

> I'm a man who doesn't much believe in poetry and yet I write it. There are reasons for this. For example, when I publish a poem in *La Stampa*, I receive letters and phone calls from readers expressing approval or disapproval. If a story of mine is published, the response is not so animated. I have the impression that poetry in general is becoming a marvelous instrument of human contact.
>
> Adorno wrote that after Auschwitz there can be no poetry, but my experience is the opposite. At the time (1945–46) it seemed to me that poetry was more suitable than prose to express what weighed inside me. When I say poetry, I'm not thinking of lyric poetry. In those years, if anything, I would have reformulated Adorno's words: after Auschwitz there can be poetry only about Auschwitz.[45]

When Levi is asked in an interview whether the frequent presence of plants and animals in his poetry is a result of his scientific training, he answers:

> It's the result of unsatisfied curiosity. I've quoted at various times the essay in which Aldous Huxley says that the novelist should be a zoologist. For me there is this one-sided love, which is satisfied only in part. Love for nature as a whole and in particular for the *fruschi*, as Carlo Levi said, using a term from the Lucanian dialect, meaning the poor beasts. Among the animals there is the huge and the tiny, wisdom and folly, generosity and cowardice. Each one of them is a metaphor, an essence of all the vices and all the virtues of men.[46]

NOVEMBER: The American edition of *The Periodic Table* is published by Schocken Books. The critical reception is extremely favorable. The enthusiasm of Saul Bellow inspires a series of translations of Levi's books in various countries.

1985

JANUARY: In a volume entitled *Other People's Trades*, and published by Einaudi, Levi collects some fifty essays, most of which had appeared in *La Stampa*.

FEBRUARY: Levi writes the introduction for a new paperback edition of the memoirs of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz.

APRIL: Levi visits the United States on the occasion of the publication of the translation of *If Not Now, When?*, which has an introduction by Irving Howe. He gives talks and readings in New York; Claremont, California; Bloomington, Indiana; and Boston.

1986

MAY: Einaudi publishes *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi's reflections, decades later, on the experience of the Lager. That same month, he goes to London (where he meets Philip Roth) and to Stockholm.

> Traveling is very hard for me, both for family reasons and because I've ended up internalizing the difficulties, and now it's become unpleasant. Ten years ago, it was different, I had much more energy, and the desire to follow many more things. Now I'm tired. And then I ask myself, "What's the point?" Once, when the translation of a book arrived, it was a day of celebration; now it has no effect on me. And even reviewing translations in the languages I know—English, French, and German (a clause I've had inserted into all my contracts)—has become just a boring extra job. You grow indifferent. Anyway, what is there to say, the organization of culture is extremely random, it functions haphazardly.[47]

The translations of *The Wrench* and of a selection of stories from *Lilith* (those based on the experience of the Lager), with the title *Moments of Reprieve*, are published in the United States. The German translation of *If Not Now, When?* is published.

SEPTEMBER: Levi is visited in Turin by Roth, with whom he has arranged a long, written interview, to be published in *The New York Times Book Review*. The interview comes out in October, and in November it appears, in Italian, in *La Stampa*.

NOVEMBER: The book-publishing arm of *La Stampa* brings out a collection of Levi's contributions to the paper between 1977 and 1986, under the title *Stories and Essays*. It includes a recently published piece, "Hatching the Cobra," in which he speaks about the responsibility of the scientist. It's the last book published by Levi in his lifetime.

1987

JANUARY 22: With arguments of historical revisionism gaining strength in Germany, Levi publishes an article, "The Black Hole of Auschwitz," on the front page of *La Stampa*.

MARCH: The French and German editions of *The Periodic Table* are published. The same month, Levi has a prostate operation.

APRIL 11: Levi dies, a suicide, in his apartment building in Turin.

> I think that anyone, any sort of human being, can create a fundamental work. Not necessarily a book. . . . In fact, it's just a tiny minority who can write a book, but something, certainly, for example bring up a child, heal the sick, comfort the afflicted. I don't feel embarrassed or constrained about repeating phrases from the Gospel.[48]

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ERNESTO FERRERO

If This Is a Man

Translated by Stuart Woolf

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Preface

It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944, that is, after the German government had decided, because of the growing scarcity of labor, to lengthen the average life span of the prisoners destined for elimination; it allowed noticeable improvements in the camp routine and temporarily suspended killings at the whim of individuals.

Hence, as an account of atrocities, this book of mine adds nothing to what readers throughout the world already know about the disturbing subject of the death camps. It was not written in order to formulate new accusations; it should be able, rather, to furnish documentation for a detached study of certain aspects of the human mind. Many people—many nations—can find themselves believing, more or less consciously, that "every stranger is an enemy." For the most part, this conviction lies buried in the mind like some latent infection; it betrays itself only in random, disconnected acts, and is not the basis of a system of thought. But when this happens, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, stands the Lager. It is the product of a conception of the world carried to its logical consequences with rigorous consistency; as long as the conception exists, the consequences remain to threaten us. The story of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister signal of danger.

I recognize, and ask indulgence for, the structural defects of the book. Its origins go back, if not in practice, as an idea, an intention, to the days in the Lager. The need to tell our story to "others," to make "others" share it, took on for us, before the liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with other elementary needs. The book was written to satisfy that need: in the first place, therefore, as an interior liberation. Hence its fragmentary character: the chapters were written not in logical succession but in order of urgency. The work of linking and unifying was carried out more deliberately, and is more recent.

It seems to me unnecessary to add that none of the facts are invented.

PRIMO LEVI

You who live safe
In your heated houses,
You who come home at night to find
Hot food and friendly faces:
    Consider if this is a man
    Who toils in the mud
    Who knows no peace
    Who fights for half a loaf
    Who dies by a yes or a no.
    Consider if this is a woman,
    With no hair and no name
    With no more strength to remember,
    With empty eyes and a womb as cold
    As a frog in winter.
Ponder that this happened:
I consign these words to you.
Carve them into your hearts
At home or on the street,
Going to bed or rising:
Tell them to your children.
Or may your house fall down,
May illness make you helpless,
And your children turn their eyes from you.

(TRANS. J. GALASSI)

The Journey

I was captured by the Fascist Militia on December 13, 1943. I was twenty-four, with little common sense, no experience, and a definite tendency—encouraged by the routines of segregation forced on me during the previous four years by the racial laws—to live in an unrealistic world of my own, a world inhabited by civilized Cartesian phantoms, by sincere male and bloodless female friendships. I cultivated a moderate and abstract sense of rebellion.

It hadn't been easy for me to choose the mountains, and to help set up what, both in my opinion and in that of friends who were little more experienced, was supposed to become a partisan band affiliated with the Resistance movement Justice and Liberty. We lacked contacts, arms, money, and the experience needed to acquire them. We lacked capable men, and were swamped instead by a deluge of outcasts who, in good or bad faith, came from the plain in search of a nonexistent organization, commanders, weapons, or merely protection, a hiding place, a fire, a pair of shoes.

At that time I had not yet been taught the doctrine that I learned very quickly later, in the Lager: that man is bound to pursue his own ends by all possible means, and he who errs but once pays dearly. So I can only consider the following sequence of events justified. Three Fascist Militia companies, having set out in the night to surprise a much more powerful and dangerous band than ours, which was hiding in the next valley, broke into our refuge in a spectral snowy dawn and took me down to the valley as a suspicious person.

During the interrogations that followed, I preferred to declare my status of “Italian citizen of Jewish race.” I felt that otherwise I would be unable to justify my presence in places too secluded even for an evacuee, and I believed (wrongly, as it subsequently proved) that the admission of my political activity would have meant torture and certain death. As a Jew, I was sent to Fòssoli, near Modena, where in a vast detention camp, originally meant for English and American prisoners of war, all the numerous categories of people not approved of by the newborn Fascist Republic were being assembled.

At the moment of my arrival, that is, at the end of January 1944, there were about a hundred and fifty Italian Jews in the camp, but within a few weeks their number rose to more than six hundred. For the most part these were entire families captured by the Fascists or the Nazis because they had been careless or had been informed on. A few had given themselves up of their own accord, reduced to desperation by a vagabond life, or lacking the means to survive, or wishing to avoid separation from a captured relative, or even—absurdly—“to be in conformity with the law.” There were also about a hundred Yugoslav military internees and a few other foreigners who were considered politically suspect.

The arrival of a small German SS squad should have made even the optimists dubious; but we still managed to interpret the novelty in various ways without drawing the most obvious conclusion. Thus, despite everything, the announcement that we were to be deported caught us unawares.

On February 20, the Germans inspected the camp with care and publicly and loudly upbraided the Italian commissar for the inadequate organization of the kitchen services and for the insufficient amount of wood distributed for heating; they even said that an infirmary would soon be opened. But on the morning of the 21st we learned that the following day the Jews would depart. All: without exception. Even the children, even the old, even the ill. Our destination? Nobody knew. We should be prepared for a fortnight of travel. For every person missing at the roll call, ten would be shot.

Only an ingenuous and deluded minority continued to hope; we others had spoken at length with the Polish and Croatian refugees and we knew what departure meant.

For those condemned to death, tradition prescribes an austere ritual, calculated to emphasize that all passion and anger are spent, and that the act

of justice represents only a sad duty toward society which leads even the executioner to have pity for the victim. Thus the condemned man is shielded from all external worries, he is granted solitude and, should he want it, spiritual comfort; in short, care is taken that he should feel around him neither hatred nor arbitrariness, only necessity and justice and, along with punishment, pardon.

But this was not granted to us, for we were many and time was short, and, in any case, what had we to repent, for what crime did we need pardon? The Italian commissar accordingly decreed that all services should continue to function until the final notice: the kitchens remained open, the cleaning squads worked as usual, and even the teachers in the little school gave lessons in the evening, as on other days. But that evening the children were given no homework.

Night came, and it was such a night one knew that human eyes would not witness it and survive. Everyone felt this: not one of the guards, neither Italian nor German, had the courage to come and see what men do when they know they have to die.

All took leave of life in the manner that most suited them. Some prayed, some drank to excess, others became intoxicated by a final unseemly lust. But the mothers stayed up to prepare food for the journey with tender care, and washed their children and packed the luggage; and at dawn the barbed wire was full of children’s washing hung out to dry in the wind. Nor did they forget the diapers, the toys, the pillows, and the hundred other small things that mothers remember and children always need. Would you not do the same? If you and your child were going to be killed tomorrow, would you not feed him today?

In Barrack 6A old Gattegno lived with his wife and numerous children and grandchildren and his sons-in-law and hardworking daughters-in-law. All the men were carpenters; they had come from Tripoli after many long journeys, and had always carried with them the tools of their trade, their kitchen utensils, and their accordions and violins, so they could play and dance after the day’s work. They were happy and pious folk. Their women, working silently and quickly, were the first to finish the preparations for the journey, in order to have time for mourning. When all was ready, the food cooked, the bundles tied up, they loosened their hair, took off their shoes, placed the funeral candles on the ground, and, lighting them according to the customs of their fathers, sat on the bare soil in a circle for the

lamentations, praying and weeping through the night. We gathered in a group before their door, and experienced within ourselves a grief that was new to us, the ancient grief of a people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus, renewed in every century.

Dawn came upon us like a betrayal, as if the new sun were an ally of the men who had decided to destroy us. The different emotions that were roused in us, of conscious resignation, of futile rebellion, of religious abandon, of fear, of despair, now, after a sleepless night, converged in a collective, uncontrolled panic. The time for meditation, the time for decision was over, and all reason dissolved into an unrestrained tumult, across which flashed, as painful as the thrusts of a sword, the happy memories of our homes, still so near in time and space.

Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that no memory remain.

With the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll call. At the end the officer asked "*Wieviel Stück?*" The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty "pieces," and all was in order. They then loaded us onto buses and took us to the station at Carpi. Here the train was waiting for us, with our escort for the journey. Here we received the first blows: and the thing was so new and senseless that we felt no pain, in either body or spirit. Only a profound amazement: how can one strike a man without anger?

There were twelve freight cars and six hundred and fifty of us; in mine we were only forty-five, but it was a small car. Here, then, before our very eyes, under our very feet, was one of those notorious German transport trains, one of those which never return, and of which, shuddering and always a little incredulous, we had so often heard tales. Exactly like this, detail for detail: freight cars closed from the outside, inside men, women, and children packed in without pity, like cheap merchandise, for a journey toward nothingness, a journey down, toward the bottom. This time it is we who are inside.

Sooner or later in life we all discover that perfect happiness is unrealizable, but few of us pause to consider the opposite: that so, too, is perfect unhappiness. The obstacles preventing the realization of both these extreme states are of the same nature: they derive from our human condition, which is hostile to everything infinite. Our ever inadequate knowledge of the future opposes it, and this is called, in the one instance, hope and, in the other, uncertainty about tomorrow. The certainty of death opposes it, for death places a limit on every joy, but also on every sorrow. Our inevitable material cares oppose it, for, as they poison every lasting happiness, they just as assiduously distract us from our misfortunes, making our awareness of them intermittent and hence bearable.

It was the very discomfort, the blows, the cold, the thirst that kept us aloft in the void of a bottomless despair, both during the journey and after. It was not the will to live, or a conscious resignation, for few are the men capable of such resolution, and we were but a common sample of humanity.

The doors had been closed at once, but the train did not move until evening. We had learned of our destination with relief. Auschwitz: a name without significance for us at that time, but at least it implied some place on this earth.

The train traveled slowly, with long, unnerving halts. Through a slit we saw the tall pale cliffs of the Adige valley pass by, and the names of the last Italian cities. We passed the Brenner at noon of the second day and we all stood up, but no one said a word. The thought of the return stayed in my heart, and I cruelly pictured to myself the inhuman joy of that other journey, with doors open, no one wanting to flee, and the first Italian names . . . and I looked around and wondered how many, amid that poor human dust, would be struck by fate.

Among the forty-five people in my car only four saw their homes again; and ours was by far the most fortunate.

We suffered from thirst and cold; at every stop we clamored for water, or even a handful of snow, but were rarely heard; the soldiers of the escort kept off anybody who tried to approach the train. Two young mothers, still nursing their infants, groaned night and day, begging for water. Our state of nervous tension made hunger, exhaustion, and lack of sleep less agonizing. But the hours of darkness were a nightmare without end.

There are few men who know how to go to their death with dignity, and often they are not those you would expect. Few know how to remain silent and respect the silence of others. Our restless sleep was often interrupted by noisy and futile disputes, by curses, by kicks and punches delivered blindly to ward off some troublesome and inevitable contact. Then someone would light the mournful little flame of a candle, to reveal the obscure swarming of a confused and indistinguishable human mass, sluggish and aching, rising here and there in sudden convulsions and immediately collapsing again in exhaustion.

Through the slit, known and unknown names of Austrian cities, Salzburg, Vienna; then Czech and, finally, Polish. On the evening of the fourth day the cold became intense: the train ran through interminable black pine forests, climbing perceptibly. The snow was deep. It must have been a branch line, as the stations were small and almost deserted. No one tried, any longer, during the halts, to communicate with the outside world: we felt ourselves by now “on the other side.” There was a long halt in open country. The train started up again very slowly, and stopped for the last time, in the dead of night, in the middle of a dark and silent plain.

On both sides of the track were rows of red and white lights, as far as the eye could see; but there was none of that confusion of sounds which tells of inhabited places even from a distance. By the wretched light of the last candle, with the rhythm of the wheels silenced, along with every human sound, we waited for something to happen.

Next to me, crushed, like me, body against body for the whole journey, there had been a woman. We had been acquainted for many years, and the misfortune had struck us together, but we knew little of one another. Now, in the hour of decision, we said to each other things that are not said among the living. We said farewell and it was short; everybody said farewell to life through his neighbor. We had no more fear.

The climax came suddenly. The door opened with a crash, and the darkness echoed with outlandish orders in that barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give vent to a centuries-old rage. A vast platform appeared before us, illuminated by floodlights. A little beyond it, a row of trucks. Then everything was silent again. Someone translated: we

were to get out with our luggage and deposit it alongside the train. In a moment the platform was swarming with shadows. But we were afraid to break that silence. We all busied ourselves with our luggage, searched for someone, called to one another, but timidly, in a whisper.

A dozen SS men stood to one side, legs apart, with a look of indifference. At a certain moment they moved among us and, in low voices, with faces of stone, began to interrogate us rapidly, one by one, in bad Italian. They didn't interrogate everybody, only a few: "How old? Healthy or ill?" And on the basis of the reply they pointed us in two different directions.

Everything was as silent as an aquarium, or as certain scenes in dreams. We had expected something more apocalyptic: they seemed simple policemen. It was disconcerting and disarming. Someone dared to ask for his luggage: they replied, "Luggage later." Someone else did not want to leave his wife: they said, "Together again later." Many mothers did not want to be separated from their children: they said, "Good, good, stay with child." They had the calm assurance of people merely doing their normal, everyday duty. But Renzo delayed an instant too long as he said goodbye to Francesca, his fiancée, and with a single blow, right in his face, they knocked him to the ground. It was their everyday duty.

In less than ten minutes all the able-bodied men had been gathered in a group. What happened to the others, to the women, to the children, to the old people, we could establish neither then nor later: the night swallowed them up, purely and simply. Today we know that in that rapid and summary choice each one of us had been judged capable or not of working usefully for the Reich; we know that of our convoy only ninety-six men and twenty-nine women entered the camps, respectively, of Monowitz-Buna and Birkenau, and that of all the others, more than five hundred in number, not one was alive two days later. We also know that not even this tenuous principle of discrimination between fit and unfit was always followed, and that later the simpler method was often adopted of merely opening both doors of the car without warning or instructions to the new arrivals. Those who by chance got out on one side of the train entered the camp; the others went to the gas chamber.

This is the reason that three-year-old Emilia died: the historical necessity of killing the children of Jews was self-evident to the Germans. Emilia, the daughter of the engineer Aldo Levi of Milan, was a curious,

ambitious, cheerful, intelligent child; during the journey in the packed car, her parents had succeeded in bathing her in a zinc tub with tepid water that the degenerate German engineer had allowed them to draw from the engine dragging us all to death.

Thus, suddenly, in an instant, our women, our parents, our children disappeared. Almost nobody was able to say goodbye. We saw them for a short while as a dark mass at the other end of the platform; then we saw nothing more.

Instead, two groups of strange individuals emerged into the glare of the lights. They walked in squads, in rows of three, with an odd, clumsy gait, heads hanging forward, arms rigid. They wore comical caps, and were dressed in loose striped coats, which even by night and from a distance looked filthy and ragged. They walked in a wide circle around us, never coming close, and in silence began to busy themselves with our luggage, climbing in and out of the empty cars.

We looked at one another without a word. It was all incomprehensible and mad, but one thing we had understood. This was the metamorphosis that awaited us. Tomorrow we would be like them.

Without knowing how, I found myself loaded onto a truck with thirty others; the truck took off into the night at full speed. It was covered, and we couldn't see outside, but from the jolting we could tell that the road was curving and bumpy. Are we without a guard? Should we jump down? Too late, too late, we're all going "down." In any case, we're soon aware that we are not without a guard. He's a strange guard, a German soldier bristling with arms. We do not see him, because of the thick darkness, but we feel the hard contact every time the truck lurches and throws us all in a heap to right or left. He switches on a pocket light and instead of shouting "Woe unto you, wicked souls,"[1] asks us courteously, one by one, in German and in some pidgin Italian, if we have any money or watches to give him, seeing that they will no longer be of use to us. This is no order, no regulation: it's obvious that it's a small private initiative of our Charon. The matter stirs us to anger and laughter and a strange relief.

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1. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, translated by Allen Mandelbaum. *Inferno* Canto III:84.

On the Bottom

The journey did not last more than twenty minutes. Then the truck stopped, and we saw a large gate and, above it, a sign, brightly illuminated (the memory still jolts me in my dreams): *Arbeit Macht Frei*, Work makes us free.

We get out, they have us enter an enormous bare room that is poorly heated. How thirsty we are! The weak gurgle of the water in the radiators drives us wild; we have had nothing to drink for four days. But there is also a tap—and above it a sign saying that drinking is forbidden because the water is polluted. Nonsense. It seems obvious to me that the sign is a joke, "they" know that we are dying of thirst, and they put us in a room, and there is a tap, and *Wassertrinken verboten*. I drink and incite my companions to do likewise, but I have to spit it out; the water is tepid and sweetish, and smells like a swamp.

This is hell. Today, in our time, hell must be like this. A huge, empty room: we are tired, standing on our feet, and there is a tap that drips and the water cannot be drunk, and we wait for something that will certainly be terrible, and nothing happens and nothing continues to happen. What to think? One cannot think anymore, it's like being dead already. Someone sits down on the floor. The time passes drop by drop.

We are not dead. The door opens and an SS man enters, smoking. He looks at us, in no hurry, and asks, "*Wer kann Deutsch?*" One of us whom I have never seen comes forward; his name is Flesch and he will be our interpreter. The SS man makes a long, calm speech; the interpreter translates. We are to form rows of five, with an interval of two meters between man and man; then we are to undress and make a bundle of our

clothes in a particular way, the woolen garments on one side, all the rest on the other; we must take off our shoes but pay careful attention not to let them be stolen.

Stolen by whom? Why should our shoes be stolen? And what about our documents, the few things we have in our pockets, our watches? We all look at the interpreter, and the interpreter asks the German, and the German smokes and looks right through him, as if he were transparent, as if no one had spoken.

I had never seen old men naked. Mr. Bergmann wore a truss and asked the interpreter if he should take it off, and the interpreter hesitated. But the German understood and spoke seriously to the interpreter, pointing to someone. We saw the interpreter swallow and then he said: “The officer says, take off the truss, and you will be given Mr. Coen’s.” One could see the words coming bitterly out of Flesch’s mouth; this was the German’s way of mocking us.

Then another German comes in and tells us to put the shoes in a certain corner, and we put them there, because now it’s all over and we feel outside of the world and the only thing is to obey. Someone comes with a broom and sweeps away all the shoes, sweeps them out the door in a heap. He’s crazy, he’s throwing them all together, ninety-six pairs, they’ll be unmatched. The door is open to the outdoors, a freezing wind enters and we are naked and cover our bellies with our arms. The wind slams the door shut; the German reopens it and stands watching with interest how we writhe to hide from the wind, one behind the other. Then he leaves and closes it.

Now the second act begins. Four men with razors, shaving brushes, and clippers burst in; they wear striped trousers and jackets, with a number sewn on the front; perhaps they are of the same kind as the others this evening (this evening or yesterday evening?), but these are sturdy and glowing with health. We ask many questions but they catch hold of us and in a moment we find ourselves shaved and shorn. What comical faces we have without hair! The four speak a language that does not seem of this world. It is certainly not German; I understand a little German.

Finally another door opens: here we are, locked in, naked, shorn, and standing, standing with our feet in water—it is a shower room. We are alone. Slowly the astonishment dissolves, and we speak, and everyone asks questions and no one answers. If we are naked in a shower room, it means

that we'll have a shower. If we have a shower it's because they are not going to kill us yet. Why then do they keep us standing, and give us nothing to drink, while nobody explains anything, and we have no shoes or clothes, but are all naked with our feet in the water, and it's cold and we've been traveling for five days and can't even sit down.

And our women?

Engineer Levi asks me if I think that our women are like us at this moment, and where they are, and if we'll be able to see them again. I say yes, because he is married and has a small daughter; certainly we'll see them again. But by now my belief is that all this is an elaborate ploy to mock us and insult us. Clearly they will kill us, anyone who thinks he is going to live is mad, it means that he has swallowed the bait. Not me; I have understood that soon it will be over, perhaps in this very room, when they get bored with seeing us naked, dancing from one foot to the other and trying every now and again to sit down. But there are two inches of cold water on the floor and we can't sit down.

We walk up and down pointlessly, and we talk, everybody talks to everybody else, which makes a lot of noise. The door opens, and a German enters; it is the officer of before. He speaks briefly, the interpreter translates. "The officer says you must be quiet, because this is not a rabbinical school." One sees the words that aren't his, the malicious words, twist his mouth as they emerge, as if he were spitting out a foul taste. We beg him to ask what we're waiting for, how long we'll be here, about our women, everything; but he says no, he doesn't want to ask. This Flesch, who is so reluctant to translate into Italian the icy German phrases and refuses to turn our questions into German because he knows it's pointless, is a German Jew of about fifty, who has a large scar on his face from a wound received fighting the Italians on the Piave. He is a closed, taciturn man, for whom I feel an instinctive respect, because I am aware that he began to suffer before we did.

The German leaves and now we are silent, although we are a little ashamed of our silence. It was still night and we wondered if the day would ever come. The door opened again, and someone else wearing stripes came in. He was different from the others, older, with glasses and a more civil face, and much less robust. He speaks to us and he speaks in Italian.

By now we are tired of being amazed. We seem to be watching some mad play, one of those plays that feature witches, the Holy Spirit, and the

Devil. He speaks Italian badly, with a strong foreign accent. He makes a long speech, he's very polite, and tries to answer all our questions.

We are at Monowitz, near Auschwitz, in Upper Silesia, a region inhabited by both Poles and Germans. This camp is a work camp, in German it's called *Arbeitslager*; all the prisoners (there are about ten thousand) work in a factory that produces a type of rubber called Buna, so the camp itself is called Buna.

We will be given shoes and clothes—no, not our own—other shoes, other clothes, like his. We are naked now because we are waiting for a shower and disinfection, which will take place immediately after reveille, because one cannot enter the camp without being disinfected.

Certainly there will be work to do; everyone must work here. But there is work and work: he, for example, works as a doctor. He is a Hungarian doctor who studied in Italy, and he is the dentist for the Lager. He has been in the Lager for four years (not in this one: Buna has been open only for a year and a half), but we can see that he is quite well, he's not very thin. Why is he in the Lager? Is he Jewish like us? "No," he says simply. "I am a criminal."

We ask him a lot of questions. He laughs sometimes, replies to some and not to others, and it's clear that he avoids certain subjects. He doesn't speak about the women: he says they're fine, that we'll see them again soon, but he doesn't say how or where. Instead he tells us other things, strange and crazy things, perhaps he, too, is playing with us. Perhaps he is mad—one goes mad in the Lager. He says that every Sunday there are concerts and soccer matches. He says that anyone who boxes well can become a cook. He says that anyone who works hard receives prize coupons to buy tobacco and soap with. He says that the water really isn't drinkable, and that instead a coffee substitute is distributed every day, but generally nobody drinks it, as the soup itself is watery enough to quench thirst. We beg him to find us something to drink, but he says that he cannot, that he has come to see us secretly, against SS orders, since we still have to be disinfected, and that he must leave at once; he has come because he has a liking for Italians, and because, he says, he "has a little heart." We ask him if there are other Italians in the camp and he says there are some, a few, he doesn't know how many, and right away changes the subject. Meanwhile a bell has rung and he immediately hurries off, leaving us stunned and disconcerted. Some feel reassured, but not me. I think that even this dentist,

this incomprehensible person, wanted to amuse himself at our expense, and I won't believe a word of what he said.

At the sound of the bell, we can hear the dark camp waking up. Suddenly water gushes boiling out of the showers—five minutes of bliss. But immediately afterward four men (perhaps they are the barbers) burst in, yelling and shoving, and drive us, wet and steaming, into the adjoining room, which is freezing; here other shouting people throw some rags at us and thrust into our hands a pair of worn-down shoes with wooden soles. We have no time to understand; already we find ourselves outside, in the blue and icy snow of dawn, and, barefoot and naked, with all our clothing in our hands, we must run a hundred meters to another barrack. Here we are allowed to get dressed.

When we finish, each of us remains in his own corner, and we do not dare lift our eyes to look at one another. There is no mirror in which to see ourselves, but our appearance stands before us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a hundred miserable, sordid puppets. Here we are, transformed into the phantoms we glimpsed yesterday evening.

Then for the first time we become aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality has been revealed to us: we have reached the bottom. It's not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition more wretched exists, nor could it be imagined. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listened, they would not understand. They will take away even our name; and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, remains.

We know that we are unlikely to be understood, and that this is as it should be. But consider what value, what meaning is contained in even the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions of even the poorest beggar: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photograph of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; it is inconceivable to be deprived of them in our world, for we would immediately find others to replace the old ones, other objects that are ours as guardians and evocations of our memories.

Imagine now a man who has been deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, of literally everything, in

short, that he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, heedless of dignity and restraint, for he who loses everything can easily lose himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided, with no sense of human affinity—in the most fortunate case, judged purely on the basis of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double meaning of the term “extermination camp,” and it will be clear what we seek to express with the phrase “lying on the bottom.”

Häftling: I have learned that I am a Häftling. My name is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry the mark tattooed on our left arm until we die.

The operation was slightly painful and extraordinarily rapid: they placed us all in a row, and, one by one, according to the alphabetical order of our names, we filed past a skilled official, armed with a sort of pointed tool with a very short needle. It seems that this is the true initiation: only by “showing one’s number” can one get bread and soup. It took several days, and not a few slaps and punches, for us to become used to showing our number promptly enough not to hold up the daily operation of food distribution; weeks and months were needed to learn its sound in the German language. And for many days, when the habits of freedom still led me to look for the time on my wristwatch, my new name, ironically, appeared instead, a number tattooed in bluish characters under the skin.

Only much later, and gradually, a few of us learned something of the funereal science of the numbers of Auschwitz, which epitomize the stages of destruction of European Judaism. To the old hands of the camp, the numbers told everything: the period of entry into the camp, the convoy one belonged to, and, consequently, the nationality. Everyone will treat with respect the numbers from 30000 to 80000: there are only a few hundred left and they represent the few survivors of the Polish ghettos. You’d better watch out in commercial dealings with a 116000 or a 117000: they now number only about forty, but they represent the Greeks of Salonika, so make sure they don’t trick you. As for the high numbers, there is something essentially comic about them, like the words “freshman” and “conscript” in ordinary life. The typical high number is a corpulent, docile, and stupid fellow: you can make him believe that at the infirmary leather shoes are distributed to all those with delicate feet, and persuade him to run there and leave his bowl of soup “in your custody”; you can sell him a spoon for three rations of bread; you can send him to the most ferocious of the Kapos to ask

him (it happened to me!) if it's true that his is the *Kartoffelschalenkommando*, the Potato Peeling Unit, and if it's possible to enroll in it.

In fact, the whole process of introduction to what is for us a new order takes place in a grotesque and sarcastic manner. With the tattooing operation over, they have shut us in an empty barrack. The bunks are made, but we are strictly forbidden to touch them or sit on them: so we wander around aimlessly for half the day in the limited space available, still tormented by the fierce thirst of the journey. Then the door opens and in comes a small, thin blond boy in striped clothes, with a fairly civilized air. He speaks French, and we throng around him with a flood of questions that until now we had asked one another in vain.

But he does not speak willingly; no one here speaks willingly. We are new, we have nothing and we know nothing; why waste time on us? He reluctantly explains to us that all the others are out at work and will come back in the evening. He left the infirmary this morning and is exempt from work for today. I asked him (with an ingenuousness that already, only a few days later, seemed to me incredible) if at least they would give us back our toothbrushes. He did not laugh, but, with his face animated by fierce contempt, he threw at me, "*Vous n'êtes pas à la maison.*" And it is this refrain that we hear repeated by everyone: you are not at home, this is not a sanatorium, the only way out is through the Chimney. (What does it mean? We'll soon learn very well what it means.)

And so it was. Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within reach of my hand. I opened the window and broke off the icicle, but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away. "*Warum?*" I asked in my poor German. "*Hier ist kein warum*" (there is no why here), he replied, shoving me back inside.

The explanation is repugnant but simple: in this place everything is prohibited, not for hidden reasons but because the camp has been created precisely for that purpose. If we wish to live here, we had better learn this quickly and well:

The Sacred Face has no place here!
Here we swim differently than in the Serchio![2]

Hour after hour, this first interminable day of limbo draws to its end. Finally, as the sun sets in a tumult of fierce, bloodred clouds, they order us out of the barrack. Will they give us something to drink? No, they line us up again, lead us to a huge square, which takes up the center of the camp, and arrange us meticulously in squads. Then nothing happens for another hour: it seems that we are waiting for someone.

A band begins to play, beside the entrance to the camp: it plays "Rosamunde," the well-known sentimental song, and this seems so strange to us that we look at one another and snigger; we feel a shadow of relief, perhaps all these ceremonies are nothing but a colossal farce in Teutonic taste. But the band, on finishing "Rosamunde," continues to play marches, one after the other, and suddenly the squads of our comrades appear, returning from work. They walk in a column, five abreast, with an oddly unnatural, stiff gait, like rigid puppets made only of bones; but they walk scrupulously in time to the music.

They, too, arrange themselves like us in the vast square, according to a precise order; when the last squad has returned, we are all counted and recounted for more than an hour. We are inspected at length, and the results all seem to go to a man dressed in stripes, who reports them to a group of SS men in full battle gear.

Finally (it's dark by now, but the camp is brightly lit by floodlights and spotlights) there is a cry of "*Absperre!*" at which all the squads break up into a turbulent confusion of movement. The men no longer walk stiffly and erect as before: each one drags himself along with obvious effort. I see that all of them carry in their hand or hanging at their waist an aluminum bowl almost as large as a basin.

We new arrivals also wander among the crowd, searching for a voice, a friendly face, a guide. Against the wooden wall of a barrack two boys are sitting on the ground: they seem very young, sixteen at most, the faces and hands of both are grimed with soot. One of the two, as we're passing by, calls to me and asks in German some questions that I don't understand; then he asks where we're from. "*Italien*," I reply; I would like to ask him many things, but my German vocabulary is extremely limited.

"Are you a Jew?" I ask him.

“Yes, a Polish Jew.”

“How long have you been in the Lager?”

“Three years,” and he lifts up three fingers. He must have been a child when he entered, I think with horror; on the other hand, this means that at least some manage to live here.

“What is your job?”

“*Schlosser*,” he replies. I don’t understand. “*Eisen, Feuer*” (iron, fire), he insists, and makes a play with his hands of someone beating with a hammer on an anvil. So he is a smith.

“*Ich Chemiker*,” I state; and he nods earnestly and says, “*Chemiker gut*.” But all this has to do with the distant future: what torments me at the moment is my thirst.

“Drink, water. We no water,” I tell him.

He looks at me with a serious, almost severe face, and says clearly, “Don’t drink water, comrade,” and then other words that I don’t understand.

“*Warum?*”

“*Geschwollen*,” he replies cryptically. I shake my head, I haven’t understood. “Swollen,” he makes me understand, blowing out his cheeks and sketching with his hands a monstrous distention of the face and belly. “*Warten bis heute Abend*.” “Wait until this evening,” I translate word by word.

Then he says, “*Ich Schlome. Du?*” I tell him my name, and he asks me, “Where your mother?”

“In Italy.” Schlome is amazed: a Jew in Italy? “Yes,” I explain as best I can, “hidden, no one knows, run away, does not speak, no one sees her.” He has understood; now he gets up, approaches, and timidly embraces me. The adventure is over, and I am filled with a serene sadness that is almost joy. I never saw Schlome again, but I have not forgotten his serious and gentle child’s face, welcoming me on the threshold of the house of the dead.

We have a great number of things to learn, but we have learned a lot already. Already we have some idea of the topography of the Lager; this Lager of ours is a square of about six hundred meters per side, enclosed by two barbed-wire fences, the inner one carrying a high-tension current. It consists of sixty wooden barracks, called Blocks, ten of which are still being built. In addition, there is the building that houses the kitchens, which is of brick; an experimental farm, run by a detachment of privileged Häftlinge; the barracks with the showers and the latrines, one for each

group of six or eight Blocks. Besides these, certain Blocks are reserved for specific purposes. First of all, a group of eight, at the extreme eastern end of the camp, forms the infirmary and clinic; then, there is Block 24, which is the *Krätzeblock*, reserved for infectious skin diseases; Block 7, which no ordinary Häftling has ever entered, reserved for the *Prominenz*, that is, the aristocracy, the prisoners who hold the highest positions; Block 47, reserved for the *Reichsdeutsche* (Aryan Germans, political or criminal prisoners); Block 49, for the Kapos alone; Block 12, half of which serves as a canteen for the *Reichsdeutsche* and the Kapos, that is, a distribution center for tobacco, insect powder, and, occasionally, other articles; Block 37, which contains the main Quartermaster's office and the Work Office; and, finally, Block 29, which always has its windows closed, because it is the *Frauenblock*, the camp brothel, serviced by Polish Häftling girls, and reserved for the *Reichsdeutsche*.

The ordinary living Blocks are divided into two parts. In one, the *Tagesraum*, the head of the barrack lives with his friends. There is a long table, chairs, benches, and everywhere a lot of strange bright-colored objects, photographs, cuttings from magazines, sketches, artificial flowers, ornaments; on the walls are famous sayings, proverbs, and rhymes in praise of order, discipline, and hygiene; in one corner is a glass cabinet containing the tools of the *Blockfrisör* (official barber), the ladles for distributing the soup, and two rubber truncheons, one solid and one hollow, to enforce that discipline. The other part is the dormitory: there are only 148 bunks, in three tiers, divided by three aisles, and set close together like the cells of a beehive, so that all the space in the room, up to the roof, is utilized without waste. Here all the ordinary Häftlinge live, some 200 to 250 per barrack. Consequently there are two men in most of the bunks, which are made of short wooden planks, and provided with a thin straw sack and two blankets. The corridors are so narrow that two people can barely pass; the total floor area is so small that the inhabitants of the same Block cannot all be there at the same time unless at least half are lying on their bunks. Hence the prohibition on entering a Block to which one does not belong.

In the middle of the Lager is the enormous Roll Call Square, where we gather in the morning to form the work squads and in the evening to be counted. Facing Roll Call Square is a bed of grass, carefully mowed, where the gallows is erected when necessary.

We soon learned that the guests of the Lager are divided into three categories: criminals, politicals, and Jews. All are dressed in stripes, all are Häftlinge, but the criminals wear a green triangle next to the number sewn on their jacket; the political prisoners wear a red triangle; and the Jews, who form the large majority, wear the Jewish star, red and yellow. There are SS men, but they are few and outside the camp, and are seen relatively infrequently. Our masters in effect are the "green triangles," who have a free hand over us, along with those from the other two categories who are willing to help them—and they are not few.

We have learned other things, too, more or less quickly, according to our individual character: to answer "*Jawohl*," never to ask questions, always to pretend to understand. We have learned the value of food; now we, too, diligently scrape the bottom of our bowl after the ration, and hold it under our chins when we eat bread so as not to lose the crumbs. We, too, know that it is not the same thing to be given a ladleful of soup from the top of the vat or from the bottom, and we are already able to judge, according to the capacity of the various vats, what is the best place to try for in the queue when we line up.

We have learned that everything is useful: wire, for tying up our shoes; rags, to wrap around our feet; paper, to (illegally) pad our jacket against the cold. We have learned, on the other hand, that everything can be stolen, in fact is automatically stolen as soon as attention is relaxed; and, to avoid this, we have had to learn the art of sleeping with our head on a bundle made up of our jacket and containing all our belongings, from the bowl to the shoes.

We already know in good part the rules of the camp, which are incredibly complicated. The prohibitions are innumerable: to come within two meters of the barbed wire; to sleep in one's jacket, or without one's pants, or with one's cap on; to use certain washrooms or latrines, which are *nur für Kapos* or *nur für Reichsdeutsche*; not to have a shower on the prescribed day, or to have one on a day not prescribed; to leave the barrack with one's jacket unbuttoned, or with the collar raised; to wear paper or straw under one's clothes against the cold; to wash except stripped to the waist.

The rites to be carried out are infinite and senseless: every morning you have to make the "bed" perfectly flat and smooth; smear your muddy and repellent clogs with the appropriate machine grease; scrape the mud stains

off your clothes (paint, grease, and rust stains, however, are permitted). In the evening you have to be checked for lice and whether you have washed your feet; on Saturday, you have your beard and hair shaved, mend your rags or have them mended; on Sunday, there is a general check for skin diseases and a check for the number of buttons on your jacket, which should be five.

In addition, there are innumerable circumstances, normally irrelevant, that here become problems. When your nails get long, they have to be shortened, which can only be done with your teeth (for toenails, the friction of the shoes is sufficient); if a button comes off, you have to know how to reattach it with a piece of wire; if you go to the latrine or the washroom, everything has to be carried along, always and everywhere, and while you wash your face the bundle of clothes has to be held tightly between your knees—in any other manner, it will be stolen in that second. If a shoe hurts, you have to show up in the evening at the ceremony of the shoe exchange: this tests the skill of each individual, who, in the midst of an incredible throng, has to be able to choose at a glance one (not a pair, one) shoe that fits. Because, once the choice is made, a second exchange is not allowed.

And do not think that shoes constitute a factor of secondary importance in the life of the Lager. Death begins with the shoes; for most of us, they prove to be instruments of torture, which after a few hours of marching cause painful sores that become fatally infected. Anyone who has them is forced to walk as if he were dragging a ball and chain (this explains the strange gait of the army of phantoms that returns, on parade, every evening); he arrives last everywhere, and everywhere receives blows. He cannot escape if he is pursued; his feet swell, and, the more they swell, the more unbearable the friction with the wood and cloth of the shoes becomes. Then only the hospital is left: but to enter the hospital with a diagnosis of *dicke Füsse* (swollen feet) is extremely dangerous, because it is well-known to all, and especially to the SS, that there is no cure here for that complaint.

And in all this we have not yet mentioned the work, which is, in its turn, a tangle of laws, taboos, and problems.

We all work, except those who are ill (to be recognized as ill in itself implies an imposing store of knowledge and experience). Every morning we leave the camp in squads for Buna; every evening, in squads, we return. As for the work, we are divided into about two hundred Kommandos, each of which consists of between fifteen and a hundred and fifty men and is

commanded by a Kapo. There are good and bad Kommandos; for the most part, they are assigned to transport, and the work is very hard, especially in winter, if only because it always takes place outside. There are also skilled Kommandos (electricians, smiths, bricklayers, welders, mechanics, concrete layers, etc.), each attached to a specific workshop or section of Buna, and answering more directly to civilian foremen, who are mostly Germans and Poles. Naturally this applies only to the hours of work; for the rest of the day, the skilled workers (there are no more than three or four hundred in all) are not treated differently from the ordinary workers. The assignment of individuals to the various Kommandos is organized by a special office of the Lager, the *Arbeitsdienst*, which is in constant touch with the civilian management of Buna. The *Arbeitsdienst* decides on the basis of unknown criteria, often openly on the basis of favoritism or corruption, so if someone manages to find enough to eat, he is practically certain to get a good post at Buna.

The work schedule varies with the season. All the daylight hours are working hours: hence the workday goes from a minimum in winter (8 a.m.–12 noon and 12:30–4 p.m.) to a maximum in summer (6:30 a.m.–12 noon and 1–6 p.m.). Under no pretext are the Häftlinge allowed to be at work during the hours of darkness or when there is a thick fog, because darkness or fog might provide an opportunity to attempt escape; but they work regularly even if it rains or snows or (as occurs quite frequently) if the fierce Carpathian wind is blowing.

One Sunday in every two is a regular workday; on the so-called holiday Sundays, instead of working at Buna, we usually work on the upkeep of the Lager, so that days of actual rest are extremely rare.

Such will be our life. Every day, according to the established rhythm, *Ausrücken* and *Einrücken*, go out and come in; work, sleep, and eat; fall ill, and get better or die.

. . . And for how long? But the old hands laugh at this question: by this question they recognize the new arrivals. They laugh and do not reply. For them, the problem of the distant future grew dim months ago, years ago, having lost all intensity in the face of the far more urgent and concrete

problems of the immediate future: how much they will eat today, if it will snow, if they will have to unload coal.

If we were logical, we would resign ourselves to this evidence, that our fate is utterly unknowable, that every conjecture is arbitrary and has absolutely no foundation in reality. But men are rarely logical when their own fate is at stake; they prefer in every case extreme positions. Thus, depending on our character, some of us are immediately convinced that all is lost, that one cannot survive here and that the end is certain and near; others are convinced that, however hard the life that awaits us, salvation is likely and not far off, and, if we have faith and strength, we will see our homes and our dear ones again. The two classes, pessimists and optimists, are not in fact so distinct: not just because the agnostics are many but because the majority, without memory or consistency, go back and forth between the two extreme positions, according to the moment and the person they are speaking to.

Here I am, then, on the bottom. One learns quickly enough to wipe out the past and the future if the need is pressing. A fortnight after my arrival I am plagued by that chronic hunger, unknown to free men, which makes us dream at night, and settles in all the limbs of our bodies. I have already learned not to get robbed, and in fact if I find a spoon lying around, a piece of string, a button that I can filch without danger of punishment, I pocket them and consider them mine by full right. I already have those numb sores that will not heal on the tops of my feet. I push carts, I work with a shovel, I get tired in the rain, I shiver in the wind. Already my body is no longer mine: my belly is swollen, my limbs are emaciated, my face is puffy in the morning and hollow in the evening; some of us have yellow skin, others gray. When we don’t meet for three or four days we scarcely recognize one another.

We Italians had decided to gather every Sunday evening in a corner of the Lager, but we stopped at once, because it was too sad to count our numbers and to find, each time, that we were fewer, and more disfigured and desolate. And it was so tiring to walk those few steps: and then, upon meeting, we would remember and think, and it was better not to.

2. *Inferno* Canto XXI:48–49.

Initiation

After the first day of capricious transfer from barrack to barrack and from Kommando to Kommando, I am assigned, late one evening, to Block 30, and shown a bunk in which Diena is already sleeping. Diena wakes up, and, although exhausted, makes room for me and greets me in a friendly manner.

I am not sleepy, or, more accurately, my sleepiness is masked by a state of tension and anxiety of which I have not yet managed to rid myself, and so I talk and talk.

I have too many things to ask. I'm hungry and when will they distribute the soup tomorrow? And how will I be able to eat it without a spoon? And how can I find a spoon? And where will they send me to work? Diena knows no more than I, and answers with other questions. But from above and below, from near and far, from all corners of the now dark barrack, sleepy and angry voices shout at me: "*Ruhe, Ruhe!*"

I understand that they are ordering me to be quiet, but the word is new to me, and since I do not know its meaning and implications, my restlessness increases. The confusion of languages is a fundamental component of the way of life here: one is surrounded by a perpetual Babel, in which everyone shouts orders and threats in languages never heard before, and you're in trouble if you fail to grasp the meaning. No one has time here, no one has patience, no one listens to you; we latest arrivals instinctively gather in the corners, against the walls, like sheep, to feel that our backs are physically covered.

So I give up asking questions and soon slip into a tense and bitter sleep. But it is not rest: I feel threatened, besieged, at every moment I am ready to contract in a spasm of self-defense. I dream, and I seem to be sleeping on a

road, on a bridge, in a doorway through which many people are passing. And now, oh, so early, the reveille sounds. The entire barrack is shaken to its foundations, the lights go on, all the men around me are bustling in sudden frantic activity. They shake the blankets, raising clouds of fetid dust, they dress with feverish hurry, they run outside into the freezing air half dressed, they rush headlong toward the latrines and the washhouse. Some, bestially, urinate while they run to save time, because within five minutes begins the distribution of bread, of bread-*Brot-Broit-chleb-pain-lechem-kenyér*, of the holy gray slab that seems gigantic in your neighbor's hand and in your own so small you could cry. It is a daily hallucination that one gets used to in the end, but at the beginning it is so irresistible that many of us, after long discussions of our own evident and constant misfortune and the shameless luck of others, finally exchange our rations, at which the illusion is renewed, inverted, leaving everyone discontented and frustrated.

Bread is also our only money: in the few minutes that elapse between its distribution and its consumption, the Block resounds with claims, quarrels, and flights. It is yesterday's creditors who are demanding payment, in the brief moment when the debtor is solvent. After which a relative quiet sets in, and many take advantage to go back to the latrines to smoke half a cigarette, or to the washhouse to wash properly.

The washhouse is far from inviting. It is poorly lit and drafty, and the brick floor is covered by a layer of mud. The water is not drinkable; it has a revolting smell and often fails for many hours. The walls are covered with curious didactic frescoes: for example, there is the good Häftling, shown stripped to the waist, in the act of diligently soaping his shorn, rosy cranium, and the bad Häftling, with an extremely Semitic nose and a greenish color, bundled up in ostentatiously stained clothes with a cap on his head, and cautiously dipping a finger in the water of the washbasin. Under the first is written "*So bist du rein*" (Like this you are clean), and under the second "*So gehst du ein*" (Like this you come to a bad end); and lower down, in dubious French but in gothic script: "*La propreté, c'est la santé*."

On the opposite wall an enormous white, red, and black louse stands out, with the caption "*Eine Laus, dein Tod*" (A louse is your death), and the inspired distich:

Nach dem Abort, vor dem Essen

Hände waschen, nicht vergessen.

After the latrine, before you eat,
wash your hands, don’t forget.

For many weeks I considered these warnings about hygiene pure examples of the Teutonic sense of humor, in the style of the dialogue about the truss that had welcomed us on our entry into the Lager. But later I understood that their unknown authors, perhaps without realizing it, were not far from some important truths. In this place it is practically pointless to wash every day in the murky water of the filthy washbasins for purposes of cleanliness and health; but it is extremely important as a symptom of remaining vitality, and necessary as an instrument of moral survival.

I must confess: after only a week of prison, the instinct for cleanliness disappeared in me. I wander aimlessly around the washhouse, and suddenly I see my friend Steinlauf, who is almost fifty, stripped to the waist, scrubbing his neck and shoulders with little success (he has no soap) but with great energy. Steinlauf sees me and greets me, and without preamble asks me severely why I do not wash. Why should I wash? Would I be better off than I am? Would I be more pleasing to someone? Would I live a day, an hour longer? I would probably live a shorter time, because washing is work, a waste of energy and warmth. Doesn’t Steinlauf know that after half an hour with the coal sacks every difference between him and me will have disappeared? The more I think about it, the more washing one’s face in our condition seems a stupid chore, even frivolous: a mechanical habit, or, worse, a grim repetition of an extinct rite. We will all die, we are all about to die. If they give me ten minutes between reveille and work, I want to devote them to something else, to withdraw into myself, to take stock, or perhaps look at the sky and think that I may be looking at it for the last time; or even to let myself live, to indulge in the luxury of an idle moment.

But Steinlauf contradicts me. He has finished washing and is now drying himself with his cloth jacket, which he was holding rolled up between his knees and will soon put on. And without interrupting the operation he administers a full-scale lesson.

It grieves me now that I have forgotten his plain, clear words, the words of ex-Sergeant Steinlauf of the Austro-Hungarian Army, Iron Cross in the 1914–18 war. It grieves me because it means that I have to translate his

uncertain Italian and his quiet speech, the speech of a good soldier, into my language of an incredulous man. But this was the sense, not forgotten then or later: that precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization. We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to almost certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength, for it is the last—the power to refuse our consent. So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because the rules prescribe it but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, to not begin to die.

These things Steinlauf, a man of goodwill, told me: strange things to my unaccustomed ear, understood and accepted only in part, and softened by an easier, more flexible, and blander doctrine, which for centuries has drawn breath on the other side of the Alps, and according to which, among other things, there is no greater vanity than to force oneself to swallow whole moral systems elaborated by others, under another sky. No, the wisdom and virtue of Steinlauf, certainly good for him, is not enough for me. In the face of this complicated netherworld my ideas are confused; is it really necessary to elaborate a system and put it into practice? Or would it not be better to acknowledge that one has no system?

Ka-Be

All the days seem alike, and it's not easy to count them. For I don't know how many days now we've been going back and forth, in teams of two, from the railway to the warehouse—a hundred meters over thawing ground. To the warehouse bent under the load, back with arms hanging at our sides, not speaking.

Around us, everything is hostile. Above us, the malevolent clouds chase one another to separate us from the sun; on all sides the bleakness of iron in torment closes in on us. We have never seen its boundaries, but we feel all around us the evil presence of the barbed wire that isolates us from the world. And on the scaffoldings, on the trains being shunted, on the roads, in the pits, in the offices, men and more men, slaves and masters, the masters slaves themselves. Fear motivates the former, hatred the latter, every other force is silent. All are our enemies or our rivals.

No, I honestly don't feel that my companion of today, yoked with me under the same load, is either enemy or rival.

He is Null Achtzehn. He is not called anything but that, Zero Eighteen, the last three figures of his entry number: as if everyone were aware that only a man is worthy of a name, and that Null Achtzehn is no longer a man. I think that even he has forgotten his name—certainly he acts as if this were so. When he speaks, when he looks around, he gives the impression of being empty inside, no more than a husk, like the slough of some insect that one finds on the edge of a pond, attached to the rocks by a thread and shaken by the wind.

Null Achtzehn is very young, which is a grave danger. Not only because it's harder for boys than for men to withstand fatigue and fasting but, even more, because long training in the struggle of each against all is needed to survive here, training that young people rarely have. Null Achtzehn is not even particularly weak, but all avoid working with him. He is indifferent to the point where he doesn't trouble to avoid labor or blows or to search for food. He carries out every order he is given, and it's predictable that when they send him to his death he will go with the same total indifference.

He doesn't have even the rudimentary cunning of a draft horse, which stops pulling just before it reaches exhaustion; he pulls or carries or pushes as long as his strength allows, then gives way suddenly, without a word of warning, without lifting his sad, opaque eyes from the ground. He reminds me of the sled dogs in books by Jack London, who labor until their last breath and die on the track.

But, since the rest of us try by every possible means to avoid excess effort, Null Achtzehn is the one who works more than anybody. Because of this, and because he is a dangerous companion, no one wants to work with him; and since, on the other hand, no one wants to work with me, because I am weak and clumsy, it often happens that we find ourselves paired.

As we return once again, hands empty, from the warehouse, dragging our feet, an engine whistles briefly and cuts off our path. Happy at the enforced delay, Null Achtzehn and I stop; bent and ragged, we wait for the train cars to pass slowly by.

. . . *Deutsche Reichsbahn. Deutsche Reichsbahn. SNCF*. Two huge Russian freight cars with the hammer and sickle incompletely worn off. Then *Cavalli 8, Uomini 40, Tara, Portata*:[3] an Italian car . . . Oh, to climb inside, into a corner, well hidden under the coal, and stay there, quiet and still in the dark, to listen endlessly to the rhythm of the rails, stronger than hunger or weariness; until, at a certain moment, the train stopped and I would feel the warm air and smell the hay and get out, into the sun; then I would lie down on the ground to kiss the earth, as one reads in books, with my face in the grass. And a woman would pass by, and ask, "Who are you?" in Italian, and I would tell her my story in Italian, and she would understand, and would give me food and shelter. And she would not believe

the things I tell her, and I would show her the number on my arm, and then she would believe.

. . . It's over. The last car has passed, and, as if a curtain had been raised, there before our eyes is the pile of pig-iron supports, the Kapo standing on the pile with a switch in his hand, and our haggard companions, coming and going in pairs.

Alas for the dreamer: the moment of consciousness that accompanies waking is the most acute suffering. But it doesn't happen to us often, and they are not long dreams. We are only weary beasts.

Once again we're at the foot of the pile. Mischa and the Galician lift a support and place it roughly on our shoulders. Their job is the least tiring, so they show excess zeal in order to keep it: they shout at companions who dawdle, urge them on, admonish them, drive the work at an unbearable pace. This fills me with anger, although I already know that it is in the normal order of things for the privileged to oppress the unprivileged. The social structure of the camp is based on this human law.

This time it's my turn to walk in front. The support is heavy but short; at every step I feel behind me Null Achtzehn's feet stumbling against mine, since he is unable or can't be bothered to keep pace with me.

Twenty steps, we have arrived at the railroad track, there is a cable to climb over. The load is awkwardly placed, something is not right, it seems to be slipping from my shoulder. Fifty steps, sixty. The door of the warehouse: the same distance again, and we can put it down. Enough is enough, I can't go any farther, the entire load is now weighing on my arm. I can't endure the pain and exhaustion any longer: I shout, I try to turn around, just in time to see Null Achtzehn trip and drop the whole thing.

If I had had the agility I used to have, I could have jumped backward: instead, here I am on the ground, with all my muscles contracted, blind with pain, the wounded foot clasped in my hands. The corner of the piece of iron has cut the top of my left foot.

For a moment, everything is blank in the giddiness of pain. When I manage to look around, Null Achtzehn is still standing there, he hasn't moved; hands in his sleeves, he doesn't say a word, he stares at me without expression. Mischa and the Galician arrive, speaking Yiddish to each other,

and give me incomprehensible advice. Templer and David and the others arrive; they take advantage of the distraction to stop work. The Kapo arrives, distributes kicks, punches, and abuse, and our comrades disperse like chaff in the wind. Null Achtzehn puts his hand to his nose and then stares vacantly at the blood-streaked hand. All I get is two blows to the head, of the sort that don't hurt because they stun you.

The incident is closed. I find that, for good or ill, I can stand up, so the bone must not be broken. I don't dare take off the shoe for fear of reawakening the pain, and also because I know that the foot will swell and I will be unable to put the shoe on again.

The Kapo sends me to take the Galician's place on the pile, and he, glaring at me, takes my place alongside Null Achtzehn; but already the English prisoners are passing, it will soon be time to return to the camp.

During the march I do my best to walk quickly, but I can't keep up. The Kapo assigns Null Achtzehn and Finder to support me as far as the procession before the SS, and finally (fortunately there is no roll call this evening) I am in the barrack and can throw myself on the bunk and breathe.

Maybe it's the heat, maybe the fatigue of the march, but the pain has begun again, together with a strange sensation of wetness in the wounded foot. I take off my shoe: it is full of blood, by now congealed and kneaded into the mud and the shreds of a rag I found a month ago, and which I use as a foot pad, one day on the right, one day on the left.

This evening, after the soup, I'll go to Ka-Be.

• • •

Ka-Be is the abbreviation of Krankenbau, the infirmary. There are eight barracks, exactly like the others in the camp, but separated by a wire fence. They permanently hold a tenth of the camp's population, but few of us stay longer than two weeks and none more than two months: within these limits we are obliged to die or be cured. Those who show signs of improvement recover in Ka-Be, those who show signs of getting worse are sent from Ka-Be to the gas chambers.

All this because we, fortunately for us, belong to the category of "economically useful Jews."

I have never been to Ka-Be or to the Clinic, and it is all new to me.

There are two clinics, Medical and Surgical. In front of the door, exposed to the night and the wind, are two long lines of shadows. Some have need only of a bandage or a pill, others ask to be examined; some show death in their faces. Those at the front of both lines are barefoot and ready to enter. Others, as their turn approaches, contrive in the middle of the crush to loosen the haphazard laces and wire threads of their shoes and to unfold the precious foot pads without tearing them: not too early, so as not to stand pointlessly in the mud with bare feet; not too late, so as not to miss their turn to enter, because it is strictly forbidden to enter Ka-Be with shoes on. A gigantic French Häftling, sitting in a booth between the doors of the two clinics, enforces obedience to the prohibition. He is one of the few French officials in the camp. And do not think that to spend one's day among muddy and broken shoes is a small privilege: only consider how many enter Ka-Be with shoes and leave with no further need of them. . . .

When my turn comes, I manage miraculously to take off my shoes and my rags without losing any of them, without letting my bowl or gloves be stolen, without losing my balance, all the while holding on to my cap, since for no reason can you wear it upon entering a barrack.

I leave the shoes at the shoe deposit and am given the appropriate receipt, after which, barefoot and limping, my hands encumbered by all my poor possessions, which I dare not leave anywhere, I am admitted inside and join a new line, which ends in the examination room.

In this line you undress progressively, so as to be naked when you arrive at the head of it, for there a male nurse sticks a thermometer in your armpit. If someone is dressed he misses his turn and gets back in line. Everybody has to be given the thermometer, even if he has only a skin disease or a toothache.

In this way it's assured that no one who is not seriously ill will submit to this complicated ritual on a whim.

My turn finally arrives and I am brought before the doctor. The nurse takes out the thermometer and presents me: "*Nummer 174517, kein Fieber.*" I do not need a thorough examination: I am immediately declared *Arztvormelder*. I don't know what it means, but this is certainly not the place to ask questions. I am thrown out, I retrieve my shoes, and I go back to the barrack.

Chaim rejoices with me: I have a good wound, it doesn't seem dangerous, and it guarantees me a reasonable period of rest. I will spend the

night in the barrack with the others, but tomorrow morning, instead of going to work, I will have to go back to the doctors for a definitive examination: this is what *Artzvormelder* means. Chaim is experienced in these matters, and he thinks that I'll probably be admitted to Ka-Be tomorrow. Chaim is my bed companion and I have blind faith in him. He is Polish, a religious Jew, a student of rabbinical law. He is about my age, a watchmaker by profession, and here in Buna works as a precision mechanic; thus he is among the few who are able to preserve the dignity and self-assurance that come from practicing a trade one has been trained for.

And so it happened. After reveille and bread, I was called outside with three others from my barrack. We were led to a corner of Roll Call Square, where there was a long line, all of today's *Artzvormelder*; someone came and took away my bowl, spoon, cap, and gloves. The others laughed: didn't I know that I had to hide them or leave them with someone, or, best of all, sell them, since they can't be taken to Ka-Be? Then they look at my number and shake their heads: any sort of stupidity is to be expected from one with such a high number.

Then they counted us, they made us undress outside in the cold, they took our shoes, they counted us again, they shaved the hair off our face, head, and body, they counted us yet again, and they made us take a shower. Then an SS man came, looked at us without interest, stopped in front of a man with a large hydrocele, and set him apart. After which they counted us another time and made us take another shower, although we were still wet from the first and some were shaking with fever.

We are now ready for the definitive examination. Outside the window one can see the white sky and sometimes the sun; in this country one can stare at it, through the clouds, as if through smoked glass. Its position indicates that it must be past two o'clock. By now it's farewell soup, and we have been standing for ten hours and naked for six.

This second medical examination is also extraordinarily rapid: the doctor (he wears striped clothes like ours, but over them he has a white coat, with the number sewn on it, and he is much fatter than we are) looks at my swollen and bloody foot and touches it, at which I cry out in pain. Then he says: "*Aufgenommen, Block 23*." I stand there with my mouth open, waiting for some other indication, but someone pulls me backward

brutally, throws a coat over my bare shoulders, gives me a pair of sandals, and drives me out into the open.

A hundred meters away is Block 23; written on it is "*Schonungsblock.*" Who knows what it means? Inside they take off my coat and sandals, and I'm naked again and last in a line of human skeletons—today's patients.

I stopped trying to understand long ago. As far as I'm concerned, I am by now so tired of standing on my wounded foot, still untended, so hungry and frozen, that nothing interests me anymore. This might easily be my last day and this room the gas chamber that everyone talks about, but what can I do about it? I might just as well lean against the wall, close my eyes, and wait.

My neighbor must not be Jewish. He is not circumcised and, besides (this is one of the few things that I have so far learned), such fair skin, such a huge face and body are characteristics of non-Jewish Poles. He is a whole head taller than me, but he has quite a cordial face, such as have only those who do not suffer from hunger.

I tried to ask him if he knows when they will let us enter. He turns to the nurse, who resembles him like a twin and is smoking in a corner; they talk and laugh together without replying, as if I were not there. Then one of them takes my arm and looks at my number, and they laugh even harder. Everyone knows that the 174000s are the Italian Jews, the well-known Italian Jews, who arrived two months ago, all lawyers, all university graduates, who were more than a hundred and are now only forty; who don't know how to work, and let their bread be stolen, and are hit from morning to night. The Germans call them *zwei linke Hände* (two left hands), and even the Polish Jews despise them, because they don't speak Yiddish.

The nurse indicates my ribs to the other man, as if I were a cadaver in an anatomy class. He points to my swollen eyelids and cheeks and my thin neck, he bends over and presses on my tibia with his thumb, and shows the other the deep impression that his finger leaves in the pale flesh, as if it were wax.

I wish I had never spoken to the Pole: I feel as if I had never in all my life suffered a more atrocious insult. The nurse, meanwhile, seems to have finished his demonstration, in his language, which I do not understand, and which to me sounds terrible. He turns to me and, in broken German, charitably, tells me the conclusion: "*Du Jude, kaputt. Du schnell*

Krematorium, fertig." (You Jew, done for. You soon for the crematorium, finished.)

More hours pass before all the patients have been seen, given a shirt, and had their information recorded. I, as usual, am last. Someone in brand-new striped clothes asks me where I was born, what profession I practiced "as a civilian," if I had children, what diseases I had had, a whole series of questions. What use can they be? Is this a complicated rehearsal to make fools of us? Could this be the hospital? They make us stand naked and ask us questions.

At last, even for me the door is opened, and I can enter the dormitory.

Here, as everywhere, there are three tiers of bunks, in three rows throughout the barrack, separated by two narrow corridors. There are 150 bunks, and about 250 patients; so there are two in most of the bunks. The patients in the upper bunks, squashed against the ceiling, can hardly sit up; they lean out, curious to see today's new arrivals. It's the most interesting moment of the day, for one always finds some acquaintances. I am assigned to bunk number 10—a miracle! It's empty! I stretch out with delight; it's the first time since I entered the camp that I've had a bunk all to myself. Despite my hunger, within ten minutes I am asleep.

The life of Ka-Be is a life of limbo. The physical discomforts are relatively few, apart from hunger and the suffering inherent in illness. It's not cold, there's no work to do, and, unless you commit some grave fault, you aren't beaten.

Reveille is at 4 a.m., even for patients. You have to make your bed and wash, but there's not much hurry nor is it very strict. The bread is distributed at half past five, and one can cut it comfortably into thin slices and eat it lying down in complete peace; then one can fall asleep again until the soup is distributed at midday. Until about four it's *Mittagsruhe*, afternoon rest time; then there is often the medical examination and bandaging, and you have to climb down from the bunk, take off your shirt,

and line up in front of the doctor. The evening ration is also served in bed, after which, at nine, all the lights are turned off except for the shaded lamp of the night guard, and there is silence.

. . . And for the first time since I entered the camp reveille catches me in a deep sleep, and waking up is a return from nothingness. When the bread is distributed, one can hear far away, outside the windows, in the dark air, the band beginning to play: our healthy comrades are leaving in their squads for work.

From Ka-Be you can't hear the music well. The beating of the bass drum and the cymbals reaches us continuously and monotonously, but on this weft the musical phrases weave a pattern only intermittently, according to the wind's caprices. From our beds we exchange looks, because we all feel that this music is infernal.

The tunes are few, a dozen, the same ones every day, morning and evening: marches and popular songs dear to every German. They lie engraved in our minds and will be the last thing in the Lager that we forget: they are the voice of the Lager, the perceptible expression of its geometric madness, of the resolution of others to annihilate us first as men, in order to kill us slowly afterward.

When this music plays, we know that our comrades, outside in the fog, are marching like automatons; their souls are dead and the music drives them, as the wind drives the dead leaves, and takes the place of their will. There is no longer any will: every beat becomes a step, a reflexive contraction of exhausted muscles. The Germans have succeeded in this. Their prisoners are ten thousand, and are a single gray machine; they are precisely determined; they do not think and they do not desire, they walk.

During the marches of departure and return, the SS are always present. Who could deny them their right to watch this choreography of their creation, the dance of dead men, squad after squad, leaving the fog to enter the fog? What more concrete proof of their victory?

Even those in Ka-Be recognize this departure and return from work, the hypnosis of the interminable rhythm, which kills thought and deadens pain; they have experienced it themselves and they will experience it again. But we had to escape from the enchantment, hear the music from the outside, as happened in Ka-Be, and as we think back to it now, after liberation and

rebirth, without obeying it, without enduring it, to understand what it was, for what carefully considered reason the Germans created this monstrous rite, and why even today, when one of those innocent songs comes to mind, our blood freezes in our veins and we are aware that to have returned from Auschwitz was no small fortune.

I have two neighbors in the adjoining bunk. They lie down all day and all night, side by side, skin against skin, crossed like the Pisces of the zodiac, so that each has the other's feet beside his head.

One is Walter Bonn, a Dutchman, civilized and quite educated. He sees that I have nothing to cut my bread with and lends me his knife, and then offers to sell it to me for half a ration of bread. I discuss the price and turn it down—I think that I will always find someone to lend me a knife here in Ka-Be, while outside it costs only a third of a ration. Walter is by no means less courteous because of this, and at midday, after eating his soup, he wipes his spoon with his lips (which is a good rule before lending it, so as to clean it and not to let any traces of soup that may still be clinging to it go to waste) and spontaneously offers it to me.

"What are you suffering from, Walter?" "*Körperschwäche*," progressive physical decline. The worst disease: it cannot be cured, and it's very dangerous to enter Ka-Be with such a diagnosis. If it hadn't been for the edema of his ankles (and he shows them to me), which makes it impossible for him to march to work, he would have been very cautious about reporting sick.

My ideas about this kind of danger are still quite confused. Everybody speaks about it indirectly, by allusions, and when I ask some questions they look at me and fall silent.

Is it true what one hears of selections, of gas, of the crematorium?

Crematorium. The other one, Walter's bed companion, wakes, startled, and sits up: Who's talking about the crematorium? What's happening? Can't a sleeping person be left in peace? He is a Polish Jew, albino, with a gaunt, good-natured face, no longer young. His name is Schmulek, he's a smith. Walter tells him briefly.

So, “*der Italeyner*” does not believe in selections. Schmulek wants to speak German but speaks Yiddish; I understand him with difficulty, only because he wants to be understood. He silences Walter with a gesture, he will take care of convincing me:

“Show me your number: you are 174517. This numbering began eighteen months ago and applies to Auschwitz and the subcamps. There are now ten thousand of us here at Buna-Monowitz; perhaps thirty thousand between Auschwitz and Birkenau. *Wo sind die Andere?* Where are the others?”

“Perhaps transferred to other camps?” I suggest.

Schmulek shakes his head, he turns to Walter.

“*Er will nix verstayen*,” he doesn’t want to understand.

• • •

But destiny ordained that I was soon to understand, and at the expense of Schmulek himself. That evening the door of the barrack opened, a voice shouted “*Achtung!*” and every sound died out, giving way to a leaden silence.

Two SS men entered (one of them has many chevrons, perhaps he is an officer?). Their steps echoed in the barrack as if it were empty; they spoke to the chief doctor, and he showed them a register, pointing here and there. The officer took notes on a pad. Schmulek touches my knee: “*Pass auf, pass auf*,” pay attention.

The officer, followed by the doctor, walks around in silence, nonchalantly, between the bunks. He has a switch in his hand, and flicks at the edge of a blanket hanging down from a top bunk—the patient hurries to adjust it. The officer moves on.

Another has a yellow face; the officer pulls off his blanket, he trembles, the officer touches his belly, says, “*Gut, gut*,” and moves on.

Now he is looking at Schmulek; he brings out his pad, checks the number of the bed and the number of the tattoo. I see it all clearly from above: he has made a cross beside Schmulek’s number. Then he moves on.

I now look at Schmulek and behind him I see Walter’s eyes, and so I ask no questions.

The next day, in place of the usual group of patients who had recovered, two distinct groups were sent out. Those in the first were shaved and shorn and had a shower. Those in the second went out as they were, beards unshaved, bandages unchanged, without a shower. Nobody said goodbye to the latter, nobody gave them messages for healthy comrades.

Schmulek was part of this group.

In this discreet and sedate manner, without display or anger, massacre moves through the wards of Ka-Be every day, touching one man or another. When Schmulek left, he gave me his spoon and knife; Walter and I avoided looking at each other and were silent for a long time. Then Walter asked me how I manage to keep my ration of bread so long, and explained to me that he usually cuts his bread lengthwise so that he has wider slices, on which the margarine spreads more easily.

Walter explains many things to me: *Schonungsblock* means rest barrack; here are only the patients who are less seriously ill or convalescent, or who do not require treatment. Among them, at least fifty have dysentery, in a more or less serious form.

These last are checked every third day. They line up along the corridor. At the far end are two tin basins and the nurse, with a register, a watch, and a pencil. Two at a time, the patients present themselves and have to show, on the spot and at once, that they still have diarrhea; to prove it, they are given exactly one minute. After which, they show the result to the nurse, who looks at it and judges. They wash the basins quickly in a washtub provided for the purpose and the next two take their place.

Of those waiting, some are contorted with the pain of holding in their precious evidence another twenty, another ten minutes; others, without resources at the moment, strain veins and muscles in the contrary effort. The nurse observes, impassive, chewing his pencil, one eye on the watch, one eye on the specimens successively presented. In doubtful cases, he leaves with the basin and goes to show it to the doctor.

. . . And I receive a visit: it is Piero Sonnino, from Rome. “Did you see how I tricked him?” Piero has mild enteritis, has been here for twenty days, and is quite content, resting and growing fatter; he couldn’t care less about the selections and has decided to stay in Ka-Be until the end of winter, at all costs. His method consists of getting in line behind some authentic dysentery patient, who offers a guarantee of success; when it’s his turn he asks for his collaboration (to be rewarded with soup or bread), and if the

latter agrees, and the nurse has a moment of inattention, he switches the basins in the middle of the crowd, and the deed is done. Piero knows what he's risking, but it has gone well so far.

Yet life in Ka-Be is not this. It is not the crucial moments of the selections, it is not the grotesque episodes of checking for diarrhea and lice, it is not even the illnesses.

Ka-Be is the Lager without its physical discomforts. Therefore, anyone who still has any seeds of conscience feels his conscience reawaken; and so, in the long empty days, he speaks of other things than hunger and work, and begins to consider what they have made us become, how much they have taken away from us, what this life is. In this Ka-Be, an enclosure of relative peace, we have learned that our personality is fragile, that it is much more endangered than our life; and the wise men of ancient times, instead of warning us "Remember that you must die," would have done better to remind us of this greater danger that threatens us. If, from inside the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: Be sure not to tolerate in your own homes what is inflicted on us here.

When one works, one suffers and there is no time to think: home is less than a memory. But here the time is ours; despite the prohibition, we exchange visits from bunk to bunk, and we talk and talk. The wooden barrack, crammed with suffering humanity, is full of words, of memories, and of another pain. *Heimweh*, the Germans call this pain; it's a beautiful word that means "longing for home."

We know where we come from; memories of the world outside crowd our sleeping and our waking hours, we become aware, with amazement, that we have forgotten nothing, every memory evoked rises before us with painful clarity.

But where we are going we do not know. Perhaps we will be able to survive the illnesses and escape the selections, perhaps even endure the work and hunger that wear us down—and then? Here, momentarily far away from the curses and the beatings, we can reenter into ourselves and meditate, and then it becomes clear that we will not return. We traveled here in sealed freight cars; we saw our women and our children depart toward

nothingness; we, made slaves, have marched countless times to and from our silent labor, dead in spirit long before our anonymous death. No one must leave here who might carry to the world, together with the mark stamped in his flesh, the evil tidings of what man’s audacity made of man in Auschwitz.

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3. Horses 8, Men 40, Tare, Capacity.

Our Nights

After twenty days of Ka-Be, when my wound was practically healed, I was discharged, to my great disappointment.

The ceremony is simple, but entails a painful and dangerous period of readjustment. On leaving Ka-Be, those who have no special contacts are not returned to their former Block and Kommando but are enrolled, on the basis of criteria wholly unknown to me, in some other barrack and given some other kind of work. Moreover, they leave Ka-Be naked; they are given "new" clothes and shoes (I mean not those left behind at their entry), which need to be adapted to their own persons with speed and diligence, and this involves effort and expense. They have once more to acquire a spoon and knife. And finally—and this is the gravest aspect—they find themselves inserted into an unknown environment, among hostile companions never seen before, with leaders whose character they do not know and against whom consequently it is difficult to protect themselves.

Man's capacity to dig a niche for himself, to secrete a shell, to build around himself a tenuous barrier of defense, even in apparently desperate circumstances, is astonishing and deserves serious study. It is an invaluable exercise of adaptation, partly passive and unconscious, partly active: hammering in a nail above his bunk on which to hang his shoes at night; concluding tacit pacts of nonaggression with neighbors; understanding and accepting the habits and laws of the individual Kommando, the individual Block. By virtue of this work, one manages after a few weeks to arrive at a certain equilibrium, a certain degree of security in the face of the unforeseen. One has made oneself a nest: the trauma of the transplantation is over.

But the man who leaves Ka-Be, naked and almost always insufficiently recovered, feels himself ejected into the dark and cold of sidereal space. His trousers are falling down, his shoes hurt, his shirt has no buttons. He searches for a human contact and finds only backs turned. He is as helpless and vulnerable as a newborn babe, but in the morning he will have to march to work.

It is in these conditions that I find myself when the nurse entrusts me, after various obligatory administrative rites, to the care of the *Blockältester* of Block 45. But at once a thought fills me with joy: I'm in luck, this is Alberto's Block!

Alberto is my best friend. He is only twenty-two, two years younger than me, but none of us Italians have shown a capacity for adaptation like his. Alberto entered the Lager head high, and lives in the Lager unscathed and uncorrupted. He understood, before any of us, that this life is war; he allowed himself no indulgences, he wasted no time complaining or feeling sorry for himself and others, but entered the battle from the outset. He is sustained by intelligence and intuition. He reasons correctly; often he does not even reason but is right just the same. He grasps everything immediately; he knows only a little French but understands whatever the Germans and Poles tell him. He responds in Italian and with gestures, he makes himself understood and at once wins sympathy. He fights for his life but remains everybody's friend. He "knows" whom to corrupt, whom to avoid, whose compassion to arouse, whom to resist.

Yet (and it is for this virtue of his that his memory is still dear and close to me) he did not become corrupt himself. I always saw, and still see in him, the rare figure of the strong yet gentle man against whom the weapons of the night are blunted.

But I was unable to get permission to sleep in a bunk with him—not even Alberto could manage that, although by now he enjoyed a certain popularity in Block 45. It was a pity, because to have a bed companion whom one can trust, or at least with whom one can reach an understanding, is an inestimable advantage; and, besides, it is winter now and the nights are long, and since we are forced to exchange sweat, smell, and warmth with someone, under the same blanket, and in a width of seventy centimeters, it is clearly desirable that he be a friend.

In the winter the nights are long and we are allowed a considerable period of time to sleep.

Little by little, the noise in the Block dies down; the distribution of the evening ration ended more than an hour ago, and only a few stubborn men continue to scrape the by now shiny bottom of the bowl, turning it meticulously under the lamp, frowning with concentration. Engineer Kardos moves around the bunks, tending wounded feet and suppurating corns. This is his trade: there is no one who will not willingly give up a slice of bread to soothe the torment of those numb sores, which bleed all day, at every step. And so, in this manner, honestly, Engineer Kardos has solved the problem of living.

Through the back door, stealthily, and looking around cautiously, the storyteller has come in. He is seated on Wachsmann's bunk and at once a small, attentive, silent crowd gathers around him. He chants an interminable Yiddish rhapsody, always the same one, in rhymed quatrains, of a resigned and penetrating melancholy (or perhaps I remember it so because I heard it at that time and in that place?); from the few words I understand, it must be a song that he composed himself, which contains all the life of the Lager in its minute details. Some are generous and give the storyteller a pinch of tobacco or a length of thread; others listen intently but give nothing.

Suddenly the call resounds for the last rite of the day: "*Wer hat kaputt die Schuhe?*" (Who has broken shoes?), and at once a clamor erupts as forty or fifty claimants to the exchange rush toward the *Tagesraum* in desperate haste, well knowing that only the first ten, on the best of hypotheses, will be satisfied.

Then there is quiet. The lights go out a first time for a few seconds to warn the tailors to put away their precious needle and thread; then in the distance the bell sounds, the night guard settles himself, and all the lights go out definitively. There is nothing left to do but undress and go to bed.

I do not know who my neighbor is; I'm not even sure that it's always the same person, because I have never seen his face except for a few seconds in the confusion of reveille, so I know his back and his feet much better than

his face. He does not work in my Kommando and gets into the bunk only at curfew time; he wraps himself in the blanket, pushes me aside with a blow from his bony hips, turns his back on me, and at once begins to snore. Back-to-back, I struggle to regain a reasonable area of the straw mattress: with my lower back I exercise a progressive pressure against his; then I turn around and try to push with my knees; I take hold of his ankles and attempt to place them a little farther over so as not to have his feet next to my face. But it is all in vain: he is much heavier than I am and seems turned to stone in his sleep.

So I adapt to lying like this, forced into immobility, half on the bunk's wooden edge. But I am so tired and stunned that I, too, soon fall asleep, and I seem to be sleeping on a railroad track.

The train is about to arrive; you can hear the panting of the engine, which is my neighbor. I am not yet so asleep that I am not aware of the double nature of the engine. It is, in fact, the very engine that towed the freight cars we had to unload in Buna today. I recognize it by the fact that even now, as when it passed close by us, I feel the heat radiating from its black side. It is puffing, it gets closer and closer, it is always on the point of running me over but instead it never arrives. My sleep is very light, it is a veil, if I want I can tear it. I will tear it, I want to, so that I can get off the railroad track. Now I've done it and now I'm awake, but not really awake, only a little more, one step higher on the ladder between unconscious and conscious. My eyes are closed and I don't want to open them lest sleep escape me, but I can register noises. I'm sure this distant whistle is real, it doesn't come from the dream engine, it can be heard objectively. It is the whistle from the narrow-gauge track; it comes from the construction site, which operates at night as well. A long, steady note, then another, a semitone lower, then again the first, but short and cut off. This whistle is an important thing and in some ways essential: we've heard it so often, associated with the suffering of the work and the camp, that it has become the camp's symbol and immediately evokes its image, as certain music does, or certain smells.

Here is my sister, with some unidentifiable friends of mine and many other people. They are all listening to me and it is this very story that I am telling: the three-note whistle, the hard bunk, my neighbor whom I would like to move but am afraid to wake because he is stronger than I am. I also speak at length about our hunger and about how we are checked for lice,

and about the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash because I was bleeding. It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people, and to have so many things to recount, but I can't help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly among themselves of other things, as if I were not there. My sister looks at me, gets up, and goes away without a word.

A desolating grief now rises in me, like some barely remembered pain of early childhood. It is pain in its pure state, untempered by a sense of reality or by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, the kind of pain that makes children cry; and it is better for me to swim up to the surface once again, but this time I deliberately open my eyes, to have a guarantee in front of me that I am in fact awake.

My dream stands before me, still warm, and although I'm awake I'm filled with its anguish. And then I remember that it's not just any dream, and that since I arrived here I have dreamed it not once but many times, with hardly any variations in setting or details. I am now fully awake and I remember that I recounted it to Alberto and that he confided, to my amazement, that it's also his dream and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone. Why does it happen? Why is the pain of every day so constantly translated, in our dreams, into the ever repeated scene of the story told and not listened to?

. . . While I ponder this, I try to take advantage of the interval of wakefulness to shake off the anguished remnants of the preceding sleep, so as not to compromise the quality of the next sleep. I sit up, crouching in the darkness; I look around and listen intently.

I can hear the sleepers breathing and snoring; some groan and speak. Many smack their lips and waggle their jaws. They dream of eating; this is another collective dream. It's a pitiless dream: the creator of the Tantalus myth must have known it. You not only see the food, you feel it in your hands, particular and concrete, and are aware of its rich and pungent fragrance. Someone even brings it to your lips, but some circumstance, different every time, intervenes to prevent the consummation of the act. Then the dream dissolves and breaks up into its elements, but it re-forms immediately afterward and begins again, similar yet changed; and this without pause, for each of us, every night, and for the entire duration of our sleep.

It must be after eleven, because the movement to and from the bucket next to the night guard is already intense. This is an obscene torment, an indelible shame. Every two or three hours we have to get up to eliminate the large dose of water that we are forced to absorb during the day in the form of soup, in order to satisfy our hunger—that same water which in the evening swells our ankles and the hollows of our eyes, conferring a deformed likeness on all physiognomies, and whose elimination imposes a grueling task on our kidneys.

It's not merely a question of the procession to the bucket; the rule is that the last user of the bucket goes and empties it in the latrine, and it is also the rule that at night one must not leave the barrack except in night uniform (shirt and pants), giving one's number to the guard. It follows, predictably, that the night guard will try to exempt his friends, his fellow countrymen, and the Prominents from this duty. In addition, the old inhabitants of the camp have refined their senses to such a degree that, while still in their bunks, they are miraculously able to distinguish if the level is at a dangerous point, purely on the basis of the sound that the sides of the bucket make—with the result that they almost always manage to avoid emptying it. So the candidates for bucket service are a fairly limited number in each barrack, while the total volume to eliminate is at least two hundred liters, which means that the bucket has to be emptied about twenty times.

In short, every night the risk that hangs over us, the inexperienced and unprivileged, when need drives us to the bucket, is quite serious. The night guard unexpectedly jumps out of his corner and grabs us, scribbles down our number, hands us a pair of wooden clogs and the bucket, and chases us out into the snow, shivering and sleepy. It is our task to trudge to the latrine with the bucket, which knocks against our bare calves, disgustingly warm; it's full beyond any reasonable limit, and inevitably with the shaking some of the contents spills over onto our feet, so that, however repugnant this duty may be, it is always preferable that we, and not our bunk companion, be ordered to do it.

So our nights drag on. The dream of Tantalus and the dream of the story are woven into a fabric of more indistinct images; the suffering of the day, composed of hunger, blows, cold, exhaustion, fear, and lack of privacy, at

night turns into shapeless nightmares of unprecedented violence, such as in free life occur only during a fever. One wakes at every moment, frozen with terror, shaking in every limb, under the impression of an order shouted out by a voice full of anger in a language not understood. The procession to the bucket and the thud of bare heels on the wooden floor turns into another symbolic procession. It is us again, gray and identical, as small as ants and big enough to reach to the stars, packed one against the other, innumerable, covering the plain as far as the horizon—sometimes melting into a single substance, an anguished dough in which we feel trapped and suffocated; sometimes marching in a circle, without beginning or end, with a blinding dizziness and a tide of nausea rising from the heart to the throat—until hunger or cold or the fullness of our bladders leads our dreams into their customary patterns. We try in vain, when the nightmare itself or the discomfort wakes us, to extricate the various elements and drive them, separately, out of the field of our present attention, so as to protect our sleep from their intrusion. But as soon as we close our eyes we feel our brain start up, yet again, beyond our control; it beats and buzzes, incapable of rest, it fabricates phantoms and terrible signs, incessantly draws and shakes them in gray fog on the screen of our dreams.

But for the entire night, through all the alternations of sleep, waking, and nightmare, the expectation and terror of the moment of reveille keeps watch. By means of that mysterious faculty which many know, we are able, even without clocks, to calculate the moment with close accuracy. At the hour of reveille, which varies from season to season but always falls much before dawn, the camp bell rings for a long time, and in every barrack the night guard goes off duty; he switches on the lights, stands up, stretches, and pronounces the daily condemnation: "*Aufstehen*," or, more often, in Polish, "*Wstawać*."

Very few sleep until the *Wstawać*: it's a moment of pain too acute for even the deepest sleep not to dissolve as it approaches. The night guard knows this, and for this reason utters it not in a tone of command but in the quiet, subdued voice of one who is aware that the announcement will find all ears straining, and will be heard and obeyed.

The foreign word sinks like a stone to the bottom of every soul. "Get up": the illusory barrier of the warm blankets, the thin armor of sleep, the nighttime escape, though tortured, fall to pieces around us, and we find ourselves mercilessly awake, exposed to insult, atrociously naked and

vulnerable. A day begins that is like every day, so long that we cannot reasonably conceive the end, so much cold, so much hunger, so much toil separate us from it: better to concentrate attention and desires on the slab of gray bread, which is small but in an hour will certainly be ours, and which for five minutes, until we have devoured it, will constitute the sum total of what the law of the place allows us to possess.

At the *Wstawać* the storm starts up again. The entire barrack enters without transition into frenzied activity: everybody climbs up and down, makes his bunk, and tries at the same time to get dressed in such a way as to leave none of his objects unguarded; the air fills with dust and becomes opaque; the quickest ones elbow their way through the crowd to go to the washhouse and the latrine before the line forms. The barrack sweepers at once come onto the scene and drive everyone out, hitting and shouting.

When I have made my bunk and am dressed, I climb down to the floor and put on my shoes. The sores on my feet reopen at once, and a new day begins.

The Work

Before Resnyk came, my bunkmate was a Pole whose name no one knew; he was gentle and silent, with two old sores on his shinbones, and during the night he gave out a squalid smell of illness; he also had a weak bladder, and so woke up and woke me up eight or ten times a night.

One night he left his gloves in my care and entered the hospital. For half an hour I hoped that the quartermaster would forget that I was the sole occupant of my bunk, but when the curfew bell had already sounded, the bunk trembled and a lanky red-haired fellow, with the number of the French from Drancy, climbed up beside me.

To have a bed companion of tall stature is a misfortune and means losing hours of sleep; I always get tall companions, because I am small and two tall men cannot sleep together. But it was immediately apparent that Resnyk, in spite of that, was not a bad companion. He spoke little and courteously, he was clean, he didn't snore, didn't get up more than two or three times a night and always with great delicacy. In the morning he offered to make the bed (this is a complicated and difficult operation, and also carries a notable responsibility, as those who make the bed badly, the *schlechte Bettenbauer*, are diligently punished) and did it quickly and well; so that I felt a certain fleeting pleasure later, in Roll Call Square, in seeing that he had been assigned to my Kommando.

On the march to work, limping in our clumsy wooden clogs on the icy snow, we exchanged a few words, and I found out that Resnyk is Polish; he lived in Paris for twenty years but still speaks an implausible French. He is thirty, but, like all of us, could be taken for anywhere from seventeen to fifty. He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but it was certainly

a sorrowful, cruel, and moving story; because such are all our stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, shocking necessity. We tell them to one another in the evening, and they take place in Norway, Italy, Algeria, Ukraine—simple and incomprehensible, like the stories in the Bible. But are not they, too, stories in a new Bible?

Once we arrived at the construction site, we were led to the *Eisenröhreplatz*, the flat area where the iron pipes are unloaded, and then the usual things began. The Kapo took the roll call again, briefly took note of the new acquisition, and arranged with the civilian *Meister* about the day's work. He then entrusted us to the *Vorarbeiter* and went off to sleep in the toolshed, next to the stove; he is not a Kapo who makes trouble, for he is not a Jew and so has no fear of losing his post. The *Vorarbeiter* distributed the iron levers among us and the jacks among his friends. The usual little struggle took place to get the lightest levers, and today it went badly for me: mine is the twisted one that weighs perhaps fifteen kilograms; I know that even if I had to use it without any weight on it, I would be dead from exhaustion in half an hour.

Then we left, each with his own lever, limping in the melting snow. At every step, a little snow and mud stick to our wooden soles, until we're walking unsteadily on two heavy, shapeless masses from which it's impossible to get free; suddenly one comes unstuck, and then it's as if one leg were several centimeters shorter than the other.

Today we have to unload an enormous cast-iron cylinder from the freight car. I think it is a synthesis pipe and must weigh several tons. This is better for us, because it is notoriously less exhausting to work with big loads than with small ones; in fact, the work is better subdivided, and we are given adequate tools. However, it is dangerous, one must not get distracted; a moment's inattention and one would be crushed.

Meister Nogalla, the Polish foreman, rigid, serious, and taciturn, supervised in person the unloading operation. Now the cylinder lies on the ground and Meister Nogalla says, "*Bohlen holen*."

Our hearts sink. It means "carry ties," in order to build a path in the soft mud on which the cylinder will be pushed by the levers into the factory. But

the ties are jammed in the ground and weigh eighty kilos; they are more or less at the limit of our strength. The more robust of us, working in pairs, are able to carry ties for a few hours; for me it is a torture; the load maims my shoulder bone. After the first trip, I am deaf and almost blind from the effort, and I would stoop to any baseness to avoid the second.

I will try and pair myself with Resnyk; he seems a good worker and, being taller, will support the greater part of the weight. I know it's in the order of things for Resnyk to refuse me with contempt and team up with someone more robust; then I will ask to go to the latrine and I will remain there as long as possible, and afterward I will try to hide, with the certainty of being immediately tracked down, mocked, and hit; but anything is better than this work.

Instead Resnyk accepts, and, what's more, lifts up the tie by himself and rests it on my right shoulder with care; then he lifts up the other end, places his left shoulder under it, and we set out.

The tie is encrusted with snow and mud; at every step it knocks against my ear and the snow slides down my neck. After fifty steps I am at the limit of what is usually called normal endurance: my knees are folding, my shoulder aches as if clasped in a vise, my balance is in danger. At every step I feel my shoes sucked in by the greedy mud, by this ubiquitous Polish mud whose monotonous horror fills our days.

I bite my lips deeply; we know well that gaining a small, extraneous pain serves as a stimulant to mobilize our last reserves of energy. The Kapos also know it: some of them beat us from pure bestiality and violence, but others beat us almost lovingly when we are carrying a load, accompanying the blows with exhortations and encouragement, as cart drivers do with willing horses.

When we reach the cylinder, we unload the tie on the ground, and I stand stiffly, my eyes vacant, mouth open, and arms dangling, sunk in the ephemeral and negative ecstasy of the cessation of pain. In a twilight of exhaustion I wait for the push that will force me to begin work again, and I try to take advantage of every second of waiting to recover some energy.

But the push never comes: Resnyk touches my elbow, we return as slowly as possible to the ties. There the others are wandering around in pairs, all trying to delay as long as possible before submitting to the load.

"*Allons, petit, attrape.*" This tie is dry and a little lighter, but at the end of the second journey I go to the *Vorarbeiter* and ask to go the latrine.

We have the advantage that our latrine is quite far away; this permits us, once a day, a slightly longer absence than normal. Moreover, since we are also forbidden to go there alone, Wachsmann, the weakest and clumsiest of the Kommando, has been invested with the duty of *Scheissbegleiter*, latrine companion; by virtue of this appointment, Wachsmann is responsible for any hypothetical (laughable hypothesis!) attempt to escape and, more realistically, for every delay.

As my request has been accepted, I leave in the mud and the gray snow, amid scraps of metal, escorted by little Wachsmann. I never manage to understand him, as we have no language in common; but his comrades tell me that he is a rabbi, in fact a melamed, a person learned in the Torah, and, even more, in his town, in Galicia, had a reputation as a healer and a miracle worker. And it is not hard to believe when I think that this thin, fragile, and meek figure has managed to work for two years without falling ill and without dying; on the contrary, he is animated by an amazing vitality of words and facial expressions, and spends long evenings discussing Talmudic questions, incomprehensibly, in Yiddish and Hebrew, with Mendi, who is a modernist rabbi.

The latrine is an oasis of peace. It is a provisional latrine, which the Germans have not yet provided with the customary wooden partitions to separate the various compartments: *Nur für Engländer*, *Nur für Polen*, *Nur für Ukrainische Frauen*, and so on, and, a little apart, *Nur für Häftlinge*. Inside, shoulder to shoulder, sit four hollow-faced Häftlinge: a bearded old Russian worker with the blue OST band[4] on his left arm; a Polish boy, with a large white “P” on his back and chest; an English military prisoner of war, with his face splendidly shaved and rosy and his khaki uniform neat, ironed, and clean, except for a large “KG” (*Kriegsgefangener*) on the back. A fifth Häftling stands at the door, patiently and monotonously asking every civilian who enters loosening his belt: “*Êtes-vous français?*”

When I return to work, the trucks with the rations can be seen passing, which means it is ten o’clock. That is already a respectable hour, as the midday pause can be glimpsed in the fog of the remote future, and we can begin to derive some energy from the expectation.

I make two or three more trips with Resnyk, searching attentively, even going to distant piles, to find lighter ties, but by now all the best ones have been moved and only the others remain, repellent, sharp edged, heavy with mud and ice, and with metal plates nailed to them for the rails to fit on.

When Franz comes and calls Wachsmann to go with him to bring back our ration, it means that it is eleven o'clock and the morning is almost over —no one thinks about the afternoon. The crew returns at eleven thirty, and the standard interrogation begins: how much soup today, what quality, did we get it from the top or the bottom of the vat. I force myself not to ask these questions, but I cannot help listening eagerly to the replies, sniffing at the smell carried from the kitchen by the wind.

And at last, like a celestial meteor, superhuman and impersonal as a sign from heaven, the midday siren explodes, granting a brief respite to our anonymous, shared weariness and hunger. And the usual things happen again: we all run to the shed, and line up with our bowls ready, and we all have an animal hurry to flood our bellies with the warm slop, but no one wants to be first, because the first person receives the most watery ration. As usual, the Kapo mocks and insults us for our voracity and takes care not to stir the pot, because the bottom belongs notoriously to him. Then comes the bliss (positive, this time, and visceral) of relaxation and warmth in the stomach and in the shed around the rumbling stove. The smokers, with miserly and reverent gestures, roll a thin cigarette, while our clothes, dank with mud and snow, give off a dense smoke in the heat of the stove, which smells of a kennel or a sheepfold.

A tacit convention ordains that no one speak: within a minute we are all sleeping, jammed elbow to elbow, falling suddenly forward and recovering with a stiffening of the back. Behind barely closed eyelids, dreams break out violently, and these, too, are the usual dreams. Of being at home, in a wonderful hot bath. Of being at home, sitting at the table. Of being at home, and telling the story of this hopeless work of ours, of our never-ending hunger, of our sleep of slaves.

Then, within the steam of our sluggish digestion, a painful nucleus condenses, and pricks us and grows until it crosses the threshold of our consciousness and takes away the joy of sleep. "*Es wird bald ein Uhr sein*": it is almost one o'clock. Like a fast-moving, voracious cancer, it kills our sleep and grips us in a precautionary anguish: we listen to the wind whistling outside, and to the light rustle of the snow against the window, "*Es wird schnell ein Uhr sein.*" As each of us clings to sleep, so that it will not abandon us, all our senses are taut with the horror of the signal that is about to come, that is outside the door, that is here . . .

Here it is. A thud at the window: Meister Nogalla has thrown a snowball against the windowpane, and now stands stiffly outside, holding his watch with its face turned toward us. The Kapo gets up, stretches, and says quietly, like one who does not doubt that he will be obeyed: "*Alles heraus*," all outside.

Oh, to weep! Oh, to confront the wind as once we did, as equals, and not as here, like worms without a soul.

We are outside and each one picks up his lever. Resnyk draws his head down between his shoulders, pulls his cap over his ears, and lifts his face up to the low gray sky where the inexorable snow is swirling: "*Si j'avey une chien, je ne le chasse pas dehors*."

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4. This indicated a slave worker from Eastern Europe.

A Good Day

The conviction that life has a purpose is rooted in man's every fiber; it is a property of human substance. Free men give many names to this purpose, and think and talk a lot about its nature. But for us the question is simpler.

Today, here, our only purpose is to reach the spring. We care about nothing else now. Behind this goal there is now no other goal. In the morning, lined up in Roll Call Square, while we wait endlessly for the time to leave for work, and every breath of wind penetrates our clothes and runs in violent shivers over our defenseless bodies, and everything is gray around us, and we are gray; in the morning, when it's still dark, we all scan the sky in the east to spot the first signs of a milder season, and every day the rising of the sun is commented on, today a little earlier than yesterday, today a little warmer than yesterday, in two months, in a month, the cold will relent and we will have one enemy less.

Today for the first time the sun rose bright and clear from the horizon of mud. It's a Polish sun, cold, white, and distant, and warms only the skin, but when it broke loose from the last mists a murmur ran through our colorless multitude, and when even I felt its warmth through my clothes, I understood how men can worship the sun.

"*Das Schlimmste ist vorüber*," said Ziegler, turning his sharp shoulders to the sun: the worst is over. Next to us is a group of Greeks, those admirable and terrible Jews of Salonika, tenacious, thieving, wise, ferocious, and united, so determined to live, such pitiless opponents in the struggle for life—those Greeks who have prevailed in the kitchens and at the worksite, and whom even the Germans respect and the Poles fear. This is their third year in the camp, and nobody knows better than they what the

camp means. They stand in a tight circle, shoulder to shoulder, and sing one of their interminable chants.

Felicio the Greek knows me. "*L'année prochaine à la maison!*" he shouts at me, and adds, "*À la maison par la Cheminée!*" Felicio was in Birkenau. And they continue to sing and stamp their feet in time, and grow drunk on songs.

When we finally left, through the main entrance of the camp, the sun was quite high and the sky clear. At midday we could see the mountains; to the west, familiar and incongruous, the steeple of Auschwitz (a steeple here!), and all around the tethered barrage balloons. The smoke from Buna lay still in the cold air, and a row of low hills could be seen, green with forests: and our hearts ache because we all know that Birkenau is there, that our women ended up there, and that soon we, too, will end up there—but we are not used to seeing it.

For the first time we notice that on both sides of the road, even here, the meadows are green, because, without sun, a meadow is as if it were not green.

Buna is not: Buna is desperately and essentially opaque and gray. This huge tangle of iron, concrete, mud, and smoke is the negation of beauty. Its roads and buildings have been given names like ours, numbers or letters, or inhuman and sinister ones. Within its precincts not a blade of grass grows, the soil is impregnated with the poisonous juices of coal and petroleum, and nothing is alive but machines and slaves—and the former are more alive than the latter.

Buna is as big as a city; besides the German managers and technicians, forty thousand foreigners work here, and fifteen or twenty languages are spoken. All the foreigners live in different Lagers, which surround Buna: the English prisoners of war Lager, the Ukrainian women's Lager, the French volunteers' Lager, and others that we do not know. Our Lager (*Judenlager*, *Vernichtungslager*, *Kazett*) by itself provides ten thousand workers, who come from all the nations of Europe. We are the slaves of the slaves, whom all can give orders to, and our name is the number that we carry tattooed on our arm and sewn on our chest.

The Carbide Tower, which rises in the middle of Buna and whose top is rarely visible in the fog, was built by us. Its bricks were called *Ziegel, briques, tegula, cegli, kamenny, mattoni, téglak*, and they were cemented by hate, hate and discord, like the Tower of Babel; and that is what we call it, *Babelturm, Bobelturm*; and we hate it as our masters' insane dream of grandeur, their contempt for God and men, for us men.

And today, just as in the ancient fable, we all feel, and the Germans themselves feel, that a curse—not transcendent and divine but inherent and historical—hangs over the insolent structure, built on the confusion of languages and erected in defiance of heaven like a stone curse.

As we will explain, the Buna factory, which the Germans worked on for four years and where countless of us suffered and died, never produced a kilo of synthetic rubber.

But today the eternal puddles, on which a rainbow veil of oil quivers, reflect the clear sky. Pipes, girders, boilers, still cold from the night's freeze, are dripping with dew. The earth dug up from the pits, the piles of coal, the blocks of concrete exhale the winter dampness in a faint mist.

Today is a good day. We look around like blind people who have recovered their sight, and we look at one another. None of us have seen the others in sunlight: someone smiles. If it weren't for the hunger!

For human nature is such that sorrows and sufferings simultaneously endured do not add up to a whole in our consciousness but hide, the lesser behind the greater, according to a definite law of perspective. This is providential and allows us to survive in the camp. And this is the reason that so often in free life one hears it said that man is never content. In fact, it is a question not of a human incapacity for a state of absolute happiness but of an ever insufficient knowledge of the complex nature of the state of unhappiness; so that the single name of its major cause is given to all its causes, which are numerous and arranged hierarchically. And when this most immediate cause of unhappiness comes to an end, we are painfully surprised to see that behind it lies another one, and in reality a whole series of other ones.

And so as soon as the cold, which throughout the winter had seemed our only enemy, ceased, we became aware of our hunger, and, repeating the same mistake, today we say: "If it weren't for the hunger! . . ."

But how could one imagine not being hungry? The Lager *is* hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger.

On the other side of the road a steam shovel is working. The bucket, hanging from cables, opens wide its saw-toothed jaws, hovers a moment as if uncertain in its choice, then rushes upon the soft, clayey soil and snaps it up voraciously, while a satisfied snort of thick white smoke rises from the operator's cabin. Then up it goes again, turns halfway around, vomits its weighty mouthful behind, and starts over.

Leaning on our shovels, we stop to watch, fascinated. At every bite of its bucket, our mouths open, our Adam's apples dance up and down, wretchedly visible under the flaccid skin. We are unable to tear ourselves away from the sight of the steam shovel's meal.

Sigi is seventeen years old and is hungrier than all of us, although he gets a little soup every evening from a protector, who is probably not disinterested. He had begun to speak of his home in Vienna and of his mother, but then he drifted onto the subject of food, and now he talks endlessly about some wedding lunch and recalls, with genuine regret, that he failed to finish his third bowl of bean soup. And everyone tells him to keep quiet, but within ten minutes Béla is describing his Hungarian countryside and the fields of maize and a recipe for making sweet polenta—with roasted grains, and lard, and spices and . . . and he is cursed, insulted, and somebody else begins to describe . . .

How weak is our flesh! I am perfectly aware of how vain these fantasies of hunger are, but I cannot exclude myself from the general law, and dancing before my eyes I see the pasta we had just cooked, Vanda, Luciana, Franco, and I, at the transit camp in Italy, when we suddenly heard the news that we would leave the following day to come here; and we were eating (it was so good, yellow, filling), and we stopped, idiots, fools—if we had only known! And if it should happen again . . . Absurd. If one thing is sure in this world, it is certainly this: that it will not happen to us a second time.

Fischer, the newest arrival, pulls a package out of his pocket, wrapped with the meticulousness of the Hungarians, and inside there is a half-ration of bread: half the bread from this morning. It is notorious that only the high numbers keep their bread in their pocket; none of us old ones are able to save our bread for an hour. Various theories circulate to justify this incapacity: bread, when eaten a little bit at a time, is not fully digested; the nervous tension needed to save the bread without touching it when you are hungry is in the highest degree harmful and debilitating; bread that is turning stale soon loses its alimentary value, so that the sooner it's eaten the

more nutritious it is; Alberto says that hunger and bread in one's pocket are terms of opposite sign which automatically cancel each other out and cannot exist together in the same individual; and the majority justly affirm that, in the end, one's stomach is the vault most secure against thefts and extortions. "*Moi, on m'a jamais volé mon pain!*" David snarls, hitting his empty stomach, but he is unable to take his eyes off Fischer, who chews slowly and methodically, "lucky" enough still to have half a ration at ten in the morning: "*Sacré veinard, va!*"

But it is not only because of the sun that today is a happy day: at noon a surprise awaits us. Besides the normal morning ration, we discover in the barrack a wonderful fifty-liter vat, almost full, one of those from the Factory Kitchen. Templer looks at us, triumphant; this "organization" is his work.

Templer is the official organizer of our Kommando: he has a highly sensitive nose for the civilians' soup, like a bee for flowers. Our Kapo, who is not a bad Kapo, leaves him a free hand, and rightly so: Templer slinks off, following imperceptible tracks, like a bloodhound, and returns with the invaluable news that the Polish workers in the Methanol Department, a couple of kilometers from here, have abandoned forty liters of soup that tasted rancid, or that a carload of turnips is to be found unguarded on the siding next to the Factory Kitchen.

Today there are fifty liters and we are fifteen, Kapo and *Vorarbeiter* included. This means three liters each: we'll have one at midday, in addition to the normal ration, and we'll come back to the barrack in turns for the two others during the afternoon, and be granted an extra five-minute break to fill ourselves up.

What more could one want? Even our work seems light, with the prospect of two hot, dense liters waiting for us in the barrack. The Kapo comes to us periodically and calls: "*Wer hat noch zu fressen?*"

He says it not in derision or mockery but because the way we eat, standing, urgently, burning our mouths and throats, without taking time to breathe, really is *fressen*, the way animals eat, and certainly not *essen*, the way humans eat, sitting at a table, solemnly. "*Fressen*" is the proper word, and is the one we commonly use.

Meister Nogalla watches, and closes an eye at our absences from work. Meister Nogalla also has a hungry look about him, and, if it weren't for the social conventions, perhaps he would not refuse a liter of our hot broth.

Templer's turn comes. By popular consensus, he has been allowed five liters, taken from the bottom of the pot. For Templer is not only a good organizer but an exceptional soup eater, and is uniquely able to empty his bowels whenever he wants and in anticipation of a large meal, which contributes to his astonishing gastric capacity.

He is justly proud of this gift of his, and everybody, even Meister Nogalla, knows about it. Accompanied by the gratitude of all, Templer the benefactor enters the latrine for a few moments and comes out beaming and ready, and amid the general benevolence prepares to enjoy the fruits of his labor: "*Nu, Templer, hast du Platz genug für die Suppe gemacht?*"

At sunset, the siren of the *Feierabend* sounds, marking the end of work; and, as we are all sated, at least for a few hours, no quarrels arise, we feel good, the Kapo feels no urge to hit us, and we are able to think of our mothers and wives, which usually does not happen. For a few hours we can be unhappy in the manner of free men.

This Side of Good and Evil

We had an incorrigible tendency to see in every event a symbol and a sign. For seventy days we had been waiting for the *Wäschetauschen*, the ceremony of the change of clothes, and a persistent rumor circulated that there was a lack of clothes to exchange, because, as the front advanced, it was impossible for the Germans to bring new transports into Auschwitz, and "therefore" liberation was near. At the same time, the opposite interpretation circulated: that the delay in the change was a sure sign of an approaching total liquidation of the camp. Instead, the change took place, and, as usual, the officials of the Lager made sure that it would occur unexpectedly and in all the barracks at once.

It should be understood that in the Lager cloth is scarce, and is precious, and that our only way of acquiring a rag to blow our nose, or a pad for our shoes, is, in fact, to cut off a piece of a shirt at the moment of the exchange. If the shirt has long sleeves, one cuts the sleeves; if not, one has to make do with a square from the tail, or unstitch one of the many patches. But in any case, time is needed to get hold of a needle and thread and carry out the operation with some skill, so that the damage is not too obvious at the time of handing over the shirt. The dirty, tattered clothing is bundled together, and passed on to the camp's tailor shop, where it is cursorily patched, and from there it goes to the steam disinfection (not washed!), and then is redistributed; hence the need to make the exchanges as unexpected as possible, in order to protect the used clothing from the above mutilations.

But, as always happens, it was not possible to prevent a shrewd glance from penetrating under the canvas of the cart as it was leaving after the disinfection, so that within a few minutes the camp knew that a

Wäschetauschen was imminent, and, in addition, that this time there were new shirts from a convoy of Hungarians that had arrived three days earlier.

The news had immediate repercussions. All who illegally possessed second shirts, stolen or organized, or even honestly bought with bread as a protection against the cold or as an investment of capital in a moment of prosperity, immediately rushed to the Market, hoping to arrive in time to barter their reserve shirts for food products before the flood of new shirts, or the certainty of their arrival, irreparably devalued the price of the article.

The Market is always very active. Although every exchange (in fact, every form of possession) is explicitly forbidden, and although frequent sweeps by Kapos or *Blockälteste* periodically rout merchants, customers, and the curious, nevertheless the northeast corner of the camp (significantly, the corner farthest from the SS barracks) is permanently occupied by a tumultuous throng, in the open in summer, in a washhouse in winter, as soon as the squads return from work.

Here scores of prisoners, made desperate by hunger, prowl around, with lips parted and eyes gleaming, lured by a false instinct to where the merchandise displayed makes the gnawing in their stomachs more acute and their salivation more persistent. At best, they possess a miserable half-ration of bread that, with painful effort, they have saved since the morning, in the foolish hope of a chance to make an advantageous bargain with some ingenuous person who is unaware of the prices of the moment. Some, with savage patience, acquire a liter of soup with their half-ration, from which, having moved away from the crowd, they methodically extract the few pieces of potato lying at the bottom; this done, they exchange it for bread, and the bread for another liter to denature, and so on until their nerves are exhausted, or until some victim, catching them in the act, inflicts on them a severe lesson, exposing them to public derision. Those who come to the Market to sell their only shirt belong to the same species; they well know what will happen on the next occasion that the Kapo finds out that they are naked beneath their jacket. The Kapo will ask them what they have done with their shirt; it is a purely rhetorical question, a formality useful only for opening the exchange. They will reply that their shirt was stolen in the washhouse; this reply is equally standard, and is not expected to be believed; in fact, even the stones of the Lager know that ninety-nine times out of a hundred those who have no shirt have sold it out of hunger, and that in any case one is responsible for one’s shirt because it belongs to the Lager.

So the Kapo will beat them, they'll be issued another shirt, and sooner or later they'll begin again.

The professional merchants are stationed in the Market, each in his usual corner; first among them are the Greeks, as immobile and silent as sphinxes, squatting on the ground behind bowls of thick soup, the fruits of their labor, their organizing, and their national solidarity. By now the Greeks have been reduced to very few, but they have made a contribution of major importance to the physiognomy of the camp and to the international slang in circulation. Everyone knows that *caravana* is the bowl, and that "*la comedera es buena*" means that the soup is good; the word that expresses the generic idea of theft is *klepsi-klepsi*, of obvious Greek origin. These few survivors from the Jewish colony of Salonika, with their two languages, Spanish and Greek, and their numerous activities, are the repositories of a concrete, worldly, conscious wisdom, in which the traditions of all the Mediterranean civilizations converge. In the camp this wisdom has been transformed into the systematic and scientific practice of theft and seizure of posts of authority, and into a monopoly on the barter Market. But this should not let us forget that their aversion to gratuitous brutality, their amazing consciousness of the survival of at least the potential of human dignity, made the Greeks the most coherent national group in the Lager and, in this respect, the most civilized.

At the Market you can find specialists in kitchen thefts, their jackets swelled by mysterious bulges. Whereas there is a virtually stable price for soup (half a ration of bread for a liter), the price of turnips, carrots, potatoes is extremely variable and depends greatly on, among other factors, the diligence and the corruptibility of the guards on duty at the warehouses.

Mahorca is sold. Mahorca is a third-rate tobacco, in the form of woody chips, which is officially on sale at the *Kantine* in fifty-gram packets, in exchange for "prize coupons" that Buna is supposed to distribute to the best workers. That distribution occurs irregularly, with great parsimony and manifest unfairness, so that the majority of coupons end up, either directly or through the abuse of authority, in the hands of the Kapos and the Prominents; nevertheless, the prize coupons still circulate on the market in the form of money, and their value changes in strict obedience to the laws of classical economics.

There have been periods in which the prize coupon was worth one ration of bread, then one and a quarter, even one and a third; one day it was

quoted at one and a half rations, but then the supply of Mahorca failed to arrive at the *Kantine*, so that, lacking coverage, the currency dropped abruptly to a quarter of a ration. Another boom period occurred for a singular reason: the changing of the guard at the *Frauenblock*, with the arrival of a fresh contingent of robust Polish girls. In fact, since the prize coupon is valid for entry into the *Frauenblock* (for the criminals and the politicals; not for the Jews, who, on the other hand, are not affected by this restriction), interested parties cornered the market actively and rapidly: hence the revaluation, which, however, did not last long.

Among the ordinary Häftlinge there are not many who search for Mahorca to smoke it personally; for the most part, it leaves the camp and ends up in the hands of the civilian workers in Buna. This is a very widespread system of *kombinacja*: the Häftling, somehow saving a ration of bread, invests it in Mahorca; he cautiously gets in touch with a civilian addict, who buys the Mahorca, paying as it were in cash, with a portion of bread greater than that initially invested. The Häftling eats the surplus, and puts the remaining ration back on the market. Speculations of this kind establish a tie between the internal economy of the Lager and the economic life of the outside world: when the distribution of tobacco to the civilian population of Kraków accidentally failed, that fact, crossing the barbed-wire barrier that segregates us from human society, had an immediate repercussion in the camp, provoking a notable rise in the price of Mahorca and, consequently, of the prize coupon.

The process outlined above is only the simplest type; a more complex one is the following. The Häftling acquires in exchange for Mahorca or bread, or maybe receives as a gift from a civilian, some abominable, torn, dirty rag of a shirt, which must, however, have three holes suitable for the head and arms to more or less fit through. As long as it shows signs only of wear, and not of artificial mutilations, such an object, at the moment of the *Wäschetauschen*, is valid as a shirt and carries the right to an exchange; at most, the person who presents it will receive an appropriate number of blows for having taken so little care of the regulation clothing.

Consequently, within the Lager, there is no great difference in value between a shirt worthy of the name and a rag covered with patches. The Häftling described above will have no difficulty in finding a comrade in possession of a shirt of commercial value who is unable to capitalize on it, as he is not in touch with civilian workers, because of his place of work, or

because of language, or because of intrinsic incapacity; this latter will be satisfied with a modest amount of bread for the exchange, and in fact the next *Wäschetauschen* will to a certain extent reestablish equilibrium, distributing good and bad clothes in a perfectly random manner. But the first Häftling will be able to smuggle the good shirt into Buna and sell it to the original (or any other) civilian for four, six, even ten rations of bread. This high margin of profit reflects the gravity of the risk of leaving camp wearing more than one shirt or reentering with none.

There are many variations on this theme. Some do not hesitate to have the gold crowns on their teeth extracted so as to sell them in Buna for bread or tobacco. But it is more usual for such traffic to take place through an intermediary. A high number, that is, a new arrival, only recently but sufficiently brutalized by hunger and by the extreme tension of life in the camp, is noticed by a low number for the abundance of his gold teeth; the low offers the high three or four rations of bread, to be paid in return for extraction. If the high number accepts, the low one pays, and takes the gold to Buna, where, if he is in contact with a trustworthy civilian, who he is not afraid will inform on or cheat him, he can make a sure gain of between ten and twenty or even more rations, which are paid to him gradually, one or two a day. It is worth noting in this respect that, contrary to what takes place in Buna, the maximum amount of any transaction negotiated within the camp is four rations of bread, because it would be practically impossible either to enter into contracts on credit or to safeguard a larger quantity of bread from the greed of others or from one's own hunger.

Trafficking with civilians is a characteristic element of the *Arbeitslager* and, as we have seen, determines its economic life. On the other hand, it is a crime, explicitly provided for in the camp regulations, and considered equivalent to a "political" crime; hence it is punished with particular severity. The Häftling convicted of *Handel mit Zivilisten*, unless he can rely on influential protection, ends up at Gleiwitz III, Janina, or Heidebreck, in the coal mines, which means death from exhaustion within a few weeks. Moreover, his accomplice, the civilian worker, may also be reported to the appropriate German authority and condemned to spend in the *Vernichtungslager*, under the same conditions as us, a period varying, as far as I know, from a fortnight to eight months. The workers on whom this retribution is imposed are stripped on entry, like us, but their personal possessions are kept in a special storeroom. They are not tattooed, and they

keep their hair, which makes them easily recognizable, but for the entire duration of their punishment they are subjected to the same work and the same discipline as us—except, of course, the selections.

They work in separate Kommandos and have no contact of any sort with the common Häftlinge. In fact, for them the Lager is a punishment, and if they do not die of exhaustion or illness they can expect to return among men; if they could communicate with us, it would constitute a breach in the wall that makes us dead to the world, and a glimpse into the mystery that prevails among free men about our condition. For us, on the contrary, the Lager is not a punishment; for us, no end is foreseen and the Lager is nothing but the kind of existence that has been allotted to us, without time limits, within the German social organism.

One section of our camp is in fact set aside for civilian workers, of all nationalities, who are compelled to stay there for a longer or shorter period in expiation of their illicit relations with Häftlinge. This section is separated from the rest of the camp by barbed wire, and is called E-Lager, and its guests E-Häftlinge. “E” is the initial for *Erziehung*, which means “education.”

All the transactions outlined above are based on the smuggling of materials belonging to the Lager. This is why the SS are so rigorous in suppressing them: the very gold of our teeth is their property, as, sooner or later, torn from the mouths of the living or the dead, it ends up in their hands. So it is natural that they should do their best to see that the gold does not leave the camp.

But against theft in itself the camp authorities have no prejudice. The attitude of open connivance by the SS in regard to smuggling in the opposite direction shows this clearly.

Here things are generally simpler. It is a question of stealing or receiving any of the various tools, utensils, materials, products, etc., with which we come in daily contact in Buna in the course of our work, of introducing them into the camp in the evening, of finding a customer, and of carrying out the exchange for bread or soup. This traffic is intense: in regard to certain articles, although they are necessary for the normal life of the camp, this method of theft in Buna is the only and regular means of procurement. Typical are the cases of brooms, paint, electrical wire, grease for shoes. The trade in this last item will serve as an example.

As we have already noted, the camp regulations prescribe that shoes must be greased and polished every morning, and every *Blockältester* is responsible to the SS for compliance with this order by all the men in his barrack. One might think, then, that each barrack would enjoy a periodic assignment of grease for shoes, but this is not so; the mechanism is completely different. It should be stated first that each barrack receives an evening allotment of soup somewhat higher than that prescribed for regulation rations; this extra amount is divided according to the discretion of the *Blockältester*, who first of all distributes it as a gift to his friends and protégés, then as recompense to the sweepers, the night guards, the lice inspectors, and all the other Prominents and functionaries. What is still left (and every smart *Blockältester* makes sure that there is always some) is used precisely for these purchases.

The rest is obvious. Those Häftlinge who in Buna have the chance to fill their bowl with grease or machine oil (or anything else: any blackish and greasy substance is considered suitable for the purpose) on their return to the camp in the evening make a systematic tour of the barracks until they find a *Blockältester* who lacks the article or wants to stock up. In fact, each barrack usually has its habitual supplier, with whom a fixed daily payment has been agreed on, on condition that he provide the grease whenever the supply is about to run out.

Every evening, next to the doors of the *Tagesräume*, the groups of suppliers stand around patiently; on their feet for hours and hours in the rain or snow, they discuss excitedly, in low tones, matters relating to the fluctuation of prices and the value of the prize coupon. Every now and again one of them leaves the group, makes a quick visit to the Market, and returns with the latest news.

Besides the articles already described, there are innumerable others to be found in Buna, which might be useful to the Block or welcomed by the *Blockältester*, or might excite the interest or curiosity of the Prominents: lightbulbs, brushes, ordinary or shaving soap, files, pliers, sacks, nails. Methyl alcohol is sold to make drinks, and gas is useful for rudimentary lighters, marvels of the secret industry of Lager craftsmen.

In this complex network of thefts and counter-thefts, fueled by the silent hostility between the SS command and the civilian authorities of Buna, Ka-Be plays a role of prime importance. Ka-Be is the place of least resistance, where the regulations can most easily be avoided and the surveillance of the

Kapos eluded. Everyone knows that it is the nurses themselves who send back to the Market, at low prices, the clothes and shoes of the dead and of the selected, who leave naked for Birkenau; it is the nurses and doctors who export the allotment of sulfonamides to Buna, selling them to civilians for foodstuffs.

The nurses also make a huge profit from the trade in spoons. The Lager does not provide new arrivals with spoons, although the semiliquid soup cannot be consumed without one. The spoons are manufactured in Buna, secretly and in spare moments, by Häftlinge who work as specialists in the Kommandos of iron and tin workers. These spoons are crude and clumsy tools, hammered out of aluminum, and often have a sharp handle that also serves as a knife for cutting bread. The manufacturers themselves sell these directly to the new arrivals: an ordinary spoon is worth half a ration of bread, a knife-spoon three-quarters of a ration. Now, it is a law that although one can enter Ka-Be with one's spoon, one cannot leave with it. As those who get better are about to be released, and before they are given clothes, their spoon is confiscated by the nurses and put up for sale in the Market. Adding the spoons of the patients about to leave to those of the dead and the selected, the nurses receive profits from the sale of about fifty spoons every day. On the other hand, the discharged patients are forced to begin work again with the initial disadvantage of half a ration of bread, allocated for the purchase of a new spoon.

Finally, Ka-Be is the main customer and receiver of goods stolen in Buna: of the soup assigned to Ka-Be, a good twenty liters are set aside each day as the theft fund to acquire the most varied goods from the specialists. Some steal thin rubber tubing, which is used in Ka-Be for enemas and stomach pumps; others offer colored pencils and inks, necessary for Ka-Be's complicated bookkeeping system; and thermometers, and laboratory glassware, and chemicals, which vanish from the Buna stores in the Häftlinge's pockets and find a use in the infirmary as medical equipment.

And I would not be guilty of immodesty if I add that it was our idea, mine and Alberto's, to steal rolls of graph paper from the thermographs of the Drying Department, and offer them to the Medical Chief of Ka-Be with the suggestion that they be used as forms for pulse-temperature charts.

In conclusion: theft in Buna, punished by the civilian authorities, is sanctioned and encouraged by the SS; theft in the camp, severely repressed by the SS, is considered by the civilians a normal operation of exchange;

theft among Häftlinge is generally punished, but the punishment strikes the thief and the victim with equal severity. We now invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words “good” and “evil,” “just” and “unjust”; let each judge, on the basis of the picture outlined and the examples given above, how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.

The Drowned and the Saved

What we have described so far and will continue to describe is the ambiguous life of the Lager. In our time many men have lived in this cruel manner, crushed against the bottom, but for a relatively short period; so that we can perhaps ask ourselves if it is necessary or good that any memory of this exceptional human state be retained.

To this question we feel that we have to reply in the affirmative. Indeed, we are convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not always positive, can be deduced from this particular world which we are describing. We would like to consider how the Lager was also, and preeminently, a gigantic biological and social experiment.

Let thousands of individuals, differing in age, condition, origin, language, culture, and customs, be enclosed within barbed wire, and there be subjected to a regular, controlled life, which is identical for all and inadequate for all needs. No one could have set up a more rigorous experiment to determine what is inherent and what acquired in the behavior of the human animal faced with the struggle for life.

We do not believe in the most obvious and facile deduction: that man is fundamentally brutal, egoistic, and stupid in his conduct once every civilized institution is taken away, and that the “Häftling” is consequently nothing but a man without inhibitions. We believe, rather, that the only conclusion to be drawn is that, in the face of driving need and physical privation, many habits and social instincts are reduced to silence.

But another fact seems to us worthy of attention: what comes to light is the existence of two particularly well differentiated categories among men

—the saved and the drowned. Other pairs of opposites (the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the cowardly and the courageous, the unlucky and the fortunate) are much less distinct; they seem less innate, and above all they allow for more numerous and complex intermediate gradations.

This division is much less evident in ordinary life, for there it rarely happens that a man loses himself. Normally a man is not alone and, in his rise or fall, is bound to the destiny of his neighbors, so that it is exceptional for anyone to acquire unlimited power, or to fall by a succession of defeats into utter ruin. Moreover, everyone is usually in possession of such spiritual, physical, and even financial resources that the probability of a shipwreck, of total inadequacy in the face of life, is relatively small. And then one must add the definite cushioning effect exercised by the law, and by the moral sense that constitutes a self-imposed law; for a country is considered the more civilized the more the wisdom and efficiency of its laws hinder a poor man from becoming too poor or a powerful one too powerful.

But things are different in the Lager: here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone. If some Null Achtzehn totters, he will find no one to extend a hand; on the contrary, someone will knock him aside, because it is in no one's interest that there be one more *Muselmann*[5] dragging himself to work every day. And if someone, by a miracle of savage patience and cunning, finds a new expedient for avoiding the hardest work, a new art that yields him an ounce of bread, he will try to keep his method secret, and he will be esteemed and respected for this, and will derive from it an exclusive, personal benefit; he will become stronger and so will be feared, and he who is feared is, ipso facto, a candidate for survival.

In history and in life one sometimes seems to glimpse a fierce law that states: "To he who has, it will be given; from he who has not, it will be taken away." In the Lager, where man is alone and where the struggle for life is reduced to its primordial mechanism, this unjust law is openly in force, and is recognized by all. The bosses, too, willingly maintain contact with the adaptable, with those who are strong and astute, sometimes even in a comradely way, because they hope, perhaps later, to derive some benefit. But it's not worth speaking to the *Muselmänner*, the men who are disintegrating, because you know already that they will complain and will tell you about what they used to eat at home. It's even less worthwhile to

make friends with them, because they have no important connections in the camp, they do not get any extra rations, they do not work in profitable Kommandos, and they do not know any secret method of organizing. And, in any case, it's clear that they are only passing through here, that in a few weeks nothing will remain of them but a handful of ashes in some nearby field and a checked-off number in a register. Although engulfed and swept along unceasingly by the innumerable crowd of those like them, they suffer and drag themselves on in an opaque inner solitude, and in solitude they die or disappear, leaving no trace in anyone's memory.

The result of this pitiless process of natural selection could be read in the statistics of Lager population movements. At Auschwitz in 1944, of the old Jewish prisoners (we will not speak of the others here, as their situation was different), *kleine Nummer*, low numbers under 150000, only a few hundred were still alive; *not one* was an ordinary Häftling, vegetating in the ordinary Kommandos, and subsisting on the normal ration. There remained only doctors, tailors, shoemakers, musicians, cooks, young attractive homosexuals, friends or compatriots of some authority in the camp; the notably pitiless, vigorous, and inhuman individuals installed (as the result of investiture by the SS leadership, which, by its choices, showed itself to possess a Satanic knowledge of human beings) in the posts of Kapo, *Blockältester*, etc.; and, finally, those who, without holding particular offices, always managed, by their astuteness and energy, to organize successfully, gaining in this way, besides material advantages and reputation, indulgence and esteem on the part of the powerful people in the camp. Anyone who does not know how to become an *Organisator*, *Kombinator*, *Prominent* (the eloquence of these words!) soon becomes a *Muselmann*. In life, a third way exists, and is in fact the rule; in the concentration camp, the third way does not exist.

The easiest thing is to succumb: one has only to carry out all the orders one receives, eat only the ration, stick to the discipline of the work and the camp. Experience proved that very rarely could one survive more than three months in this way. All the *Muselmänner* who go to the gas chambers have the same story, or, more exactly, have no story; they have followed the slope to the bottom, naturally, like streams running down to the sea. Once they entered the camp, they were overwhelmed, either through basic incapacity, or through misfortune, or through some banal incident, before they could adapt; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn

German and to untangle the fiendish knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already breaking down, and nothing can save them from selection or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always the same, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death—in the face of it they have no fear, because they are too tired to understand.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could encompass all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image, which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, head bowed and shoulders bent, on whose face and in whose eyes no trace of thought can be seen.

If the drowned have no story, and there is only a single, broad path to perdition, the paths to salvation are many, rugged and unimaginable.

The main path, as we have stated, is *Prominenz*. *Prominenten* is the name for the camp officials, from the Häftling overseer (*Lageräl*tester) to the Kapos, the cooks, the nurses, the night guards, even the barrack sweepers, and the *Scheissminister* and *Bademeister* (superintendents of the latrines and the showers). We are more particularly interested in the Jewish Prominents, because, while the others were automatically appointed to positions upon entering the camp, by virtue of their natural supremacy, the Jews had to plot and struggle hard to gain them.

The Jewish Prominents form a sad and notable human phenomenon. Present, past, and atavistic sufferings converge with the tradition and cultivation of hostility toward the stranger to make of them monsters of asociality and insensitivity.

They are a typical product of the structure of the German Lager: if a position of privilege, a degree of comfort, and a reasonable probability of survival are offered to a few individuals in a state of slavery, in exchange for the betrayal of a natural solidarity with their comrades, someone will certainly accept. He will be removed from the common law and will become untouchable; hence the more power he is granted, the more hateful and hated he will be. When he is given command of a group of unfortunates, with the right of life or death over them, he will be cruel and tyrannical, because he will understand that, if he is not sufficiently so, someone else, judged more suitable, will take over his post. Moreover, his

capacity for hatred, which remains unfulfilled toward the oppressors, will spill over, unreasonably, onto the oppressed; and he will be satisfied only when he has heaped onto his underlings the abuse received from above.

We are aware that this is very distant from the picture that is usually given of the oppressed, who are united, if not in resistance, at least in suffering. We do not deny that this can happen when oppression does not go beyond a certain limit, or perhaps when the oppressor, through inexperience or magnanimity, tolerates or encourages it. But we would observe that in our time, in all countries that have been invaded by a foreign people, an analogous condition of rivalry and hatred among the subjugated has been established; and this, like many other human characteristics, could be grasped in the Lager with crude force.

There is less to say about the non-Jewish Prominents, although they were by far the more numerous (no “Aryan” Häftling was without a post, however modest). That they were stupid and bestial seems natural once one knows that the majority were common criminals, chosen from the German prisons precisely for the purpose of being employed as supervisors in the camps for Jews; and we maintain that it was a very apt choice, because we refuse to believe that the wretched human specimens whom we saw at work were an average sample, not just of Germans in general but even of German prisoners in particular. It is more difficult to explain how in Auschwitz the German, Polish, and Russian political Prominents rivaled the ordinary convicts in brutality. But it is well-known that in Germany the label of political crime was also applied to such acts as clandestine trade, illicit relations with Jewish women, theft from Party officials. The “real” politicals lived and died in other camps, with names now sadly famous, in notoriously harsh conditions, which, however, differed in many aspects from those described here.

But, besides the officials in the strict sense of the word, there was a vast category of prisoners, not initially favored by fate, who struggled to survive purely by their own strength. One had to fight against the current; to battle every day and every hour against exhaustion, hunger, cold, and the resulting inertia; to resist enemies and have no pity for rivals; to sharpen one’s wits, build up one’s patience, strengthen one’s willpower. Or else to strangle all dignity and kill all conscience, to enter the arena as a beast against other beasts, to let oneself be guided by those unsuspected subterranean forces which sustain peoples and individuals in cruel times. Many were the ways

devised and put into practice by us in order not to die: as many as there are human characters. All implied a grueling struggle of one against all, and many a not inconsiderable sum of aberrations and compromises. To survive without renouncing any part of their own moral world—apart from powerful and direct interventions by fortune—was conceded only to a very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints.

We will try to show in how many ways one might reach salvation by telling the stories of Schepschel, Alfred L., Elias, and Henri.

Schepschel has been living in the Lager for four years. He has seen the death of tens of thousands of his fellow men, beginning with the pogrom that drove him from his village in Galicia. He had a wife and five children and a prosperous business as a saddler, but for a long time now he has been accustomed to thinking of himself merely as a sack that needs periodic refilling. Schepschel is not very robust, or very courageous, or very wicked; he is not even particularly astute, and has never found an arrangement that allows him a little respite, but is reduced to small, occasional expedients, *kombinacje*, as they are called here.

Every now and again he steals a broom in Buna and sells it to the *Blockältester*. When he manages to set aside a little bread-capital, he rents the tools of the cobbler in the Block, a compatriot of his, and works on his own account for a few hours; he knows how to make suspenders with braided electrical wire; Sigi told me that he has seen him during the midday break singing and dancing in front of the barrack of the Slovak workers, who sometimes reward him with the remains of their soup.

This said, one might be inclined to think of Schepschel with indulgent sympathy, as a poor wretch whose spirit by now harbors only a humble and elementary desire to live, and who bravely carries on his small struggle not to give way. But Schepschel was no exception, and when the opportunity arose he did not hesitate to have Moischl, his accomplice in a theft from the kitchen, condemned to a flogging, in the mistaken hope of gaining favor in the eyes of the *Blockältester* and furthering his candidacy for the position of vat washer.

The story of the engineer Alfred L. shows among other things how empty is the myth of original equality among men.

In his own country L. was the manager of an extremely important factory that made chemical products, and his name was (and is) familiar in industrial circles throughout Europe. He was a robust man of about fifty; I don't know how he had been arrested, but he entered the camp like everyone else: naked, alone, and unknown. When I knew him, he was very emaciated, yet his face still preserved the features of a disciplined and methodical energy; at the time, his privileges were limited to the daily cleaning of the Polish workers' soup vat; this job, which he had somehow obtained as his exclusive monopoly, yielded him half a bowlful of soup per day. Certainly it was not enough to satisfy his hunger; nevertheless, no one had ever heard him complain. Rather, the few words that he let slip implied vast secret resources, a solid and fruitful "organization."

This was confirmed by his appearance. L. had "a line": with his hands and face always perfectly clean, he had the rare self-denial to wash his shirt every fortnight, without waiting for the bimonthly change (we would like to point out here that to wash a shirt meant finding soap, finding time, finding space in the overcrowded washhouse; training oneself to keep a careful watch on the wet shirt, without losing sight of it for a moment, and to put it on, naturally still wet, at the time for silence, when the lights are turned out); he owned a pair of wooden shoes for going to the shower, and even his striped garments were singularly suited to his physique, and were clean and new. L. had acquired in essence the full appearance of a Prominent, considerably before becoming one; only a long time afterward did I find out that he had been able to earn all this show of prosperity with incredible tenacity, paying for each of his acquisitions and services with bread from his own ration, thus imposing on himself a regime of additional privations.

His plan was a long-term one, which is all the more remarkable as it was conceived in an environment dominated by a mentality of the provisional; and L. carried it out with strict inner discipline, and without pity for himself or—with greater reason—for comrades who crossed his path. L. knew that it's a short step from being judged powerful to effectively becoming so, and that everywhere, and especially amid the general leveling of the Lager, a respectable appearance is the best guarantee of being respected. He took great care not to be confused with the mass; he worked with ostentatious commitment, occasionally even admonishing lazy comrades in a persuasive and apologetic tone of voice; he avoided the daily struggle for the best place in line for the soup, and was prepared to take the

first, notoriously very liquid portion, every day, so as to be noticed by the *Blockältester* for his discipline. To complete this detachment, in his relations with his comrades he always behaved with the maximum courtesy compatible with his egotism, which was absolute.

When the Chemical Kommando was formed, as will be described, L. knew that his hour had struck: he needed no more than his tidy clothing and his emaciated but clean-shaven face amid the herd of his sordid and slovenly colleagues to convince both Kapo and *Arbeitsdienst* immediately that he was one of the genuinely saved, a potential Prominent; and so (to he who has, it shall be given) he was, of course, promoted to "specialist," named technical head of the Kommando, and taken on by the management of Buna as an analyst in the laboratory of the Styrene Department. He was subsequently appointed to examine all the new additions to the Chemical Kommando staff, in order to judge their professional ability. He always did this with extreme rigor, especially in regard to those in whom he scented possible future rivals.

I do not know how his story continued; but it seems to me very likely that he managed to escape death, and today is still living his cold life as a determined and joyless master.

Elias Lindzin, 141565, one day fell inexplicably into the Chemical Kommando. He was a dwarf, no more than five feet tall, but I have never seen muscles like his. When he is naked you can see every muscle rippling beneath his skin, powerful and mobile, like an animal unique of its kind; if his body were enlarged, with no alteration to its proportions, it would serve as a good model for a Hercules—as long as one does not look at his head.

Under his scalp, the cranial sutures stand out excessively. The skull is massive and gives the impression of being made of metal or stone; the black edge of his shaved hair is visible barely a finger's width above his eyebrows. The nose, the chin, the forehead, the cheekbones are hard and compact; the whole face looks like a battering ram, an instrument made for butting. A sense of bestial vigor emanates from his body.

To see Elias work is a disconcerting spectacle; the Polish *Meister*, and even the Germans, sometimes stop to admire Elias in action. Nothing seems impossible to him. While we have trouble carrying one bag of cement, Elias

carries two, then three, then four—no one knows how he keeps them balanced—and while he hurries along on his short, squat legs he makes faces under the load, he laughs, curses, shouts, and sings without pause, as if he had lungs of bronze. Despite his wooden shoes, Elias climbs like a monkey up the scaffolding and runs confidently along girders suspended over nothing; he carries six bricks at a time balanced on his head; he can make a spoon from a piece of tin, and a knife from a scrap of steel; he finds dry paper, wood, and coal everywhere and can start a fire in a few moments, even in the rain. He is a tailor, a carpenter, a cobbler, a barber; he can spit incredible distances; he sings, in a not unpleasant bass voice, Polish and Yiddish songs never heard before; he can ingest six, eight, ten liters of soup without vomiting and without having diarrhea, and begin work again immediately afterward. He knows how to produce a big hump between his shoulders, and goes around the barrack, lopsided and misshapen, shouting and declaiming incomprehensibly, to the joy of the Prominents of the camp. I saw him fight a Pole a whole head taller and knock him down with a blow of his skull to the stomach, as powerful and accurate as a catapult. I never saw him rest, I never saw him quiet or still, I never knew him injured or ill.

Of his life as a free man, no one knows anything; in any case, to picture Elias as a free man requires a profound effort of imagination and deduction. He speaks only Polish and the surly, deformed Yiddish of Warsaw; besides, it’s impossible to keep him to a coherent conversation. He might be twenty years old or forty; he usually says he’s thirty-three, and has begot seventeen children—which is not unlikely. He talks continuously on the most varied subjects, always in a resounding voice, with oratorical accents and the violent gestures of the deranged, as if he were always speaking to a large crowd—and, naturally, he never lacks a crowd. Those who understand his language drink up his declamations, shaking with laughter; they slap him enthusiastically on his hard back, inciting him to continue, while he, fierce and frowning, whirls around like a wild animal within the circle of his audience. Addressing now one, now another, he suddenly grabs hold of one by the chest with his small hooked paw, irresistibly pulls him forward, vomits an incomprehensible invective into his astonished face, then throws him back like a piece of wood, and, amid applause and laughter, with his arms reaching up to the heavens like a small prophetic monster, continues his raging, crazy speech.

His fame as an exceptional worker spread rapidly and, by the absurd law of the Lager, from then on he practically ceased to work. His help was requested directly by the various *Meister*, but only for such jobs as required special skills and strength. Apart from these services, he supervised our daily, dull labor insolently and violently, often disappearing on mysterious visits and adventures in who knows what recesses of the worksite, from which he returned with large bulges in his pockets and often with his stomach visibly full.

Elias is naturally and innocently a thief: in this he shows the instinctive cunning of wild animals. He is never caught in the act, because he steals only when there is a favorable opportunity; but when there is, Elias steals as inevitably and predictably as a stone falls if you let go of it. Apart from the fact that it is difficult to surprise him, it's obvious that it would serve no purpose to punish him for his thefts: to him they represent a vital act, like breathing or sleeping.

We can now ask who is this man Elias: if he is a madman, incomprehensible and superhuman, who ended up in the Lager by chance; if he is an atavism, out of place in our modern world, and better suited to the primordial conditions of camp life. Or if he is, rather, a product of the camp, what we will all become if we do not die in the camp, and if the camp itself does not end first.

There is some truth in all three suppositions. Elias has survived destruction from the outside, because he is physically indestructible; he has resisted annihilation from within because he is insane. So, first of all, he is a survivor: he is the fittest, the human type best suited to this way of life.

If Elias regains his freedom, he will be confined to the fringes of human society, in a prison or a lunatic asylum. But here, in the Lager, there are no criminals or madmen: no criminals, because there is no moral law to contravene; no madmen, because we are without free will, as our every action is, in time and place, clearly the only one possible.

In the Lager, Elias prospers and is triumphant. He is a good worker and a good organizer, and for that double reason he is safe from selections and respected by both leaders and comrades. For those who have no solid inner resources, for those who cannot draw from their own self-consciousness the strength needed to cling to life, the only path to salvation leads to Elias: to insanity and to insidious bestiality. All other paths are dead ends.

That said, one might perhaps be tempted to draw conclusions, perhaps even rules, for our daily life. Are there not all around us Eliases, more or less fully realized? Do we not see individuals who live without purpose, lacking all forms of self-control and conscience, who live not *in spite of* these defects but, like Elias, precisely because of them?

The question is serious, but will not be further discussed, because these are intended to be stories of the Lager, while much has already been written about man outside the Lager. But one thing we would like to add: Elias, as far as it's possible to judge from the outside, and as far as the word can have meaning, was in all likelihood a happy individual.

Henri, on the other hand, is eminently civilized and sane, and possesses a complete and organic theory on ways to survive in the Lager. He is only twenty-two; he is extremely intelligent, speaks French, German, English, and Russian, has an excellent scientific and classical education.

His brother died in Buna last winter, and from that day Henri cut off every tie of affection; he closed himself up in himself, as if in armor, and fights to live without distraction, using all the resources that he can derive from his quick intellect and his refined upbringing. According to Henri's theory, there are three methods by means of which a man can escape extermination and still remain worthy of the name of man: organization, compassion, and theft.

He himself practices all three. There is no better strategist than Henri in manipulating ("cultivating," he says) the English prisoners of war. In his hands they become real geese with golden eggs—if you remember that in exchange for a single English cigarette you can get enough in the Lager not to starve for a day. Henri was once seen in the act of eating a real hard-boiled egg.

Trading in products of English origin is Henri's monopoly, and this is all a matter of organization; but his instrument of penetration, with the English and with others, is compassion. Henri has the delicate and subtly androgynous body and face of Sodoma's St. Sebastian: his eyes are dark and profound, he has no beard yet, he moves with a natural languid elegance (although when necessary he can run and jump like a cat, while the capacity of his stomach is scarcely inferior to Elias's). Henri is perfectly

aware of his natural gifts and exploits them with the cool competence of someone handling a scientific instrument; the results are surprising. Basically it's a question of a discovery. Henri has discovered that compassion, being a primary and instinctive sentiment, flourishes if skillfully inculcated, particularly in the primitive minds of the brutes who command us, those very brutes who have no scruples about knocking us down for no reason and trampling us once we're on the ground; nor has the great practical importance of the discovery escaped him, and on it he has built up his personal industry.

Like the ichneumon wasp that paralyzes a large hairy caterpillar, wounding it in its sole vulnerable ganglion, Henri sizes up the subject, *son type*, at a glance. He speaks to him briefly, in the appropriate language, and the *type* is conquered: he listens with increasing sympathy, he is moved by the fate of this unfortunate young man, and it isn't long before he begins to yield returns.

There is no heart so hardened that Henri cannot breach it, if he sets himself to it seriously. In the Lager, and in Buna as well, his protectors are extremely numerous: English soldiers, French, Ukrainian, Polish civilian workers; German "politicals"; at least four *Blockälteste*, a cook, even an SS officer. But his favorite field is Ka-Be: Henri has free entry into Ka-Be; Dr. Citron and Dr. Weiss are more than his protectors—they are his friends and admit him whenever he wants and with the diagnosis he wants. This takes place above all immediately before selections, and in the periods of the heaviest work: to "hibernate," as he says.

It's natural that Henri, possessing such notable friendships, is rarely reduced to the third method, theft; on the other hand, of course, it's not a subject that he willingly discusses.

It's very pleasant to talk to Henri in moments of rest. It's also useful: there is nothing in the camp that he does not know and about which he has not reasoned in his close, coherent manner. Of his conquests, he speaks with polite modesty, as of prey of little value, but he digresses willingly to explain the calculation that led him to approach Hans by asking him about his son at the front, and Otto by showing him the scars on his shins.

To speak with Henri is useful and pleasant. Sometimes one also feels a warmth and closeness; communication, even affection appears possible. One seems to glimpse the sorrowful, conscious human depths of his uncommon personality. But the next moment his sad smile freezes into a

cold grimace that appears practiced at the mirror; Henri politely excuses himself (“. . . *j’ai quelque chose à faire*,” “. . . *j’ai quelqu’un à voir*”) and here he is again, intent on his hunt and his struggle: hard and distant, enclosed in armor, the enemy of all, inhumanly sly and incomprehensible, like the Serpent in Genesis.

After my talks with Henri, even the most cordial, I always had a slight taste of defeat, and a confused suspicion of having been, in some inadvertent way, not a man to him but an instrument in his hands.

I know that Henri is alive today. I would give much to know his life as a free man, but I do not want to see him again.

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5. Author’s note: This word, *Muselmann*, was used, although I do not know why, by the old hands of the camp to describe the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection.

Chemistry Examination

Kommando 98, called the Chemical Kommando, was supposed to be a squad of skilled workers.

The day its formation was officially announced, a meager group of fifteen Häftlinge gathered in the gray dawn around the new Kapo in Roll Call Square.

This was the first disappointment: he was a green triangle, a professional criminal; the *Arbeitsdienst* had not thought it necessary for the Kapo of the Chemical Kommando to be a chemist. It was pointless to waste any breath asking him questions; he would not have replied, or he would have replied with shouts and kicks. On the other hand, his not very robust appearance and his smaller than average stature were reassuring.

He made a short speech in vulgar barracks German, and the disappointment was confirmed. So these were the chemists: well, he was Alex, and if they thought they were entering paradise, they were mistaken. In the first place, until the day production began, Kommando 98 would be no more than an ordinary transport Kommando, assigned to the Magnesium Chloride warehouse. Secondly, if they imagined, being *Intelligenten*, intellectuals, that they could make a fool of him, Alex, a *Reichsdeutscher*, well, *Herrgottsakrament*, he would show them, he would . . . (and with clenched fist and index finger extended he cut the air in the German gesture of threat); and, finally, they should not imagine that they would deceive anyone, if a man who was not a chemist presented himself as one. An examination, yes, gentlemen, in the next few days, a chemistry examination, before the triumvirate of the Polymerization Department: Doktor Hagen, Doktor Probst, and Doktor Ingenieur Pannwitz.

And with this, *meine Herren*, enough time has been wasted, Kommandos 96 and 97 have already started, forward *Marsch*, and, to begin with, whoever fails to keep in line and step will have to deal with him.

He was a Kapo like all other Kapos.

Leaving the camp, in view of the band and the SS counting station, we march five abreast, cap in hand, arms motionless at our sides, and neck rigid; speaking is forbidden. Then we switch to threes, and it is possible to exchange a few words amid the clatter of ten thousand pairs of wooden shoes.

Who are my chemist comrades? Next to me walks Alberto; he is in his third year at university, and once again we have managed to stay together. The third person on my left I have never seen; he seems very young, is as pale as wax, and has the number of the Dutch. The three backs in front of me are also new. It's dangerous to look behind—I might lose step or stumble—but I try for a moment, and see the face of Iss Clausner.

As long as we're walking there is no time to think; we have to take care not to step on the shoes of the person hobbling in front, and not to let our own be stepped on by the person behind, and every now and again there is a hole to get over, an oily puddle to avoid. I know where we are, I've already been here with my previous Kommando; it's the H-Strasse, the road of the warehouses, I tell Alberto, we really are going to the Magnesium Chloride warehouse, at least that was not a lie.

We have arrived, we go down into a large damp, drafty cellar; this is the headquarters of the Kommando—the Bude, as it is called here. The Kapo divides us into three squads: four to unload sacks from the freight car, seven to carry them down, four to stack them in the warehouse. These last are Alberto and I, Iss and the Dutchman.

At last we can speak, and to each of us what Alex said seems a madman's dream.

With these empty faces of ours, these shaved skulls, these shameful clothes, to take a chemistry examination. And obviously it will be in German; and we'll have to go before some blond Aryan *Doktor* hoping that we don't have to blow our noses, because perhaps he won't know that we don't have handkerchiefs, and it will certainly not be possible to explain it

to him. And with us we'll have our old companion hunger, and we will hardly be able to stand steady on our feet, and he will certainly smell our odor, to which we are by now accustomed, but which persecuted us during the first days, the odor of turnips and cabbages, raw, cooked, and digested.

Exactly so, Clausner confirms. But do the Germans have such a great need of chemists? Or is it a new trick, a new machine *pour faire chier les Juifs*? Are they aware of the grotesque and absurd test that is asked of us, of us who are no longer alive, of us who are already half mad in the grim expectation of nothing? Clausner shows me the bottom of his bowl. Where others have carved their numbers, and Alberto and I our names, Clausner has written: "*Ne pas chercher à comprendre.*"

Although we don't think about it for more than a few minutes a day, and even then in a strangely detached and distant manner, we know very well that we will end up in a selection. I know that I am not made of the stuff of those who endure, I am too civilized, I still think too much, I wear myself out at work. And now I also know that I will survive if I become a specialist, and that I will become a specialist if I pass a chemistry examination.

Today, this very day, as I sit at a table and write, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened.

Three days passed, three of the usual unremembered days, so long while they were passing and so short once they had passed, and already we were all tired of believing in the chemistry examination.

The Kommando was reduced to twelve men: three had disappeared the way people did there, perhaps into the barrack next door, perhaps removed from the world. Of the twelve, five were not chemists; all five had immediately requested permission from Alex to return to their former Kommandos. They did not escape beatings, but unexpectedly, and by who knows what authority, it was decided that they should remain as auxiliaries to the Chemical Kommando.

Down came Alex into the Magnesium Chloride cellar and called the seven of us out to go and face the examination. Here we are, like seven awkward chicks behind the hen, following Alex up the steps of the Polymerisations-Büro. We are in the lobby, and on the door is a brass plate

with the three famous names. Alex knocks respectfully, takes off his cap, and enters. We hear a quiet voice. Alex comes out again: "*Ruhe, jetzt. Warten.*" Wait now in silence.

We are satisfied with this. When we wait, time runs smoothly—there is no need to intervene and drive it forward—while when we work every minute moves through us arduously and has to be laboriously pushed out. We are always happy to wait; we are capable of waiting for hours with the complete dull-witted inertia of spiders in old webs.

Alex is nervous, he walks up and down, and we move out of his way each time. We, too, are uneasy, each in his own way; only Mendi is not. Mendi is a rabbi; he comes from Subcarpathian Russia, from that confusion of peoples where everyone speaks at least three languages, and Mendi speaks seven. He knows a great number of things; besides being a rabbi, he is a militant Zionist, and a linguist, he was a partisan, and has a law degree; he is not a chemist, but he wants to try all the same, he is a stubborn, courageous, keen little man.

Bálla has a pencil and we all crowd around him. We aren't sure if we still know how to write, we want to try.

Kohlenwasserstoffe, *Massenwirkungsgesetz.* The German names of compounds and laws float back to the surface. I feel grateful to my brain: I have not paid much attention to it, and yet it still serves me so well.

Here is Alex. I am a chemist. What have I to do with this Alex? He plants himself in front of me, roughly adjusts the collar of my jacket, pulls off my cap and slaps it firmly down on my head, then steps back, and, eyeing the result with a disgusted air, turns away, muttering, "*Was für ein Muselmann Zugang*." What a shabby new acquisition!

The door opens. The three doctors have decided that six candidates will be examined in the morning. The seventh will not. I am the seventh, I have the highest entry number, I have to return to work. Alex will not come to fetch me until the afternoon. What bad luck, I won't even be able talk to the others to find out "what the questions are."

This time it really is my turn. On the steps, Alex looks at me blackly; in some way he feels responsible for my miserable appearance. He dislikes me because I am Italian, because I am a Jew, and because, of all of us, I am the one furthest from his barracks ideal of virility. By analogy, without understanding anything, and proud of this very ignorance, he displays a profound disbelief in my chances on the examination.

We have entered. There is only Doktor Pannwitz; Alex, cap in hand, speaks to him in an undertone: ". . . an Italian, has been in the Lager only three months, already half *kaputt*. . . . *Er sagt er ist Chemiker*. . . ." But he, Alex, apparently has his reservations on the subject.

Alex is dismissed in a few words and set aside, and I feel like Oedipus in front of the Sphinx. My ideas are clear, and I am aware even at this moment that the stakes are high; yet I feel a mad desire to disappear, to avoid the test.

Pannwitz is tall, thin, blond; he has the eyes, the hair, and the nose that all Germans ought to have, and sits formidably behind an elaborate desk. I, Häftling 174517, stand in his office, which is a real office, shining, clean, and orderly, and it seems to me that I would leave a dirty stain if I were to touch anything.

When he finished writing, he raised his eyes and looked at me.

Since that day, I have thought about Doktor Pannwitz many times and in many ways. I have asked myself about his inner workings as a man; how he filled his time, outside of the Polymerization Department and his Indo-Germanic conscience. Above all, when I was once more a free man, I wanted to meet him again, not out of a spirit of revenge but merely out of my curiosity about the human soul.

Because that look did not pass between two men; and if I knew how to explain fully the nature of that look, exchanged as if through the glass wall of an aquarium between two beings who inhabit different worlds, I would also be able to explain the essence of the great insanity of the Third Reich.

What we all thought and said of the Germans could be felt at that moment, in an immediate manner. The brain that governed those blue eyes and those manicured hands said, "This something in front of me belongs to a species that it is obviously right to suppress. In this particular case, one has first to make sure that it does not contain some useful element." And in my head, like seeds in an empty pumpkin: "Blue eyes and fair hair are essentially wicked. No communication possible. I am a specialist in mining chemistry. I am a specialist in organic syntheses. I am a specialist . . ."

And the examination began, while in the corner Alex, that third zoological specimen, yawned and ground his teeth.

"*Wo sind Sie geboren?*" He uses *Sie*, the polite form of address: Doktor Ingenieur Pannwitz has no sense of humor. Damn him, he isn't making the slightest effort to speak a more comprehensible German.

“I took my degree at Turin in 1941, summa cum laude”—and, as I say it, I have the definite impression of not being believed, I don’t really believe it myself; it’s enough to look at my dirty hands covered with sores, my convict’s trousers encrusted with mud. Yet I am he, the university graduate of Turin—in fact at this particular moment it is impossible to doubt my identity with him, for my reservoir of knowledge of organic chemistry, even after this long period of idleness, responds upon request with unexpected docility. And, even more, this sense of lucid elation, this excitement which I feel warm in my veins, I recognize it, it is the fever of exams, *my* fever of *my* exams, the spontaneous mobilization of all my logical faculties and all my knowledge that my classmates so envied.

The examination is going well. As I gradually realize this, I seem to grow in stature. Now he is asking me what was the subject of my degree thesis. I have to make a violent effort to recall that sequence of memories, so deeply buried: it is as if I were trying to remember the events of a previous incarnation.

Something protects me. My poor old “Measurements of Dielectrical Constants” are of particular interest to this blond Aryan with his safe existence: he asks me if I know English, he shows me Gattermann’s textbook, and this, too, is absurd and impossible, that down here, on the other side of the barbed wire, a Gattermann should exist, exactly the same as the one I studied in Italy in my fourth year, at home.

Now it is over: the excitement that sustained me during the entire test suddenly gives way, and, dazed and dumb, I stare at the fair-skinned hand writing down my fate on the blank page in incomprehensible symbols.

“*Los, ab!*” Alex enters the scene again; I am once more under his jurisdiction. He salutes Pannwitz, clicking his heels, and in return receives a faint nod of the eyelids. For a moment I grope for a suitable formula of leave-taking: but in vain. In German I know how to say eat, work, steal, die; I also know how to say sulfuric acid, atmospheric pressure, and short-wave generator; but I have no idea how to address a person of importance.

Here we are again on the steps. Alex flies down them: he has leather shoes because he is not a Jew, he is as light on his feet as the devils of Malebolge. At the bottom he turns and looks at me sourly as I walk down hesitantly and noisily in my two enormous mismatched wooden clogs, clinging to the railing like an old man.

It seems to have gone well, but it would be foolish to rely on it. I already know the Lager well enough to realize that one should never anticipate, especially optimistically. What is certain is that I have spent a day without working, so that tonight I will be a little less hungry, and this is a concrete advantage, not to be taken away.

To reenter Bude, we have to cross a space cluttered with piles of girders and metal frames. The steel cable of a winch cuts across our path, and Alex grabs hold of it to climb over: *Donnerwetter,* he looks at his hand, black with thick grease. In the meantime I have joined him. Without hatred and without contempt, Alex wipes his hand on my shoulder, both the palm and the back of the hand, to clean it; he would be amazed, the innocent brute Alex, if someone told him that today I judge him on the basis of this action, him and Pannwitz and the innumerable others like him, great and small, in Auschwitz and everywhere.

The Canto of Ulysses

There were six of us, scraping and cleaning the inside of an underground gas tank; the daylight reached us only through a small door. It was a luxury job, because no one was supervising us; but it was cold and damp. The powdery rust burned us under our eyelids and coated our throats and mouths with a taste almost like blood.

The rope ladder hanging from the manhole began to sway: someone was coming. Deutsch extinguished his cigarette, Goldner woke Sivadjan; we all began to scrape the resonant steel-plate wall vigorously.

It was not the *Vorarbeiter*, it was only Jean, the Pikolo of our Kommando. Jean was an Alsatian student; although he was already twenty-four, he was the youngest Häftling in the Chemical Kommando. So he was given the post of Pikolo, meaning errand boy/clerk, responsible for cleaning the barrack, for the distribution of tools, for washing the bowls, and for keeping a record of the working hours of the Kommando.

Jean spoke French and German fluently: as soon as we recognized his shoes on the top step of the ladder we all stopped scraping.

"*Also, Pikolo, was gibt es Neues?*"

"*Qu'est-ce qu'il y a comme soupe aujourd'hui*?"

. . . what was the Kapo's mood? And the matter of the twenty-five lashes given to Stern? What was the weather like outside? Had he read the newspaper? What sort of smell was coming from the civilian kitchen? What was the time?

Jean was very well liked by the Kommando. It should be noted that the post of Pikolo represented quite a high rank in the hierarchy of the *Prominenz*: the Pikolo (who is usually no older than seventeen) does no

manual work, has a free hand with the remains of the daily ration at the bottom of the vat, and can stay near the stove all day. He “therefore” has the right to a supplementary half-ration and has a good chance of becoming the friend and confidant of the Kapo, from whom he officially receives discarded clothes and shoes. Now, Jean was an exceptional Pikolo. He was shrewd and physically robust, and at the same time gentle and friendly. Although he carried out his secret individual struggle against the camp and against death with tenacity and courage, he did not neglect his human relationships with less privileged comrades, and yet he was so skillful and persevering that he had managed to establish himself in the confidence of Alex, the Kapo.

Alex had kept all his promises. He had shown himself a violent and unreliable beast, with an armor of solid, dense ignorance and stupidity, except for his intuitive and consummate technique as a torturer. He never missed an opportunity of proclaiming his pride in his pure blood and his green triangle, and displayed a lofty contempt for his ragged and starving chemists. “*Ihr Doktoren! Ihr Intelligenten!*” he sneered every day, watching them crowd around with their bowls held out for the distribution of the ration. He was extremely compliant and servile toward the civilian supervisors, and with the SS he maintained ties of cordial friendship.

He was clearly intimidated by the Kommando’s register and by the daily performance report, and this was the path that Pikolo chose to make himself indispensable. It had been a slow, cautious, and subtle task, which the entire Kommando had followed for a month with bated breath; but in the end the porcupine’s defenses were penetrated, and Pikolo confirmed in his office, to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Although Jean never abused his position, we had already been able to verify that a single word of his, spoken in the right tone of voice and at the right moment, had great power; many times already it had saved one of us from a whipping or from being reported to the SS. He and I had been friends for a week: we discovered each other during the unusual occasion of an air-raid alarm, but then, swept up by the fierce rhythm of the Lager, we had been able to greet each other only fleetingly, at the latrines, in the washhouse.

Hanging onto the swaying ladder with one hand, he pointed to me: "*Aujourd'hui c'est Primo qui viendra avec moi chercher la soupe*."

Until the day before it had been Stern, the squinting Transylvanian; now he had fallen into disgrace for some business of brooms stolen from the warehouse, and Pikolo had managed to support my candidacy as assistant for the *Essenholen*, the daily task of picking up the ration.

He climbed out and I followed him, blinking in the brightness of the day. It was warm outside; the sun drew a faint smell of paint and tar from the greasy earth that made me think of a summer beach of my childhood. Pikolo gave me one of the two wooden poles, and we walked along under a clear June sky.

I began to thank him, but he stopped me: it was not necessary. We could see the Carpathians, covered with snow. I breathed in the fresh air, I felt unusually lighthearted.

"*Tu es fou de marcher si vite. On a le temps, tu sais.*" The ration was picked up a kilometer away; you had to return with the pot, weighing fifty kilos, supported on the two poles. It was quite a tiring job, but it meant a pleasant walk there without a load, and the ever welcome opportunity of getting near the kitchens.

We slowed down. Pikolo was experienced. He had chosen the path cleverly, so that we would make a long circuit, walking for at least an hour, without arousing suspicions. We spoke of our homes, of Strasbourg and Turin, of the books we had read, of what we had studied, of our mothers: how all mothers resemble one another! His mother, too, had scolded him for never knowing how much money he had in his pocket; his mother, too, would have been amazed if she had known that he had made it, that day by day he was making it.

An SS man passed on a bicycle. It's Rudi, the *Blockführer*. Halt! Attention! Take off your cap! "*Sale brute, celui-là. Ein ganz gemeiner Hund.*" Can he speak French and German with equal facility? Yes, it makes no difference, he can think in both languages. He spent a month in Liguria, he likes Italy, he would like to learn Italian. I would be happy to teach him Italian: why not try? We can do it. Why not immediately, one thing is as good as another, what's important is not to lose time, not to waste this hour.

Limentani from Rome walks by, dragging his feet, with a bowl hidden under his jacket. Pikolo listens carefully, picks up a few words of our

conversation and repeats them smiling: "*Zup-pa, cam-po, ac-qua*."

Frenkel the spy passes. Quicken the pace, one never knows, he does evil for evil's sake.

. . . The canto of Ulysses. Who knows how or why it comes into my mind. But we have no time to choose, this hour is already less than an hour. If Jean is intelligent he will understand. He *will* understand—today I feel capable of so much.

. . . Who Dante is. What the Comedy is. What a curiously novel sensation, to try to explain briefly what the Divine Comedy is. How the Inferno is divided up, what its punishments are. Virgil is Reason, Beatrice is Theology.

Jean pays close attention, and I begin slowly and precisely:

The greater horn within that ancient flame
began to sway and tremble, murmuring,
just like a fire that struggles in the wind;
then, he waved his flame-tip back and forth,
as if it were a tongue that tried to speak,
and flung toward us a voice that answered: "When I departed . . ."[6]

Here I stop and try to translate. Disastrous—poor Dante and poor French! All the same, the experience seems to augur well: Jean admires the bizarre simile of the tongue and suggests the appropriate word to translate *antica* (ancient).

And after "When I departed"? Nothing. A hole in my memory. "Before Aeneas gave that place a name." Another hole. An unusable fragment floats into my mind: "nor pity / for my old father, nor the love I owed Penelope, / which would have gladdened her," can that be correct?

. . . but I set out on the open sea.

Of this, yes, I am certain, this I can explain to Pikolo, I can point out why "I set out"—"*misi me*"— is not "*je me mis*," it is much stronger and more audacious, it is a chain that has been broken, it is throwing oneself beyond a barrier, we know the impulse well. The deep open sea: Pikolo has traveled by sea and knows what it means. It is when the horizon closes in

on itself, free, straight, and simple, and there is nothing but the smell of the sea—sweet things, cruelly distant.

We have arrived at the Kraftwerk, where the cable-laying Kommando works. Engineer Levi must be here. There he is, only his head is visible above the trench. He waves to me, he is a spirited man, I have never seen his morale low, he never talks about eating.

"Open sea," "open sea" (*mare aperto*), I know it rhymes with "deserted" (*diserto*): ". . . and with that small company of those who never had deserted me," but I no longer remember if it comes before or after. And the journey as well, the foolhardy journey beyond the Pillars of Hercules, how sad, I have to tell it in prose: a sacrilege. I have rescued only one line, but it is worth pausing on:

. . . that men might heed and never reach beyond . . .

"Reach beyond" (*si metta*): I had to come to the Lager to realize that it's the same expression as before: "I set out" (*misi me*). But I say nothing to Jean, I'm not sure that it's an important observation. How many other things there are to say, and the sun is already high, midday is near. I'm in a hurry, a terrible hurry.

Here, listen, Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

Consider well the seed that gave you birth:
you were not made to live your lives as brutes,
but to be followers of worth and knowledge.

As if I, too, were hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am.

Pikolo begs me to repeat it. How kind Pikolo is, he is aware that it is doing me good. Or perhaps it is something more: perhaps, despite the feeble translation and the pedestrian, rushed commentary, he has received the message, he has understood that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two, who dare to talk about these things with the soup poles on our shoulders.

I spurred my comrades with this brief address
To meet the journey with such eagerness

. . . and I try, but in vain, to explain how many things this “eagerness” means. There is another gap here, this time irreparable. “. . . the light beneath the moon” or something like that; but before it? . . . No idea, *keine Ahnung*, as they say here. Forgive me, Pikolo, I have forgotten at least four *terzinas*.

“*Ça ne fait rien, vas-y tout de même.*”

When there before us rose a mountain, dark
because of distance, and it seemed to me
the highest mountain I had ever seen.

Yes, yes, not “very high” but “highest,”[7] a consecutive proposition. And the mountains when one sees them in the distance . . . the mountains . . . oh, Pikolo, Pikolo, say something, speak, don’t let me think of my mountains, which would appear in the evening dusk as I returned by train from Milan to Turin!

Enough, one has to go on, these are things one thinks but does not say. Pikolo waits and looks at me.

I would give today’s soup to be able to connect “the highest I had ever seen” to the last lines. I try to reconstruct it through the rhymes, I close my eyes, I bite my fingers—but it’s no use, the rest is silence. Other lines dance in my head: “The tearful earth gave forth a wind,” no, it’s something else. It’s late, it’s late, we’ve reached the kitchen, I have to finish:

Three times it turned her round with all the waters;
and at the fourth, it lifted up the stern
so that our prow plunged deep, as pleased an Other.

I hold Pikolo back, it is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand this “as pleased an Other” before it’s too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again, I must tell him, I must explain to him about the Middle Ages, about the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism, and something else, something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today. . . .

We are now in the soup line, among the sordid, ragged crowd of soup-carriers from other Kommandos. Those who have just arrived press against our backs. “*Kraut und Rüben?*” “*Kraut und Rüben*.” The official

announcement is made that the soup today is cabbage and turnips: “*Choux et navets.*” “*Kaposzta és répak.*”

Until the sea again closed—over us.

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6. *Inferno* Canto XXVI:85–90.
7. *Alta tanto*, not *tanto alta*.

The Events of the Summer

Throughout the spring, convoys arrived from Hungary; one of every two prisoners was Hungarian, and Hungarian became the second language in the camp, after Yiddish.

In the month of August 1944, we who had entered the camp five months before now counted among the old prisoners. As such, we of Kommando 98 were not surprised that the promises made to us and the chemistry examination we had passed had brought no result: neither surprised nor exceptionally saddened. At bottom, we all had a certain fear of change: “When things change, they change for the worse” was one of the camp proverbs. More generally, experience had shown us countless times the futility of every conjecture: why torment oneself by trying to see into the future when no action, no word of ours could have the least influence? We were old Häftlinge: our wisdom lay in “not trying to understand,” not imagining the future, not torturing ourselves about how and when it would all be over: not asking questions of ourselves or others.

We preserved the memories of our previous life, but blurred and remote, and hence profoundly sweet and sad, like the memories of early childhood and all things that are over, whereas for each of us the moment of entry into the camp was the starting point of a different sequence of memories, near and sharp, constantly confirmed by present experience, like wounds reopened every day.

The news, heard at the worksite, of the Allied landing in Normandy, of the Russian offensive, and of the failed attempt on Hitler’s life had given rise to violent but ephemeral waves of hope. Day by day each of us felt his strength fade, his desire to live melt away, his mind grow dim; and

Normandy and Russia were so far away, and winter so close, hunger and desolation so concrete, and all the rest so unreal, that it did not seem possible that any world and time existed other than our world of mud and our sterile and stagnant time, whose end we were by now incapable of imagining.

For living men, units of time always have a value, which increases in proportion to the strength of the internal resources of the person living through them; but for us hours, days, months spilled out sluggishly from the future into the past, always too slow, a worthless and superfluous material that we sought to rid ourselves of as quickly as possible. With the end of the time when the days followed one another vivacious, precious, and irrecoverable, the future stood before us gray and inarticulate, like an invincible barrier. For us, history had stopped.

But in August ’44 the bombardments of Upper Silesia began, and they continued, with irregular pauses and resumptions, throughout the summer and the autumn until the final crisis.

The monstrous unquestioned labor for the preparation of the Buna factory stopped abruptly, and degenerated immediately into a disjointed, frantic, and paroxysmal confusion. The day when the production of synthetic rubber was supposed to begin, which had seemed imminent in August, was repeatedly postponed, until the Germans no longer spoke about it.

Construction work stopped; the power of the countless multitudes of slaves was directed elsewhere and, day by day, became more unruly and passively hostile. With every raid there was new damage to be repaired; the delicate machinery, laboriously installed a few days before, had to be dismantled and removed; air-raid shelters and protective walls had to be hurriedly erected, only to prove ironically insubstantial and useless at the next trial.

We had thought that anything would be preferable to the monotony of the identical and inexorably long days, to the systematic and orderly squalor of Buna in operation; but we were forced to change our minds when Buna began to fall to pieces around us, as if struck by a curse in which we

ourselves felt implicated. We had to sweat amid the dust and smoking ruins, and tremble like beasts, flattened against the earth by the anger of the planes; broken by exhaustion and parched with thirst, we returned in the long, windy evenings of the Polish summer to find the camp upside down, no water to drink or wash in, no soup for our empty bellies, no light by which to defend our piece of bread against someone else's hunger, or, in the morning, to find our shoes and clothes in the dark, raucous inferno of the Block.

At Buna the German civilians raged with the fury of the secure man who wakes from a long dream of domination, and sees his ruin and is unable to understand it. The *Reichsdeutsche* of the Lager as well, including the political prisoners, felt in the hour of danger the ties of blood and soil. This new fact reduced the tangle of hatreds and incomprehensions to their elementary terms and redivided the two camps: the politicals, along with the green triangles and the SS, saw, or thought they saw, in the face of each of us the mockery of reprisal and the grim joy of revenge. They found agreement on this, and their ferocity redoubled.

No German could now forget that we were on the other side: on the side of the terrible sowers who plowed the German sky like masters, high above every defense, and twisted the living metal of their constructions, carrying slaughter every day into their homes, into the hitherto unviolated homes of the German people.

As for us, we were too destroyed to be truly afraid. The few who were still able to judge and feel righteously drew new strength and hope from the bombardments; those whom hunger had not yet reduced to a definitive inertia often took advantage of the moments of general panic to carry out doubly rash expeditions to the factory kitchens or the stores (doubly rash because, besides the direct risk of the raids, theft carried out in conditions of emergency was punished by hanging). But the greater number bore the new danger and the new discomforts with unchanged indifference: it was not a conscious resignation but the dull torpor of beasts broken in by beatings, and no longer hurt by beatings.

We were forbidden to enter the bomb shelters. When the earth began to tremble, we dragged ourselves, dazed and limping, through the corrosive fumes of the smoke bombs to the vast squalid, sterile waste areas enclosed within the boundary of Buna; there we lay inert, piled on top of one another like dead men, yet still conscious of the momentary sweetness of our limbs

at rest. We looked with indifferent eyes at the columns of smoke and fire breaking out around us: in moments of respite, filled with the faint menacing hum that every European knows, we picked the stunted chicory leaves and wild chamomile from the heavily trampled ground, and chewed them slowly in silence.

When the alarm was over, we returned from every corner to our posts, a silent uncountable flock, accustomed to the anger of men and things; and continued that work of ours, as hated as ever, now even more obviously vain and senseless.

In this world, shaken more deeply every day by the tremors of its approaching end, amid new terrors and hopes, and intervals of exacerbated slavery, I happened to meet Lorenzo.

The story of my relationship with Lorenzo is both long and short, plain and enigmatic: it is the story of a time and a situation by now effaced from every present reality, and so I do not think it can be understood except in the manner in which we understand today the events of legends or the remotest history.

In concrete terms, it amounts to little: an Italian civilian worker brought me a piece of bread and the remains of his ration every day for six months; he gave me an undershirt of his, full of patches; he wrote a postcard on my behalf to Italy and brought me the reply. For all this he neither asked nor accepted any reward, because he was good and simple, and did not think that one should do good for a reward.

All this ought not to seem trivial. My case was not the only one; as has already been said, others of us had relationships of various kinds with civilians, and obtained from them the means to survive; but they were relationships of a different nature. Our comrades spoke of them in the same ambiguous manner, full of innuendo, in which men of the world speak of their relations with women; that is, as adventures of which one can justly be proud and for which one wants to be envied, but which, even for the most pagan consciences, always remain on the margins of the permissible and the honest, so that it is incorrect and improper to boast about them. It is in this way that the Häftlinge speak of their civilian “protectors” and “friends”: with an ostentatious discretion, mentioning no names, so as not to

compromise them, and also, and especially, so as not to create undesirable rivals. The most accomplished, the professional seducers like Henri, do not speak of them at all; they surround their successes with an aura of equivocal mystery, and they limit themselves to hints and allusions, calculated to arouse in their audience the vague and disquieting legend that they enjoy the good graces of boundlessly powerful and generous civilians. This in view of a deliberate aim: the reputation of good luck, as we have said elsewhere, proves to be of fundamental usefulness to anyone who knows how to surround himself with it.

The reputation of being a seducer, of being "organized," excites both envy and scorn, contempt and admiration. Anyone who lets himself be seen eating "organized" food is judged severely; he shows a serious lack of modesty and tact, besides obvious stupidity. It would be equally stupid and impertinent to ask "Who gave it to you? Where did you find it? How did you manage it?" Only the high numbers, foolish, inept, and helpless, who know nothing of the rules of the Lager, ask such questions; one does not reply to these questions, or one replies "*Verschwinde, Mensch!*" "*Hau' ab,*" "*Ucieka,*" "*Schiess in den Wind,*" "*Va chier*"—in short, with one of those countless equivalents of "Go to hell" which are so abundant in camp jargon.

There are also some who specialize in complex and patient campaigns of spying, to identify the civilian or group of civilians so-and-so turns to, and who then try in various ways to supplant him. Interminable controversies of priority break out, made all the more bitter for the loser by the knowledge that a "tested" civilian is almost always more profitable, and above all safer, than a civilian making his first contact with us. This civilian is worth much more, for obvious sentimental and technical reasons: he already knows the principles of "organization," its regulations and its dangers, and, even more, he has demonstrated that he is capable of overcoming the caste barrier.

In fact, for the civilians we are the untouchables. More or less explicitly, and with all the nuances lying between contempt and pity, they think that, because we have been condemned to this life of ours, because we have been reduced to this condition, we must be tainted by some mysterious, grave sin. They hear us speak in many different languages, which they do not understand and which sound grotesque to them, like animal noises; they see us as ignoble slaves, without hair, without honor, and without names, beaten every day, more abject every day, and they never glimpse in our eyes a light

of rebellion, or of peace, or of faith. They know us as thieving and untrustworthy, muddy, ragged, and starving, and, mistaking the effect for the cause, they judge us worthy of our abasement. Who could tell one of our faces from another? For them we are *Kazett*, a neuter-singular noun.

Naturally, this does not stop many of them from throwing us a piece of bread or a potato now and again, or giving us their bowls, after the distribution of the *Zivilsuppe* at the worksite, to scrape and return to them washed. They do it to get rid of some importunate hungry look, or through a momentary impulse of humanity, or through simple curiosity to see us running from all sides to fight each other for the scrap, ferociously and without restraint, until the strongest gobbles it up, and all the others limp away, humiliated.

Now, nothing of this sort occurred between me and Lorenzo. However little sense there may be in trying to specify the reasons that I, among thousands of others like me, was able to stand up to the test, I believe that I owe it to Lorenzo if I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that a just world still existed outside ours, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, unconnected to hatred and fear: something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving.

The personages in these pages are not men. Their humanity is buried, or they themselves buried it, under the abuse received or inflicted on someone else. The evil and stupid SS men, the Kapos, the politicals, the criminals, the Prominents great and small, down to the indistinguishable Häftlinge slaves—all the grades of the mad hierarchy created by the Germans are paradoxically united in a common inner desolation.

But Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.

October 1944

We fought with all our strength to prevent the arrival of winter. We clung to the warm hours, at every dusk we tried to keep the sun in the sky for a little longer, but it was all in vain. Yesterday evening the sun went down irrevocably behind a tangle of dirty clouds, chimney stacks, and wires, and today it is winter.

We know what it means, because we were here last winter; and the others will soon learn. It means that in the course of these months, from October until April, seven out of ten of us will die. Whoever does not die will suffer minute by minute, all day, every day: from the morning, before dawn, until the distribution of the evening soup we will have to keep our muscles continually tensed, dance from foot to foot, beat our arms under our armpits against the cold. We will have to spend bread to acquire gloves, and lose hours of sleep to repair them when they come unstitched. Since we can no longer eat outside, we will have to have our meals in the barrack, standing up; there each of us has available just a palm's breadth of floor space, and we are forbidden to lean against the bunks. Wounds will open on our hands, and to get a bandage we'll have to wait for hours every evening, standing in the snow and wind.

Just as our hunger has nothing to do with the feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a special word. We say "hunger," we say "tiredness," "fear," and "pain," we say "winter," and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived, in happiness and in suffering, in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have come into being; and we feel the need of this language in order to express what it means to labor all day in the wind,

in temperatures below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, a cloth jacket and trousers, and in our body weakness, hunger, and knowledge of the approaching end.

In the same way that one sees a hope end, winter arrived this morning. We realized it when we left the barrack to go and wash: there were no stars, the dark cold air had the scent of snow. In Roll Call Square, in the early light, when we assembled for work, no one spoke. When we saw the first flakes of snow, we thought that if, at the same time last year, they had told us we would see another winter in the Lager, we would have gone and touched the electric fence; and that even now we would go if we were logical, if it were not for this senseless, crazy residue of unconfessable hope.

Because “winter” means yet another thing.

Last spring, the Germans constructed two huge tents in an open space in the Lager. Throughout the spring and summer, each of them housed more than a thousand men: now the tents had been taken down, and an excess of two thousand persons crowded our barracks. We old prisoners know that the Germans do not like such irregularities, and that soon something will happen to reduce our numbers.

One feels the selections arriving. *Selekcja*: the hybrid Latin and Polish word is heard once, twice, many times, interpolated in foreign conversations; at first we cannot distinguish it, then it forces itself on our attention, and in the end it persecutes us.

This morning the Poles are saying “*Selekcja*.” The Poles are the first to find out the news, and generally they try not to let it spread, because to know something that the others don’t yet know can always be useful. By the time everyone realizes that a selection is imminent, they already have a monopoly on the few possibilities of evading it (corrupting some doctor or Prominent with bread or tobacco; leaving the barrack for Ka-Be or vice versa at the right moment, so as to miss the commission).

In the days that follow, the atmosphere of the Lager and the worksite is saturated with *Selekcja*: nobody knows anything definite, but everybody speaks about it, even the Polish, Italian, and French civilian workers whom we secretly see on the job. Yet the result is hardly a wave of despondency: our collective morale is too inarticulate and flat to be unstable. The fight

against hunger, cold, and work leaves little margin for thought, even this thought. Every man reacts in his own way, but almost no one with those attitudes which might seem most plausible because most realistic—that is, with resignation or despair.

All those able to make arrangements make them; but they are a small minority, because it is very difficult to escape a selection. The Germans apply themselves to these things with great solemnity and diligence.

All those unable to make material arrangements seek protection in other ways. In the latrines, in the washhouse, we show each other our chests, our buttocks, our thighs, and our comrades reassure us: "You'll be all right, it certainly won't be your turn this time. . . *du bist kein Muselmann* . . . more probably mine . . ." and in turn they lower their pants and pull up their shirts.

Nobody refuses this act of charity to another: nobody is so sure of his own lot that he has the courage to condemn others. I brazenly lied to old Wertheimer; I told him that if they questioned him, he should say he's forty-five, and that he shouldn't forget to have a shave the evening before, even if it cost him a quarter-ration of bread; apart from that, he need have no fears, and in any case it was by no means certain that it was a selection for the gas chamber; had he not heard the *Blockältester* say that those chosen would go to the convalescent camp at Jaworzno?

It's absurd for Wertheimer to hope: he looks sixty, he has enormous varicose veins, he hardly even notices the hunger anymore. But he lies down on his bed, serene and quiet, and replies to anyone who asks him with my words; they are the watchword in the camp these days. I myself repeated them just as—except for the details—I heard them said to me by Chaim, who has been in the Lager for three years, and, being strong and robust, is wonderfully sure of himself; and I believed him.

On this slender basis I, too, lived through the great selection of October 1944, with inconceivable tranquility. I was tranquil because I managed to lie to myself sufficiently. The fact that I was not selected depended almost entirely on chance and does not prove that my faith was well founded.

Monsieur Pinkert is also, a priori, condemned: it is enough to look at his eyes. He calls me over with a nod, and in a confidential tone explains to me that he has been informed—he cannot tell me the source of his information—that this time there really is something new: the Holy See, by means of the International Red Cross . . . in short, he personally guarantees that, both

for himself and for me, absolutely, any danger can be ruled out; it's well-known that as a civilian he was an attaché at the Belgian embassy in Warsaw.

Thus, in various ways, even those days of vigil, which seem in the telling as if they ought to have been agonizing beyond the limits of human endurance, go by not very differently from other days.

The discipline in both the Lager and Buna is in no way relaxed: the work, the cold, and the hunger are sufficient to absorb our attention completely.

Today is a working Sunday, *Arbeitssonntag*: we work until 1 p.m., then we return to the camp for a shower, shaving, and the general inspection for skin diseases and lice. And at the worksite, mysteriously, we've all found out that the selection will be today.

The news arrived, as always, surrounded by a halo of contradictory and suspect details: the selection in the infirmary took place this morning; the percentage was 7 percent of the whole camp, 30, 50 percent of the patients. At Birkenau, the crematorium chimney has been smoking for ten days. Room has to be made for an enormous convoy arriving from the Poznan Ghetto. The young tell the young that all the old ones will be chosen. The healthy tell the healthy that only the sick will be chosen. Specialists will be excluded. German Jews will be excluded. Low numbers will be excluded. You will be chosen. I will be excluded.

Punctually, starting at 1 p.m. exactly, the worksite empties, and for two hours the interminable gray rows file past the two checkpoints, where, as usual, we are counted and recounted, and past the orchestra that for two hours without interruption plays, as usual, those marches to which we must synchronize our steps at our entrance and our exit.

It seems like an ordinary day, the kitchen chimney smokes as usual, the distribution of the soup is already beginning. But then the bell is heard, and at that moment we know that we are there.

Because that bell always sounds at dawn, and then it means reveille, but when it sounds during the day it means *Blocksperre*, confinement in the barracks, and this happens when there is a selection, so that no one can escape it, and so that, when those selected leave for the gas chamber, no one sees them leave.

Our *Blockältester* knows his business. He has made sure that we have all entered, he has had the door locked, he has given each of us the card that bears our number, name, profession, age, and nationality, and he has ordered everyone to undress completely, except for shoes. Like this, naked, with the card in our hand, we wait for the commission to reach our barrack. We are Barrack 48, but one can never tell if it will start at Barrack 1 or Barrack 60. Anyway, we can rest quietly for at least an hour, and there is no reason not to get under the blankets on the bunk and keep warm.

Many are already dozing when a barrage of orders, oaths, and blows proclaims the imminent arrival of the commission. The *Blockältester* and his helpers, with fists and shouts, starting at the end of the dormitory, drive the crowd of frightened, naked men forward and cram them into the *Tagesraum,* which is the quartermaster's office. The *Tagesraum* is a small room, seven meters by four: when the drive is over, a warm, compact human mass is jammed into the *Tagesraum*, spreading to fill all the corners perfectly, and exerting such a pressure on the wooden walls that they creak.

Now we are all in the *Tagesraum*, and there is not only no time but not even any space in which to be afraid. The sensation of warm flesh pressing all around is unusual and not unpleasant. You have to take care to hold your nose up in order to breathe, and not to crumple or lose the card in your hand.

The *Blockältester* has closed the connecting door and has opened the other two, which lead outside from the dormitory and the *Tagesraum*. Here, in front of the two doors, stands the arbiter of our fate, an SS officer. On his right is the *Blockältester,* on his left, the quartermaster of the barrack. Each of us, as he comes naked out of the *Tagesraum* into the cold October air, has to run the few steps between the two doors, in front of the three men, give the card to the SS officer, and go back in through the dormitory door. The SS officer, in the fraction of a second between the two successive crossings, with a glance at front and back, judges our fate, and in turn gives the card to the man on his right or his left, and this is the life or death of each one of us. In three or four minutes a barrack of two hundred men is "done," and in the course of the afternoon the entire camp of twelve thousand men.

Jammed in the charnel house of the *Tagesraum*, I gradually felt the human pressure around me slacken, and before long my turn came. Like everyone else, I passed by with a brisk and elastic step, trying to keep my head high, my chest forward, and my muscles taut and conspicuous. Out of the corner of my eye I tried to look back, and it seemed to me that my card ended up on the right.

As we gradually return to the dormitory we are allowed to dress. Nobody yet knows with certainty his fate; first of all it has to be established whether the condemned cards were those handed to the right or to the left. There's no point by now in sparing one another's feelings with superstitious scruples. Everybody crowds around the oldest, the most emaciated, the most *Muselmann*; if their cards went to the left, the left is certainly the side of the condemned.

Even before the selection is over, we all know that the left was in fact the *schlechte Seite*, the bad side. Naturally, there have been some irregularities: René, for example, so young and robust, ended up on the left; perhaps it's because he has glasses, perhaps because he walks with a slight stoop, like someone who is nearsighted, but more likely it was a simple error: René went past the commission immediately ahead of me, and there could have been a mistake with our cards. I think about it, discuss it with Alberto, and we agree that the hypothesis is probable: I don't know what I'll think tomorrow and later; today I feel no distinct emotion.

It must likewise have been a mistake with Sattler, a huge Transylvanian peasant who was still at home only twenty days ago; Sattler does not know German, has understood nothing of what has happened, and stands in a corner mending his shirt. Should I go and tell him that he won't need his shirt anymore?

There is nothing surprising about these mistakes: the examination is very rapid and perfunctory, and, in any case, the important thing for the Lager administration is not that the most useless prisoners be eliminated but that free places be quickly created, according to a fixed percentage.

The selection is now over in our barrack, but it continues in the others, so we are still locked in. But since the soup vats have arrived in the meantime, the *Blockältester* decides to proceed with the distribution at once. A double

ration will be given to those selected. I have never discovered if this was a ridiculously charitable initiative of the *Blockälteste* or an explicit order of the SS, but in fact, during the two- or three-day interval (and sometimes much longer) between the selection and the departure, the victims at Auschwitz-Monowitz enjoyed this privilege.

Ziegler holds out his bowl, collects his normal ration, and then waits expectantly. “What do you want?” asks the *Blockältester*: as far as he is concerned, Ziegler is entitled to no supplement, and he pushes him away, but Ziegler returns and humbly persists. He was on the left, everybody saw it, the *Blockältester* can check the cards; he has the right to a double ration. When he gets it, he goes quietly to his bunk to eat.

Now each of us is busy scraping the bottom of his bowl with his spoon so as to pick up the last drops of soup, a confused, metallic clatter, signifying the end of the day. Silence slowly prevails, and then, from my bunk, on the top level, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his cap on his head, his torso swaying violently. Kuhn is thanking God that he was not chosen.

Kuhn is out of his mind. Does he not see, in the bunk next to him, Beppo the Greek, who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow, and knows it, and lies there staring at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Does Kuhn not know that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty—nothing at all in the power of man to do—can ever heal?

If I were God, I would spit Kuhn’s prayer out upon the ground.

Kraus

When it rains we feel like crying. It is November, it has been raining for ten days now, and the ground is like the bottom of a swamp. Everything made of wood has the smell of mushrooms.

If I could take ten steps to the left, I would be sheltered by the roof; all I'd need is a sack to cover my shoulders, or the mere prospect of a fire where I could dry myself; or maybe a dry rag to put between my shirt and my back. From one swing of the shovel to the next I think about it, and I really believe that to have a dry rag would be positive happiness.

It's impossible to be more thoroughly soaked than I am now; I just have to try to move as little as possible and, above all, not to make any new movements, so that no other part of my skin comes into unnecessary contact with my sodden, icy clothes.

Luckily it's not windy today. Strange, how in some way one always has the impression of being lucky, how some chance circumstance, perhaps infinitesimal, checks us on the edge of despair and allows us to live. It's raining, but not windy. Or it's raining and also windy, but you know that tonight is your turn for the extra soup, and so today, too, you find the strength to make it to the evening. Or there's rain, wind, and the usual hunger, and then you think that if you really had to, if you really felt nothing in your heart but suffering and boredom, as sometimes happens, when you truly seem to be lying on the bottom—well, even then we think that at any moment, if we want, we could always go and touch the electric fence, or throw ourself under the shunting trains, and then the rain would stop.

We have been stuck in the mud since morning, legs apart, feet never moving from the holes they have dug for themselves in the glue-like soil, hips swaying at every swing of the shovel. I am halfway down the pit, Kraus and Clausner are at the bottom, Gounan is above me, at ground level. Only Gounan can look around, and every now and again he alerts Kraus tersely of the need to quicken the pace or even to rest, according to who is passing by along the road. Clausner wields the pickax, Kraus lifts the earth up to me, shovelful by shovelful, and I gradually lift it up to Gounan, who piles it on one side. Others go to and fro with wheelbarrows and carry the earth somewhere, of no interest to us. Our world today is this hole of mud.

Kraus misses the target, a lump of mud flies up and splatters over my knees. It's not the first time this has happened, and I warn him to be careful, but without much hope: he is Hungarian, has a limited understanding of German, and doesn't know a word of French. He is tall and thin, wears glasses, and has a curious, small, twisted face; when he laughs he looks like a child, and he laughs often. He works too much and too vigorously: he has not yet learned our underground art of economizing on everything—breath, movement, even thought. He does not yet know that it is better to be beaten, because you do not normally die from beatings, but from exhaustion you do, and miserably, and by the time you realize it, it's already too late. He still thinks . . . oh no, poor Kraus, this is not reasoning, it is only the foolish honesty of a petty office worker, he brought it with him, and he seems to think that in here it's like the outside, where hard work is honest and logical, and also advantageous, since, as everyone says, the more one works the more one earns and eats.

"*Regardez-moi ça! . . . Pas si vite, idiot!*" Gounan swears at him from above; then he remembers to translate into German: "*Langsam, du blöder Einer, langsam, verstanden?*" Kraus can kill himself through exhaustion if he wants to, but not today, because we're working in a line and the pace of our work is set by him.

There goes the siren of the Carbide factory, and the English prisoners leave; it is half past four. Then the Ukrainian girls will go by, and so it will be five, and we will be able to straighten our backs, and only the return march, the roll call, and the check for lice will separate us from our rest.

It is assembly time, *Antreten* from all sides; from all sides the mud puppets crawl out, stretch their cramped limbs, carry the tools back to the

sheds. We extract our feet from the holes cautiously, so that our shoes don't get sucked in, and emerge, unsteady and dripping, to line up for the return march. *Zu dreien*, in threes. I tried to place myself near Alberto; we didn't work together today and wanted to ask each other how it had gone. But someone slapped me in the stomach and I ended up behind him, look, right next to Kraus.

Now we are leaving. The Kapo marks time in a harsh voice: "*Links, links, links*"; at first our feet hurt, then slowly we warm up and our nerves relax. We have bored through all the minutes of the day, this very day, which this morning seemed invincible and eternal; now it lies dead and is immediately forgotten; already it is no longer a day, it has left no trace in anyone's memory. We know that tomorrow will be like today: perhaps it will rain a little more or a little less, or perhaps instead of digging we will go to the Carbide factory and unload bricks. Or the war might even end tomorrow, or we might all be killed, or transferred to another camp, or one of those great changes might take place which, ever since the Lager has existed, have been tirelessly foretold as imminent and certain. But who can think seriously about tomorrow?

Memory is a curious instrument: as long as I have been in the camp, two lines written long ago by a friend of mine have been running through my head:

. . . until one day
it will no longer make sense to say: tomorrow.

It's like that here. Do you know how to say "never" in camp slang? "*Morgen früh,*" tomorrow morning.

Now is the time of *links, links, links und links*, the time when one must not get out of step. Kraus is clumsy, he has already been kicked by the Kapo because he is incapable of staying in line. And, goodness, he is beginning to gesticulate and mumble in a wretched German, listen, listen, he wants to apologize for the spadeful of mud, he still doesn't understand where we are; it must be said that the Hungarians are a singular people.

To keep in step and carry on a complicated conversation in German is too much. This time it's I who warn him that he is out of step; I look at him and I see his eyes behind the drops of rain on his glasses, and they are the eyes of the man Kraus.

Then something important happened, and it's worth recounting now, perhaps for the same reason that it was important that it happened then. I made a long speech to Kraus: in bad German, but slowly, separating the words, making sure after each sentence that he had understood.

I told him I had dreamed that I was at home, in the house where I was born, with my family, sitting up, my legs under the table, and on the table was a lot of food, a huge amount of food. And it was summer and it was Italy: Naples? . . . yes, Naples, this is hardly the time to quibble. Then all of a sudden the bell rang, and I got up anxiously and went to open the door, and who did I see? I saw him, this very same Kraus Páli, and he had hair, and was clean and well nourished, and dressed like a free man, with a loaf of bread in his hand. Yes, a two-kilo loaf, still warm. Then "*Servus, Páli, wie geht's?*" and I was filled with joy and invited him in, and I explained to my parents who he was, and that he had come from Budapest, and why he was so wet; because he was soaking wet, just as he was now. And I gave him food and drink and a good bed to sleep in, and it was night, but there was a wonderful warmth and so in a moment we were all dry (yes, because I, too, was soaked).

What a good boy Kraus must have been as a civilian: he won't survive long here, it's obvious at first glance, as demonstrable as a theorem. I'm sorry I don't know Hungarian, for his emotion has overflowed the banks, erupting in a flood of outlandish Magyar words. I cannot understand anything except my name, but from his solemn gestures one would say that he is making promises and prophecies.

Poor silly Kraus. If he only knew that it's not true, that I have dreamed nothing about him, that he is nothing to me, outside of a brief moment, nothing just as everything is nothing down here, except the hunger within and the cold and the rain all around.

Die Drei Leute vom Labor

How many months have gone by since we entered the camp? How many since the day I was discharged from Ka-Be? And since the day of the chemistry exam? And since the October selection?

Alberto and I often ask ourselves these questions, and many others as well. There were ninety-six of us when we arrived, we, the Italians of convoy 174000; only twenty-nine survived until October, and, of these, eight went in the selection. We are now twenty-one, and winter has hardly begun. How many of us will be alive in the new year? How many when spring comes?

There have been no air raids now for several weeks; the November rain has turned to snow, and the snow has covered the ruins. The Germans and Poles go to work in rubber jackboots, woolen earmuffs, and padded overalls, the English prisoners in their wonderful fur-lined jackets. In our Lager they have distributed coats only to a few of the privileged; we are a specialized Kommando, which, in theory, works under shelter; so we are left in our summer clothing.

We are chemists, therefore we work with phenyl-beta sacks. We cleared out the warehouse after the first air raids, at the height of summer. The phenyl beta got under our clothes and stuck to our sweaty limbs and ate away at us like leprosy; the skin came off our faces in large burned patches. Then the air raids stopped for a while and we carried the sacks back into the warehouse. Then the warehouse was hit and we put the sacks in the cellar of the Styrene Department. Now the warehouse has been repaired and once again we have to pile up the sacks there. The caustic smell of the phenyl beta impregnates the only clothes we have, and stays with us day and night

like our shadow. So far, the advantages of being in the Chemical Kommando have been limited to the following: the others have received coats and we have not; the others carry fifty-kilo sacks of cement, while we carry sixty-kilo sacks of phenyl beta. How can we still think about the chemistry examination and the illusions of that time? On at least four occasions during the summer we heard talk of Doktor Pannwitz's laboratory in Bau 939, and the rumor spread that analysts for the Polymerization Department would be chosen from among us.

Now enough, now it's over. This is the last act: winter has begun, and with it our last battle. We can no longer doubt that it is the last. At whatever time of day we happen to listen to the voice of our bodies, or interrogate our limbs, the answer is the same: our strength will not last. Everything around us speaks of disintegration and the end. Half of Bau 939 is a heap of twisted metal and smashed concrete; from the enormous pipes where the superheated steam used to roar deformed blue icicles, as large as pillars, now hang down to the ground. Buna is silent, and when the wind is favorable, if one listens intently, one can hear a continuous dull underground rumble, which is the approaching front. Three hundred prisoners have arrived in the Lager from the Lodz Ghetto, transferred by the Germans before the Russian advance. They brought us the story of the legendary uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, and told us how, more than a year ago, the Germans liquidated the Lublin camp: four machine guns in the corners and the barracks set on fire. The civilized world will never know about it. When will it be our turn?

This morning the Kapo divided up the squads as usual. The Magnesium Chloride ten to the Magnesium Chloride: and they leave, dragging their feet, as slowly as possible, because the Magnesium Chloride is an extremely unpleasant job; you stand all day up to your ankles in cold, briny water, which saturates your shoes, your clothes, and your skin. The Kapo grabs a brick and throws it at the group; they dodge it clumsily, but do not quicken their pace. This is almost routine, it happens every morning, and does not always mean that the Kapo has a definite intention to cause injury.

The *Scheisshaus* four, to their job: and the four assigned to the building of the new latrine leave. It should be said that, with the arrival of the convoys from Lodz and Transylvania, our squad included more than fifty Häftlinge, and so the mysterious German bureaucrat who supervises these matters had authorized us to build a *Zweiplätziges Kommandoscheisshaus*,

that is, a two-seat toilet reserved for our Kommando. We are not insensible of this mark of distinction, which makes ours one of the few Kommandos that one can boast of belonging to; but it is evident that we will lose one of the simplest pretexts to absent ourselves from work and make deals with civilians. “Noblesse oblige,” says Henri, who has other strings to his bow.

The twelve for bricks. Meister Dahm’s five. The two for cisterns. How many absent? Three absent. Homolka gone into Ka-Be this morning, the Smith dead yesterday, François transferred who knows where or why. The count is correct; the Kapo records it and is satisfied. Only we eighteen of the phenyl beta are left, apart from the Prominents of the Kommando. And now the unexpected happens.

The Kapo says: “Doktor Pannwitz has communicated to the *Arbeitsdienst* that three Häftlinge have been chosen for the Laboratory: 169509, Brackier; 175633, Kandel; 174517, Levi.” For a moment my ears ring and Buna whirls around me. There are three Levis in Kommando 98, but *Hundert Vierundsiebzig Fünf Hundert Siebzehn* is me, there is no possible doubt. I am one of the three elect.

The Kapo looks us up and down with a rancorous smile. A Belgian, a Romanian, and an Italian: three *Franzosen*, in short. Is it possible that three *Franzosen* have really been chosen to enter the paradise of the Laboratory?

Many comrades congratulate us; Alberto first of all, with genuine joy, and not a trace of envy. Alberto holds nothing against my good fortune, and is really pleased, both because of our friendship and because he will also gain from it. In fact, we two are now bound by a very close alliance, under which every “organized” scrap of food is divided into two strictly equal parts. He has no reason to envy me, for he neither hoped nor desired to enter the Laboratory. The blood in his veins is too free: Alberto, this untamed friend of mine, wouldn’t think of settling down in a system; his instinct leads him elsewhere, to other solutions, to the unforeseen, the extemporaneous, the new. Without hesitation, Alberto prefers the uncertainties and battles of the “freelancer” to a steady job.

I have a ticket from the *Arbeitsdienst* in my pocket, on which it is written that Häftling 174517, as a specialized worker, has the right to a new shirt

and underpants and must be shaved every Wednesday.

The ravaged Buna lies under the first snow, silent and stiff, like an enormous corpse. Every day the sirens of the *Fliegeralarm* wail; the Russians are eighty kilometers away. The electric power plant isn't running, the methanol rectification columns no longer exist, three of the four acetylene gasometers have been blown up. Prisoners "retrieved" from all the camps in eastern Poland pour haphazardly into our Lager every day; the minority are sent to work, the majority leave immediately for Birkenau and the Chimney. The ration has been reduced still further. Ka-Be is overflowing, the E-Häftlinge have brought scarlet fever, diphtheria, and petechial typhus into the camp.

But Häftling 174517 has been promoted to specialist and has the right to a new shirt and underpants and has to be shaved every Wednesday. No one can claim to understand the Germans.

We entered the Laboratory timid, suspicious, and bewildered, like three wild beasts slinking into a large city. How clean and polished the floor is! It is a laboratory surprisingly like any other laboratory. Three long workbenches covered with hundreds of familiar objects. The glassware draining in a corner, the precision scales, a Heraeus oven, a Höppler thermostat. The smell makes me start like the lash of a whip: the faint aromatic odor of organic chemistry laboratories. The large semi-dark classroom at the university, my fourth year, the mild air of May in Italy is evoked for a moment with brutal violence and immediately vanishes.

Herr Stawinoga assigns us our workplaces. Stawinoga is a German Pole, still young, with an energetic yet sad and tired face. He is also Doktor: not of chemistry, but (*ne pas chercher à comprendre*) of linguistics; all the same, he is the head of the Laboratory. He does not speak to us willingly, but does not seem ill disposed. He calls us Monsieur, which is ridiculous and disconcerting.

The temperature in the Laboratory is wonderful; the thermometer reads 24°C. We think that they can even make us wash glassware, sweep the floor, carry hydrogen cylinders, anything to remain here, and the problem of

winter will be solved for us. And then, on further consideration, even the problem of hunger should not be difficult to solve. Will they really want to search us every day when we leave? And, even if they do, what about every time we ask to go to the latrine? Obviously not. And there is soap, gas, alcohol here. I will stitch a secret pocket inside my jacket, and make a deal with the Englishman who works in the repair shop and trades in gas. We'll see how strict the supervision is: but by now I have spent a year in the Lager and I know that if one wants to steal and seriously sets one's mind to it, no supervision and no searches can prevent it.

So it seems that fate, taking unsuspected paths, has arranged that we three, the object of envy of ten thousand condemned men, will suffer neither hunger nor cold this winter. This means a strong probability of not falling seriously ill, of being safe from frostbite, of getting through the selections. In such conditions, those less experienced than us about things in the Lager might even be tempted by the hope of survival and the thought of liberty. Not us, we know how these things go; this is all a gift of fate, to be enjoyed as intensely as possible and at once; there is no certainty about tomorrow. At the first piece of glassware I break, the first measurement error, the first failure to pay attention, I will go back to waste away in the snow and the wind until I, too, am ready for the Chimney. And, besides, who knows what will happen when the Russians come?

Because the Russians will come. The ground trembles day and night under our feet; the dull, muffled rumble of the artillery now echoes uninterrupted in the empty silence of Buna. One breathes an air of tension, an air of resolution. The Poles no longer work, the French again walk with their heads high. The English wink at us and greet us surreptitiously with a V sign: and not always surreptitiously.

But the Germans are deaf and blind, encased in an armor of obstinacy and willful refusal to know. Once again they have named a date for the start of production of synthetic rubber: it will be February 1, 1945. They construct shelters and trenches, they repair the damage, they build, they fight, they command, they organize, and they kill. What else could they do? They are Germans. This behavior is not considered and deliberate but follows from their nature and from the destiny they have chosen. They could not act differently: if you wound the body of a dying man, the wound begins to heal, even if the whole body will die within a day.

Every morning now, when the squads are divided, the Kapo calls the three of us for the Laboratory before all the others, *die drei Leute vom Labor*. In the camp, at night and in the morning, nothing distinguishes me from the flock, but during the day, at work, I am sheltered and warm, and nobody beats me; I steal and sell soap and gas without serious risk, and perhaps I will get a coupon for a pair of leather shoes. Besides, can this be called work? To work is to push carts, carry ties, break stones, shovel earth, grip with bare hands the repugnant iciness of frozen iron. Whereas I sit all day, I have a notebook and a pencil, and they have even given me a book to refresh my memory on analytical methods. I have a drawer where I can put my cap and gloves, and when I want to go out I have only to tell Herr Stawinoga, who never says no and asks no questions if I delay; he appears to be suffering in his flesh for the ruin that surrounds him.

My comrades in the Kommando envy me, and they are right; should I not call myself content? But, in the morning, as soon as I escape the raging wind and cross the threshold of the Laboratory I find at my side the companion of all moments of respite, of Ka-Be, of the Sundays when we rest—the pain of remembering, the old fierce anguish of feeling myself a man again, which attacks me like a dog the moment my consciousness comes out of the darkness. Then I take my pencil and notebook and write what I could never tell anyone.

Then, there are the women. How long since I've seen a woman? In Buna we quite often met the Ukrainian and Polish women workers, in trousers and leather jackets, heavy and violent like their men. They were sweaty and disheveled in summer, bundled up in thick clothes in winter. They worked with spades and pickaxes, and did not make us feel that we were working next to women.

It's different here. Faced with the girls in the Laboratory, we three feel ourselves sink into the ground with shame and embarrassment. We know what we look like: we see one another and sometimes we happen to see our own reflection in a clean window. We are ridiculous and repulsive. Our heads are bald on Monday, and covered by a short light-brown mold by Saturday. We have swollen, yellow faces, permanently marked by the cuts of the hasty barber, and often by bruises and numb sores; our necks are long and knobbly, like plucked chickens. Our clothes are incredibly filthy, stained with mud, grease, and blood: Kandel's trousers come only halfway

down his calves, exposing his bony, hairy ankles; my jacket slips off my shoulders as if off a wooden clothes hanger. We are full of fleas, and often scratch ourselves shamelessly; we have to ask to go to the latrine with humiliating frequency. Our wooden clogs are intolerably noisy and are encrusted with alternate layers of mud and regulation grease.

Then, too, we are used to our smell, but the girls are not and never miss a chance of letting us know. It is not the generic smell of the badly washed but the smell of the Häftling, faint and sweetish, which greeted us on our arrival in the Lager and which tenaciously pervades the dormitories, kitchens, washhouses, and latrines of the Lager. One acquires it immediately and never loses it: "So young and already stinking!" is the way we greet new arrivals.

To us the girls seem like creatures from another world. There are three young German girls, besides Fräulein Liczba, the Polish warehouse keeper, and Frau Mayer, the secretary. They have smooth, rosy skin, nice colorful clothes that are clean and warm, and long, well-brushed blond hair; they speak with grace and self-possession, and, instead of keeping the Laboratory neat and clean, as they ought to, they smoke in the corners, eat bread and jam tarts in front of us, file their nails, break a lot of glassware and then try to blame us; when they sweep, they sweep our feet. They don't speak to us, and they turn up their noses when they see us shuffling around the Laboratory, squalid and dirty, awkward and unsteady in our clogs. I once asked Fräulein Liczba for some information, and she did not reply but, with a look of annoyance on her face, turned to Stawinoga and spoke to him quickly. I didn't understand the sentence, but I clearly made out "*Stinkjude,*" and my blood froze. Stawinoga told me that we should address him directly with any question about the work.

These girls sing, just as girls sing in laboratories all over the world, and it makes us deeply unhappy. They chat among themselves: they talk about the rationing, about their boyfriends, their homes, the approaching holidays. . . .

"Are you going home on Sunday? No, I'm not, traveling is so uncomfortable!"

"I'm going for Christmas. Only two weeks and it will be Christmas again; it hardly seems real, the year has gone by so quickly!"

. . . The year has gone by so quickly. This time last year I was a free man: an outlaw but free, I had a name and a family, I had an eager and

restless mind, an agile and healthy body. I thought about many faraway things: my work, the end of the war, good and evil, the nature of things, and the laws that govern human actions; and also about the mountains, about singing, love, music, poetry. I had an enormous, deep-rooted, foolish faith in the benevolence of fate; to kill and to die seemed to me matters alien and literary. My days were happy and sad, but I regretted them equally, they were all full and affirmative; the future stood before me as a great treasure. What is left today of the life of that time is only enough to make me suffer hunger and cold; I'm not even alive enough to be able to kill myself.

If I spoke German better I could try to explain all this to Frau Mayer; but she would certainly not understand, or if she were intelligent enough, and good enough, to understand, she would be unable to bear my proximity, and would flee from me, as one flees from contact with an incurable invalid, or a man condemned to death. Or perhaps she would give me a coupon for half a liter of civilian soup.

The year has gone by so quickly.

The Last One

By now Christmas is approaching. Alberto and I are walking side by side in the long gray formation, bent forward to better resist the wind. It is night and it is snowing; it is not easy to stay on our feet, and it's even more difficult to stay in step and in line; every now and again someone in front of us stumbles and falls in the black mud, and we have to be careful to avoid him and get back in our place in the column.

Ever since I've been in the Laboratory, Alberto and I have worked separately, and on the return march we always have a lot of things to tell each other. They are not usually things of a lofty nature: about work, or our comrades, or the bread, or the cold. But for a week now there has been something new: every evening Lorenzo brings us three or four liters of soup from the Italian civilian workers. To solve the problem of transport, we had to procure a *menaschka*, as it is called here: that is, a zinc-lined pot, made to order, more like a bucket than like a pot. Silberlust, the tinsmith, made it for us from two pieces of a gutter, in exchange for three rations of bread; it is a splendid, sturdy, capacious container, with the characteristic shape of a neolithic tool.

In the whole camp only a few Greeks have a *menaschka* larger than ours. Besides the material advantages, it has brought a noticeable improvement in our social standing. A *menaschka* like ours is a certificate of nobility, a heraldic emblem: Henri is becoming our friend and speaks to us on equal terms; L. has assumed a paternal and patronizing air; and, as for Elias, he is perpetually at our side, and although on the one hand he spies on us persistently to discover the secret of our *organisacja*, on the other he overwhelms us with incomprehensible declarations of solidarity and

affection, and deafens us with a litany of fantastic obscenities and oaths in Italian and French that he learned who knows where, and by which he obviously means to honor us.

As for the moral aspect of this new state of affairs, Alberto and I are forced to agree that there's nothing to be very proud of; but it's so easy to find excuses! Besides, the very fact that we have new things to talk about is no negligible gain.

We talk about our plan to buy a second *menaschka* to rotate with the first, so that we'll need to make only a single expedition a day to the remote corner of the site where Lorenzo is now working. We talk about Lorenzo and how to reward him; later, if we return, we will of course do everything we can for him, but what's the use of talking about that? He knows as well as we do how unlikely it is that we'll return. We ought to do something at once; we could try to have his shoes repaired at the shoemaker's shop in our Lager, where repairs are free (it seems a paradox, but officially everything is free in the extermination camps). Alberto will try: he is a friend of the head shoemaker, perhaps a few liters of soup will be enough.

We talk about three new undertakings of ours, and we agree that for obvious reasons of professional secrecy it's inadvisable to discuss them openly: it's a pity, our personal prestige would be greatly increased.

The first is my brainchild. I knew that the *Blockältester* of Block 44 was short of brooms and I stole one at the worksite; as far as that goes, there is nothing extraordinary. The difficulty was how to smuggle the broom into the Lager on the return march, and I solved it in what I believe to be a completely original way: I broke up my stolen property into handle and head, sawing the former into two pieces and carrying the various parts separately into camp (the two pieces of the handle tied to my thighs, inside my trousers), where I put it back together. For this I needed to find a piece of tinplate, a hammer, and nails in order to join the two pieces of wood. The whole business took only four days.

Contrary to what I feared, the customer not only did not devalue my broom but showed it as a curiosity to several of his friends, who gave me a formal order for two more brooms "of the same model."

But Alberto had other irons in the fire. In the first place, he had put the finishing touches on Operation File and twice already had carried it out successfully. Alberto goes to the tool warehouse, asks for a file, and chooses a fairly large one. The warehouse keeper writes "one file" next to

his number and Alberto leaves. He goes straight to a safe civilian (a gem of a rascal from Trieste, as sharp as they come, who helps Alberto more for love of the art than out of self-interest or philanthropy), who has no difficulty in exchanging the large file on the open market for two small ones of equal or lesser value. Alberto gives “one file” back to the warehouse and sells the other.

And he has just achieved his masterpiece, an audacious new combination, of singular elegance. It should be said that for some weeks Alberto had been entrusted with a special duty: in the morning, at the worksite, he is given a bucket with pliers, screwdrivers, and several hundred celluloid labels of different colors, which he has to mount on special brackets in order to tag the numerous and lengthy pipes for hot and cold water, steam, compressed air, gas, naphtha, vacuum, etc., that run in all directions throughout the Polymerization Department. It should also be said (and this seems to have nothing to do with it: but does not brilliance perhaps consist in finding or creating connections between apparently unrelated types of ideas?) that for all us Häftlinge the shower is a distinctly unpleasant affair for various reasons (the water is inadequate and cold, or else boiling, there is no changing room, we don’t have towels or soap, and during our enforced absence we can easily be robbed). Since the shower is obligatory, the *Blockälteste* need an inspection system that enables them to apply sanctions against anyone who evades it. Usually, a trusted member of the Block is placed at the door, and, like Polyphemus, touches each man as he comes out to feel if he is wet; if he is, he gets a ticket, and if he is dry he gets five blows from a truncheon. One can claim one’s bread the following morning only by presenting the ticket.

Alberto’s attention was focused on the tickets. In general they are only wretched pieces of paper that are given back damp, crumpled, and unrecognizable. Alberto knows the Germans, and the *Blockälteste* are all German, or German-trained: they love order, systems, bureaucracy; furthermore, although they are aggressive, quick-tempered louts, they take a childish delight in glittering, multicolored objects.

Thus the theme is stated, and its brilliant development follows. Alberto systematically stole a series of labels of the same color; from each one he made three small disks (I organized the necessary instrument, a cork borer, in the Laboratory): when two hundred disks were ready, enough for one Block, he went to the *Blockältester* and offered him his *Spezialität* at the

mad price of ten rations of bread, paid in installments. The customer accepted enthusiastically, and Alberto now has at his disposal a marvelous and fashionable article, guaranteed to be accepted in every barrack, one color per barrack (no *Blockältester* wants to be regarded as stingy or reactionary). Even more important, he doesn't have to worry about competitors, as he alone has access to the basic material. Isn't it well thought out?

We talk about these things, stumbling from one puddle to the next, between the black of the sky and the mud of the road. We talk and we walk. I carry our two empty bowls, Alberto the happy weight of the full *menaschka*. Once again the music from the band, the ceremony of *Mützen ab*, caps off smartly in front of the SS; once more *Arbeit Macht Frei*, and the Kapo's announcement: "*Kommando 98, zwei und sechzig Häftlinge, Stärke stimmt*," sixty-two prisoners, number correct. But the column has not broken up, they have made us march as far as Roll Call Square. Is there to be a roll call? It is not a roll call. We have seen the crude glare of the floodlight and the well-known profile of the gallows.

For more than an hour the squads continued to return, wooden clogs clattering harshly on the frozen snow. When all the Kommandos had returned, the band suddenly stopped, and a rasping German voice ordered silence. Another German voice rose up in the sudden quiet, and spoke for a long time angrily into the dark and hostile air. Finally the condemned man was brought out into the blaze of the floodlight.

All this pomp, this ruthless ceremony are not new to us. I have already been present at thirteen public hangings since I entered the camp; but on the other occasions the crimes were ordinary, thefts from the kitchen, sabotage, attempts to escape. Today it is different.

Last month one of the crematoriums at Birkenau was blown up. None of us know (and perhaps no one will ever know) exactly how the exploit was carried out: there was talk of the Sonderkommando, the Special Kommando attached to the gas chambers and the ovens, which is itself periodically exterminated, and which is kept scrupulously segregated from the rest of the camp. The fact remains that at Birkenau a few hundred men, helpless

and exhausted slaves like us, found in themselves the strength to act, to bring to maturity the fruits of their hatred.

The man who is to die in front of us today took part in the revolt in some way. It's said that he had contacts with the rebels of Birkenau, that he carried arms into our camp, that he was plotting a simultaneous mutiny among us. He is to die today before our eyes: and perhaps the Germans will not understand that this solitary death, the death that has been reserved for him as a man, will bring him glory, not infamy.

At the end of the German's speech, which nobody understood, the rasping voice of before again rose up: "*Habt ihr verstanden?*" Did you understand?

Who answered "*Jawohl*"? Everybody and nobody: it was as if our cursed resignation had taken shape by itself, as if it had become a collective voice above our heads. But everybody heard the cry of the doomed man, it pierced the thick, ancient barriers of inertia and submission, it struck the living core of the man in each of us:

"*Kamaraden, ich bin der Letzte!*" (Comrades, I am the last!)

I wish I could say that from among us, an abject flock, a voice had risen, a murmur, a sign of assent. But nothing happened. We remained standing, bent and gray, heads bowed, and we did not uncover them until the German ordered us to do so. The trapdoor opened, the body writhed horribly; the band began playing again, and we, once again in our line, filed past the final tremors of the dying man.

At the foot of the gallows, the SS watch us pass with indifferent eyes: their work is done, and well done. The Russians can come now: there are no more strong men among us, the last one is hanging above our heads, and, as for the others, a few nooses were enough. The Russians can come: they will find only us, the subdued, the lifeless, worthy now of the undefended death that awaits us.

To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it wasn't easy, it wasn't quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze. From our side you have nothing more to fear: no acts of revolt, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment.

Alberto and I went back to the barrack, and we couldn’t look each other in the face. That man must have been tough, he must have been made of another metal than we are, if this condition, which has broken us, could not bend him.

Because we, too, are broken, defeated: even if we have been able to adapt, even if we have at last learned how to find our food and to withstand the exhaustion and the cold, even if we return home.

We have lifted the *menaschka* onto the bunk and divided it, we have satisfied the daily fury of hunger, and now we are oppressed by shame.

The Story of Ten Days

We had been hearing the rumble of the Russian cannons sporadically for months when, on January 11, 1945, I fell ill with scarlet fever and was once more admitted to Ka-Be. *Infektionsabteilung:* that is to say, a small room, which in fact was very clean, with ten bunks on two levels, a wardrobe, three stools, and a commode with a pail for bodily needs. All in a space of three meters by five.

It was difficult to climb up to the upper bunks, for there was no ladder; so when a patient got worse he was transferred to a lower bunk.

When I was admitted, I was the thirteenth. Of the twelve others, four—two French political prisoners and two young Hungarian Jews—had scarlet fever; there were three with diphtheria, two with typhus, and one suffering from a repellent facial erysipelas. The other two had more than one illness and were incredibly emaciated.

I had a high fever. I was lucky enough to have a bunk entirely to myself: I lay down with relief, knowing that I had the right to forty days' isolation and hence rest, and I believed that I was still in good enough shape not to fear either the aftereffects of scarlet fever or the selections.

Thanks to my by now long experience of camp life I had managed to bring with me all my personal belongings: a belt of braided electrical wire, the knife-spoon, a needle with three pieces of thread, five buttons, and, finally, eighteen flints that I had stolen from the Laboratory. By patiently paring with a knife, you could make, from each of these, three smaller flints, just the right gauge for a normal cigarette lighter. They were valued at six or seven rations of bread.

I spent four peaceful days. Outside it was snowing and very cold, but the building was heated. I was given strong doses of sulfa drugs, I suffered from an intense nausea and was hardly able to eat; I had no wish to talk.

The two Frenchmen with scarlet fever were likable. They were country men from the Vosges who had entered the camp only a few days before, with a large convoy of civilians swept up by the Germans in their retreat from Lorraine. The elder one, whose name was Arthur, was a small, thin peasant. The other, his bunk companion, was Charles, a schoolteacher, thirty-two years old; instead of a nightshirt he had been given a summer undershirt, which was ridiculously short.

On the fifth day the barber came. He was a Greek from Salonika: he spoke only the beautiful Spanish of his people, but understood some words of all the languages spoken in the camp. He was called Askenazi and had been in the camp for almost three years. I do not know how he managed to get the post of *Frisör* of Ka-Be: he spoke neither German nor Polish, and he wasn't excessively brutal. Before he entered, I heard him speaking excitedly for a long time in the corridor with a doctor, a compatriot of his. He seemed to have an odd look on his face, but, because the expressions of the Levantines are different from ours, I couldn't tell whether he was frightened or happy or excited. He knew me, or at least he knew that I was Italian.

When it was my turn I climbed laboriously down from the bunk. I asked him in Italian if there was some news: he stopped shaving me, squinted at me in a grave and allusive manner, pointed to the window with his chin, and then made a sweeping gesture with his hand toward the west.

"*Morgen, alle Kamarad weg.*"

He looked at me for a moment with his eyes wide open, as if waiting for a startled reaction, and then added, "*Todos, todos,*" and returned to his work. He knew about my flints and shaved me with a certain gentleness.

The news stirred no immediate emotion in me. For months I had not known pain, joy, or fear, except in that detached and distant manner which is characteristic of the Lager, and which might be described as conditional: if I still had my old sensitivity, I thought, this would be an extremely moving moment.

My ideas were perfectly clear; for a long time now Alberto and I had foreseen the dangers that would accompany the evacuation of the camp and its liberation. In any case, Askenazi's news was merely a confirmation of rumors that had already been circulating for some days: that the Russians

were at Częstochowa, a hundred kilometers to the north; that they were at Zakopane, a hundred kilometers to the south; that at Buna the Germans were already preparing mines for sabotage.

I looked at the faces of my comrades one by one: it was clearly useless to discuss it with any of them. They would have replied, “Well?” and it would all have ended there. The French were different, they were still fresh.

“Did you hear?” I said to them. “Tomorrow the camp is going to be evacuated.”

They overwhelmed me with questions. “Where to? On foot? . . . The sick, too? Those who can’t walk?” They knew that I was an old prisoner and understood German, and they assumed that I knew much more about the matter than I wanted to admit.

I didn’t know anything more: I told them so, but they continued to ask questions. How annoying. But of course they had been in the Lager for only a few weeks and had not yet learned that in the Lager one does not ask questions.

In the afternoon the Greek doctor came. He said that all patients able to walk would be given shoes and clothes and would leave the following day, with the healthy, on a twenty-kilometer march. The others would remain in Ka-Be with caretakers to be chosen from among the less seriously ill patients.

The doctor was unusually cheerful; he seemed drunk. I knew him: he was a cultured, intelligent man, egoistic and calculating. He added that everyone, without distinction, would receive a triple ration of bread, at which the patients visibly brightened. We asked him what would happen to us. He replied that probably the Germans would leave us to our fate: no, he did not think that they would kill us. He made no effort to hide the fact that he thought otherwise; his very cheerfulness was eloquent.

He was already equipped for the march. As soon as he left, the two Hungarian boys began to speak excitedly to each other. They had nearly recovered but were extremely debilitated. It was obvious that they were afraid to stay with the sick and were deciding to leave with the healthy. It was not a question of reasoning: I, too, would probably have followed the

instinct of the herd if I hadn't felt so weak; terror is supremely contagious, and a frightened man's immediate response is to flee.

Outside the barrack the camp sounded unusually agitated. One of the two Hungarians got up, went out, and returned half an hour later with a load of filthy rags. He must have taken them from the warehouse for clothes to be disinfected. He and his comrade dressed feverishly, putting on rag after rag. One could see that they were in a hurry to get the matter over with before the fear itself made them hesitate. It was crazy of them to think of walking even for an hour, weak as they were, especially in the snow, and with those broken-down shoes found at the last minute. I tried to explain this, but they looked at me without answering. Their eyes were like those of frightened animals.

Just for a moment it crossed my mind that they might even be right. They climbed awkwardly out of the window; I saw them, shapeless bundles, lurching into the night. They did not return; I learned much later that, unable to go on, they had been killed by the SS a few hours after the march began.

It was obvious that I, too, needed a pair of shoes. But still it took me perhaps an hour to overcome nausea, fever, and inertia. I found a pair in the corridor. (The healthy prisoners had ransacked the storeroom where patients' shoes were kept and had taken the best ones; the shoddiest, broken and unpaired, were lying all over the place.) Just then I met Kosman, the Alsatian. As a civilian he had been a Reuters correspondent in Clermont-Ferrand; he, too, was excited and euphoric. He said, "If you return before me, write to the mayor of Metz that I'm on the way back."

Kosman was notorious for his acquaintances among the Prominents, so his optimism seemed a good sign and I used it to justify my inertia to myself; I hid the shoes and went back to bed.

Late that night the Greek doctor returned with a knapsack on his back and a balaclava. He threw a French novel onto my bunk. "Keep it, read it, Italian. You can give it back when we meet again." Even today I hate him for those words. He knew that we were doomed.

And then finally Alberto came, defying the prohibition, to say goodbye to me from the window. We had been inseparable: we were "the two Italians" and most of the time our foreign comrades got our names mixed up. For six months we had shared a bunk and every scrap of food "organized" in excess of the ration; but he had had scarlet fever as a child

and I had not been able to infect him. So he left and I remained. We said goodbye; it didn't take many words, we had already said everything countless times. We did not think we would be separated for very long. He had found a pair of sturdy leather shoes in fairly good condition: he was one of those people who immediately find what they need.

He, too, was cheerful and confident, like all those who were leaving. It was understandable: something great and new was about to happen; we could finally feel around us a force that was not Germany's; we could concretely feel that hated world of ours on the verge of collapse. Or at least those who were healthy, and who, though tired and starving, were able to move, could feel this. But, inevitably, one who is too weak, or naked, or barefoot, thinks and feels in a different manner, and what dominated our thoughts was the paralyzing sensation of being utterly helpless, and in the hands of fate.

All the healthy prisoners (except for a few prudent ones, who at the last moment undressed and hid in the hospital bunks) left on the night of January 18, 1945. They must have been about twenty thousand, coming from different camps. Practically every one of them died during the evacuation march: Alberto was among them. One day, perhaps, someone will write their story.

So we remained in our bunks, alone with our illnesses, and with our inertia that was stronger than fear.

In all of Ka-Be we numbered perhaps eight hundred. In our room eleven of us remained, each in his own bunk, except for Charles and Arthur, who slept together. With the rhythm of the great machine of the Lager extinguished, for us began ten days outside the world and time.

JANUARY 18. During the night of the evacuation the camp kitchens had continued to function, and the following morning the last distribution of soup took place in the infirmary. The central-heating plant had been abandoned; in the barrack a little heat lingered, but hour by hour the temperature dropped and it was evident that we would soon suffer from the cold. Outside it must have been at least 20°C below zero; most of the patients had only a nightshirt, and some of them not even that.

Nobody knew what our situation was. Some SS men had remained, some of the guard towers were still occupied.

About midday an SS officer made a tour of the barracks. He appointed a chief in each of them, selecting him from among the remaining non-Jews, and ordered a list of the patients to be made at once, divided into Jews and non-Jews. The matter seemed clear. No one was surprised that the Germans maintained their national love of classification until the very end, nor did any Jew seriously expect to live until the following day.

The two Frenchmen had not understood and were frightened. I reluctantly translated what the SS man had said. I found it irritating that they were afraid: they hadn't yet experienced a month of the Lager, they still hardly suffered from hunger, they were not even Jews, and they were afraid.

There was one more distribution of bread. I spent the afternoon reading the book left by the doctor: it was very interesting and I can remember it with peculiar accuracy. I also made a visit to the neighboring ward in search of blankets; many of the sick had been sent out of there and their blankets were free. I brought back some quite heavy ones.

When Arthur heard that they came from the dysentery ward, he wrinkled his nose: "*Y'avait point besoin de le dire*"; in fact, they were stained. But I thought that in any case, given what awaited us, we might as well sleep warmly covered.

It was soon night, but the electric light was still working. We saw with tranquil fear that an armed SS man was standing in a corner of the barrack. I had no desire to talk and was not afraid, except in that external and conditional manner I have described. I continued reading until late.

There were no clocks, but it must have been about 11 p.m. when all the lights went out, even the searchlights on the guard towers. In the distance photoelectric beams were visible. A cluster of intense lights burst out in the sky, and remained there, motionless, crudely illuminating the terrain. One could hear the roar of the planes.

Then the bombing started. It was nothing new: I climbed down from my bunk, put my bare feet in my shoes, and waited.

It seemed far away, perhaps over Auschwitz.

But then there was an explosion nearby, and, before you could think, a second and a third, loud enough to burst one's eardrums. Windows were breaking, the building shook, the spoon I had stuck in a joint of the wooden wall fell out.

Then it seemed to be over. Cagnolati, a young country boy, also from the Vosges, had apparently never experienced an air raid. He had jumped out of his bed naked and was crouching in a corner, screaming.

After a few minutes it was obvious that the camp had been hit. Two barracks were burning fiercely, two others were destroyed, but they were all empty. Dozens of patients arrived, naked and pitiful, from a barrack threatened by fire: they asked for shelter. Impossible to take them in. They insisted, begging and threatening in many languages. We had to barricade the door. They dragged themselves elsewhere, lit up by the flames, barefoot in the melting snow. Many were trailing bandages. There seemed no danger to our barrack, so long as the wind did not change.

The Germans were not there. The towers were empty.

Today I think that if only because an Auschwitz existed no one in our age should speak of Providence. But in that hour the memory of Biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity undoubtedly passed like a wind through the mind of each one of us.

Sleep was impossible; a window was broken and it was very cold. I was thinking that we should look for a stove to set up, and get coal, wood, and food. I knew that all this was essential, but without some help I would never have had the energy to act. I spoke to the two Frenchmen.

JANUARY 19. The Frenchmen agreed. We got up at dawn, the three of us. I felt ill and helpless, I was cold and afraid.

The other patients looked at us with respectful curiosity: didn’t we know that patients were not allowed to leave Ka-Be? And if the Germans had not all departed? But they said nothing, they were glad that someone was willing to try.

The Frenchmen had no idea of the topography of the Lager, but Charles was courageous and robust, while Arthur was shrewd, and had a peasant’s practical common sense. We went out into the wind of a freezing, foggy day, clumsily wrapped in blankets.

What we saw resembled nothing that I had ever seen or heard described.

The Lager, scarcely dead, was already in a state of decomposition. No more water or electricity: broken windows and doors were banging in the

wind, loose sheets of iron were screeching on the roofs, ashes from the fire drifted high and far. To the work of the bombs was added the work of man: ragged, feeble, skeleton-like, the sick who were able to move dragged themselves in all directions over the frozen ground, like an invasion of worms. They had ransacked the empty barracks in search of food and wood; they had violated with senseless fury the grotesquely adorned rooms of the hated *Blockälteste*, forbidden to the ordinary Häftlinge until the previous day; no longer in control of their bowels, they had fouled everywhere, polluting the precious snow, now the only source of water in the whole camp.

Around the smoking ruins of the burned barracks, groups of the sick lay clinging to the ground, sucking up its last warmth. Others had found potatoes somewhere and were roasting them on the embers of the fire, looking around fiercely. A few had had the strength to light a real fire, and were melting snow over it in makeshift containers.

We headed to the kitchens as fast as we could; but already the potatoes were almost gone. We filled two sacks and left them with Arthur. Among the ruins of the *Prominenzblock* Charles and I finally found what we were searching for: a heavy cast-iron stove, with the flue still usable. Charles hurried over with a wheelbarrow and we loaded it on; he then left to me the task of getting it to our room and ran back to the sacks. There he found Arthur unconscious from the cold. Charles hoisted up both sacks and carried them to safety, then he took care of his friend.

Meanwhile, though I could barely stand, I did my best to maneuver the heavy wheelbarrow. I heard the roar of an engine and an SS man entered the camp on a motorcycle. As always when we saw their hard faces, I felt overwhelmed by terror and hatred. It was too late to disappear, and I did not want to abandon the stove. The rules of the Lager stated that one must stand at attention and uncover one’s head. I had no cap and was encumbered by the blanket. I moved a few steps away from the wheelbarrow and made a sort of awkward bow. The German moved on without seeing me, turned behind a barrack, and went off. Only later did I realize the risk I had run.

I finally reached the entrance of our barrack and unloaded the stove into Charles’s hands. The effort left me gasping for breath; large black spots danced before my eyes.

We had to get it going. The hands of all three of us were paralyzed, and the icy metal stuck to the skin of our fingers, but it was urgent to have the

stove working, so that we could warm ourselves and boil the potatoes. We had found wood and coal, and also embers from the burned barracks.

Once the broken window was repaired and the stove began to spread its heat, something seemed to relax in everyone, and then Towarowski (a Franco-Pole of twenty-three, with typhus) proposed to the others that each of them offer a slice of bread to the three of us who had been working. And so it was agreed.

Only a day before, such an event would have been inconceivable. The law of the Lager said “Eat your own bread, and, if you can, that of your neighbor,” and left no room for gratitude. It really meant that the Lager was dead.

This was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment marked the start of the process by which we who had not died slowly turned from Häftlinge into men again.

Arthur recovered quite well, but from then on he always avoided exposing himself to the cold; he took on the upkeep of the stove, the cooking of the potatoes, the cleaning of the room, and the care of the patients. Charles and I shared the various outside tasks. There was still an hour of light: an expedition yielded us half a liter of spirits and a tin of yeast, thrown away in the snow by someone; we distributed boiled potatoes and a spoonful of yeast per person. I thought vaguely that it might help with the lack of vitamins.

Darkness fell; in the entire camp ours was the only room with a stove, and we were very proud of it. Many of the sick from other wards crowded around the door, but Charles’s imposing stature held them back. Nobody, neither we nor they, considered that the inevitable mixing with our sick would make it extremely dangerous to stay in our room, and that to fall ill of diphtheria in those conditions was more surely fatal than jumping from the fourth floor.

I myself was aware of it, but I didn’t dwell on the idea: for too long I had been accustomed to think of death by illness as a possible event and, in that case, unavoidable, and anyway beyond any possible action on our part. And it didn’t even cross my mind that I could have gone to another room, in another barrack, with less danger of infection. Here was the stove, our achievement, which spread a wonderful warmth; here I had a bed; and, last, by now a tie bound us, the eleven patients of the *Infektionsabteilung*.

Occasionally we heard the thunder of artillery, near and far, and at intervals the crackle of automatic rifles. In the darkness, broken only by the glow of the embers, Charles, Arthur, and I sat smoking cigarettes made of herbs we had found in the kitchen, and spoke of many things, both past and future. In the middle of this endless plain, frozen and overrun by war, in the small dark room teeming with germs, we felt at peace with ourselves and with the world. We were utterly exhausted, but it seemed to us that, after so long a time, we had finally accomplished something useful—perhaps like God after the first day of creation.

JANUARY 20. Dawn came, and it was my turn to light the stove. Along with a general feeling of weakness, my aching joints reminded me at every moment that the scarlet fever was far from over. The thought of having to plunge into the freezing air to find a light in the other barracks made me shudder with disgust.

I remembered the flints: I trickled some spirits on a piece of paper and from a flint patiently scraped a small pile of black dust onto it, then scraped the flint more vigorously with my knife. And there it was: after a few sparks, the pile caught fire and from the paper rose the thin pale flame of the alcohol.

Arthur climbed down from his bed enthusiastically and heated three potatoes per person from those boiled the day before; afterward, Charles and I, hungry and shivering violently, left again to explore the ruins of the camp.

We had enough food (that is, potatoes) for two days only; as for water, we were forced to melt the snow, a torturous operation in the absence of large containers, and yielding a blackish, muddy liquid that had to be filtered.

The camp was silent. Other starving specters wandered around like us, exploring: beards unkempt, eyes hollow, limbs skeletal and yellowish in tattered garments. Unsteady on their legs, they went in and out of the empty barracks, carrying off the most varied objects: axes, buckets, ladles, nails. Anything might be of use, and the more far-seeing were already thinking of profitable trade with the Poles of the surrounding countryside.

In the kitchen two men were scuffling over the last few dozen putrid potatoes. They had grabbed each other by their ragged shirts, and were

fighting with curiously slow and uncertain movements, abusing each other in Yiddish between their frozen lips.

In the courtyard of the warehouse there were two large piles of cabbages and turnips (large, tasteless turnips, the basis of our diet). They were so frozen that they could be separated only with a pickax. Charles and I took turns, using all our strength with each stroke, and we got out about fifty kilos. There was still more: Charles discovered a packet of salt and ("*Une fameuse trouvaille!*") a barrel of water, perhaps fifty liters, frozen into a huge block.

We loaded everything onto a small cart (the carts had been used to distribute the rations to the barracks; there were a great number of them abandoned everywhere), and we turned back, pushing it laboriously over the snow.

That day we contented ourselves again with boiled potatoes and slices of turnip roasted on the stove, but Arthur promised important innovations for the following day.

In the afternoon I went to the former clinic, searching for anything that might be useful. Others had preceded me: everything had been smashed by inexpert looters. Not a bottle intact, on the floor a layer of rags, excrement, and bandages, a naked, contorted corpse. But here was something that had escaped my predecessors: a truck battery. I touched the poles with a knife—a small spark. It was charged.

That evening our room had light.

From my bed, I could see a long stretch of the road through the window: for three days now the Wehrmacht, in flight, had been passing by in waves. Armored cars, Tiger tanks camouflaged in white, Germans on horseback, Germans on bicycles, Germans on foot, armed and unarmed. During the night, long before the tanks came into view, the grinding of their tracks could be heard.

Charles asked, "*Ça roule encore?*"

"*Ça roule toujours.*"

It seemed as if it would never end.

JANUARY 21. But it did end. At dawn on the 21st we saw the plain deserted and lifeless, white as far as the eye could see under the flight of the crows, deathly sad.

I would almost have preferred to see something moving again. Even the Polish civilians had disappeared, hiding who knows where. The wind, too, seemed to have stopped. I wanted only one thing: to stay in bed under my blankets and give in to the complete exhaustion of muscles, nerves, and will; waiting, indifferent as a dead man, for it to end or not to end.

But Charles had already lit the stove, the man Charles, our active, trusting friend, and he called me to work:

"*Vas-y, Primo, descends-toi de là-haut; il y a Jules à attraper par les oreilles . . .*"

"Jules" was the chamber pot, which every morning had to be grabbed by the handles, carried outside, and emptied into the cesspool; this was the first task of the day, and if you remember that it wasn't possible to wash your hands, and that three of us were ill with typhus, you can understand that it was not a pleasant job.

We had to get the cabbages and turnips under way. While I went to search for wood and Charles collected snow to melt, Arthur mobilized the patients who could sit up to help with the peeling. Towarowski, Sertelet, Alcalai, and Schenck answered the call.

Sertelet was also a peasant from the Vosges, twenty years old; he seemed in good shape, but as the days passed his voice took on an increasingly sinister nasal timbre, reminding us that diphtheria seldom forgives.

Alcalai was a Jewish glazier from Toulouse; he was quiet and sensible, and suffered from erysipelas on his face.

Schenck was a Slovak merchant, Jewish: convalescing from typhus, he had a formidable appetite. Likewise Towarowski, the Franco-Polish Jew, who was stupid and talkative, but useful to our community because of his expansive optimism.

So while the sick men worked with their knives, each one seated on his bunk, Charles and I devoted ourselves to finding a suitable site for the kitchen operations.

An indescribable filth had invaded every part of the camp. All the latrines were overflowing, since, naturally, nobody cared anymore about their upkeep, and the dysentery patients (more than a hundred) had fouled

every corner of Ka-Be, filling all the buckets, all the vats formerly used for the rations, all the pots. You couldn't take a step without watching your feet; in the dark it was impossible to get around. Although we suffered from the cold, which remained acute, we thought with horror of what would happen if there was a thaw: infections would spread unchecked, the stench would be suffocating, and, besides, once the snow melted we would be left definitively without water.

After a long search, we finally found a small area of floor that wasn't excessively soiled in a place formerly used as a washhouse. We got a good fire going, then, to save time and complications, we disinfected our hands, rubbing them with chloramine mixed with snow.

The news that soup was cooking spread rapidly through the crowd of the semi-living; a throng of starving faces gathered at the door. Charles, with ladle uplifted, made a short, vigorous speech, which, although it was in French, needed no translation.

The majority dispersed, but one man came forward. He was a Parisian, a tailor for the fashionable (he said), suffering from tuberculosis. In exchange for a liter of soup he offered to make us clothes from the many blankets still to be found in the camp.

Maxime proved to be really skillful. The following day Charles and I were in possession of jacket, trousers, and gloves of a rough, strikingly colored fabric.

In the evening, after our first soup, enthusiastically distributed and greedily devoured, the great silence of the plain was broken. From our bunks, too tired to be really worried, we listened to the bursts from mysterious artillery, which appeared to be positioned on all points of the horizon, and to the whistle of the shells over our heads.

I was thinking that life outside was beautiful and would be beautiful again, and that it would be truly a pity to let ourselves be submerged now. I woke up the sick men who were dozing and when I was sure that they were all listening I told them, first in French and then in my best German, that they should all now think about returning home, and that, as far as it depended on us, certain things had to be done and others avoided. Each of us should carefully look after his own bowl and spoon; no one should offer to others any soup that he might have left over; no one should get out of bed except to go to the latrine; anyone who was in need of anything should turn only to us three. Arthur in particular was responsible for supervising

discipline and hygiene, and should remember that it was better to leave bowls and spoons dirty rather than wash them, with the danger of mixing up those of a diphtheria patient with those of someone suffering from typhus.

I had the impression that by now the sick men were too indifferent to everything to pay attention to what I had said; but I had great faith in Arthur's diligence.

JANUARY 22. If it is courageous to face grave danger with a light heart, Charles and I were courageous that morning. We extended our explorations to the SS camp, immediately outside the electric fence.

The camp guards must have left in a great hurry. On the tables we found plates half full of a by now frozen soup, which we devoured with intense pleasure; mugs of beer, transformed into a yellowish ice; a chessboard with an unfinished game. In the dormitories there were a lot of valuable things.

We loaded ourselves up with a bottle of vodka, various medicines, newspapers and magazines, and four excellent quilts, one of which is in my house in Turin today. Cheerful and heedless, we carried the fruits of our expedition back to the room, leaving them in Arthur's care. Only that evening did we learn what happened perhaps half an hour later.

Some SS men, perhaps lost, but armed, entered the abandoned camp. They found that eighteen Frenchmen had settled in the Waffen SS dining hall. They killed them all methodically, with a shot to the back of the neck, and lined up the contorted bodies in the snow on the road; then they left. The eighteen corpses lay exposed until the arrival of the Russians; nobody had the strength to bury them.

In any case, by now in all the barracks there were beds occupied by corpses, as stiff as boards, whom nobody troubled to remove. The ground was too frozen for graves to be dug; bodies were piled in a trench, but already in the first days the pile had grown higher than the pit and was obscenely visible from our window.

Only a wooden wall separated us from the ward of the dysentery patients, where many were dying and many were dead. The floor was covered by a layer of frozen excrement. None of the sick men had strength enough to come out from under their blankets to search for food, and those who had done so earlier had not returned to help their comrades. In one bed, next to the partition, clinging to each other to better withstand the cold, there were two Italians. I often heard them talking, but, since I was

speaking only French, for a long time they were not aware of my presence. That day by chance they heard my name, pronounced by Charles with an Italian accent, and from then on they never ceased groaning and pleading.

Naturally I would have liked to help them, given the means and the strength, if for no other reason than to stop their obsessive howls. In the evening, when all the work was done, I overcame fatigue and disgust, and dragged myself to their ward, groping my way along the dark, filthy corridor, with a bowl of water and the remainder of the day's soup. The result was that from then on, through the thin wall, the whole diarrhea ward called my name, day and night, in the accents of all the languages of Europe, accompanied by incomprehensible prayers, yet I could bring them no relief. I felt close to tears, I could have cursed them.

The night held ugly surprises.

Lakmaker, in the bunk under mine, was a poor human wreck. He was (or had been) a Dutch Jew, seventeen years old, tall, thin, and meek. He had been in bed for three months; I have no idea how he had escaped the selections. He had had typhus and scarlet fever successively; at the same time a serious heart defect had manifested itself and he was crusted with bedsores, so that by now he could lie only on his stomach. Nevertheless, he had a ferocious appetite. He spoke only Dutch, and none of us could understand him.

Perhaps the cause of it all was the cabbage and turnip soup: Lakmaker had wanted two helpings. In the middle of the night he groaned and then threw himself out of his bed. He tried to reach the latrine, but he was too weak and fell to the floor, weeping and shouting loudly.

Charles lit the lamp (the battery turned out to be providential), and we were able to assess the seriousness of the accident. The boy's bed and the floor were filthy. The smell in the small area was rapidly becoming intolerable. We had only a minimal supply of water and neither blankets nor straw mattresses to spare. And the poor wretch, suffering from typhus, was a terrible source of infection, and he certainly couldn't be left all night in that muck, groaning and shivering with cold.

Charles climbed down from his bed and dressed in silence. While I held the lamp, he cut all the dirty patches from the straw mattress and the blankets with a knife. He lifted Lakmaker from the ground with the tenderness of a mother, cleaned him as well as possible with straw taken from the mattress, and lifted him into the remade bed in the only position in

which the unfortunate boy could lie. He scraped the floor with a scrap piece of metal, diluted a little chloramine, and finally sprinkled disinfectant over everything, including himself.

I measured his self-sacrifice by the weariness I would have had to overcome in myself to do what he had done.

JANUARY 23. Our potatoes were gone. For days the rumor had circulated through all the barracks that an enormous pit of potatoes lay somewhere outside the barbed wire, not far from the camp.

Unknown pioneers must have carried out patient explorations, or else someone knew precisely where the place was. In fact, by the morning of the 23rd a section of the barbed wire had been beaten down and a double procession of miserable wretches went in and out through the opening.

Charles and I departed, into the wind of the leaden plain. We were beyond the broken barrier.

"*Dis donc, Primo, on est dehors!*"

It was true; for the first time since the day of my arrest I found myself free, without armed guards, without fences between me and my home.

Perhaps four hundred meters from the camp were the potatoes—a treasure. Two extremely long trenches, full of potatoes and covered by alternate layers of soil and straw to keep them from freezing. No one would die of hunger anymore.

But getting them out was by no means easy work. Because of the cold, the surface of the earth was as hard as iron. Strenuous work with a pickax made it possible to break the crust and lay bare the store; but the majority preferred to climb into holes abandoned by others and continue to dig them deeper, handing the potatoes to their companions standing outside.

An old Hungarian had been surprised there by death. He lay frozen in the posture of a starving man: head and shoulders under a pile of earth, belly in the snow, hands outstretched toward the potatoes. Somebody who came later moved the body about a meter, unblocking the hole, and continued the work.

From then on our food improved. Besides boiled potatoes and potato soup, we offered our patients potato pancakes, from Arthur's recipe: rub together raw potatoes with boiled, soft ones, and roast the mixture on a red-hot iron plate. They tasted of soot.

But Sertelet, steadily getting worse, was unable to enjoy them. Besides speaking in an ever more nasal tone, that day he was unable to force down any food; his throat had somehow closed up, and every mouthful threatened to suffocate him.

I went to look for a Hungarian doctor who had been left as a patient in the barracks opposite. When he heard talk of diphtheria he pulled back and ordered me to leave.

For pure propaganda purposes I gave everyone nose drops of camphorated oil. I assured Sertelet that they would bring him some relief; I even tried to convince myself.

JANUARY 24. Liberty. The breach in the barbed wire gave us its concrete image. If you thought about it carefully, it signified no more Germans, no more selections, no work, no beatings, no roll calls, and perhaps, later, return home.

But it took an effort to convince ourselves, and no one had time to enjoy the thought. All around lay destruction and death.

The pile of corpses in front of our window had by now overflowed the pit. Despite the potatoes, everyone was extremely weak: in the camp none of the sick got better, while many became ill with pneumonia and diarrhea. Those who were unable to move, or lacked the energy to do so, lay lethargic in their bunks, stiff with cold, and nobody noticed when they died.

The others were all incredibly tired: after months and years of the Lager a man needed more than potatoes to regain his strength. When, with the cooking done, Charles and I had dragged the twenty-five liters of the daily soup from the washhouse to our room, we threw ourselves panting on our bunks, while the meticulous, domestic-minded Arthur divided the soup, taking care to save the three rations of *rabiot pour les travailleurs* and a little from the bottom of the pot *pour les italiens d'à côté*.

In the second room of the Infectious Disease ward, also next to ours, and occupied mainly by tuberculosis patients, the situation was quite different. All those who were physically able to had gone to settle in other barracks. Their weaker and more seriously ill comrades died, one by one, in solitude.

I went there one morning to try and borrow a needle. A sick man was gasping for breath in one of the upper bunks. He heard me, raised himself to sitting, then fell, dangling headfirst over the edge toward me, with his chest

and arms stiff and his eyes white. The man in the bunk below automatically reached his arms up to support the body and then realized that he was dead. He slowly withdrew from under the weight, and the other slid to the floor and remained there. Nobody knew his name.

But in Barrack 14 something new had happened. It was occupied by patients recovering from operations, some of them in fairly good condition. They organized an expedition to the English prisoner-of-war camp, which it was assumed had been evacuated. It was a fruitful undertaking. They returned dressed in khaki, with a cart full of wonders never seen before: margarine, custard powder, lard, soybean flour, brandy.

That night there was singing in Barrack 14.

None of us felt strong enough to walk the two kilometers to the English camp and return with a load. But indirectly the successful expedition proved advantageous to many. The unequal distribution of goods caused industry and commerce to flourish once more. In our small room, with its lethal atmosphere, we started a candle factory: the candles, poured into cardboard molds, had wicks soaked in boric acid. The wealthy occupants of Barrack 14 bought up our entire production, paying us in lard and flour.

I myself had found the block of beeswax in the *Elektromagazin*; I remember the look of disappointment among those who saw me carry it away and the dialogue that followed:

"What do you intend to do with that?"

It was inadvisable to reveal a trade secret. I heard myself replying with the words I had often heard spoken by the old inmates of the camp, expressing their favorite boast: that they were "good prisoners," adaptable types, who always managed to get by—"*Ich verstehe verschiedene Sachen*. . . ." I can do a lot of different things. . . .

JANUARY 25. It was Sómogyi's turn. He was a Hungarian chemist, about fifty years old, thin, tall, and taciturn. Like the Dutchman, he was recovering from typhus and scarlet fever. But something new occurred: he was running a high fever. He had not spoken for perhaps five days. That day he opened his mouth and said in a firm voice:

"I have a ration of bread under the mattress. Divide it among the three of you. I won't be eating anymore."

We couldn't find anything to say, but for the time being we didn't touch the bread. Half his face was swollen. As long as he remained conscious, he

was closed in a bitter silence.

But in the evening, and for the whole night, and for two days, without interruption, the silence was broken by his delirium. Following a last, interminable dream of submission and slavery, he began to murmur "*Jawohl*" with every breath, regularly and continuously like a machine, "*Jawohl*," every time his poor rib cage subsided, thousands of times, so that you wanted to shake him, suffocate him, or at least make him change the word.

I never understood so clearly as at that moment how laborious is the death of a man.

Outside there was still the vast silence. The number of crows had increased considerably and everyone knew why. Only at long intervals did the dialogue of the artillery reawaken.

We all said to one another that the Russians would arrive soon, at once; we all proclaimed it, we were all sure of it, but at bottom nobody really believed it. Because in the Lager one loses the habit of hope, and even of faith in one's own reasoning. It is useless to think in the Lager, because events happen for the most part in an unpredictable manner; and it is harmful, because it keeps alive a sensitivity that is a source of pain, and which some providential natural law dulls when suffering passes a certain limit.

As one tires of joy, fear, and pain itself, so, too, one can tire of waiting. By January 25, eight days after breaking our ties with that ferocious world which nonetheless was a world, most of us were too exhausted even to wait.

In the evening, around the stove, Charles, Arthur, and I felt ourselves become men again. We could speak of everything. I was fascinated by Arthur's account of how Sundays were spent in Provenchères, in the Vosges, and Charles almost cried when I told him the story of the armistice in Italy, of the grim and desperate beginning of the partisan Resistance, of the man who betrayed us and our capture in the mountains.

In the darkness, behind and above us, the eight invalids did not miss a syllable, even those who did not understand French. Only Sómogyi implacably confirmed his dedication to death.

JANUARY 26. We were lying in a world of dead men and phantoms. The last trace of civilization had vanished around and inside us. The work of

bestial degradation, begun by the Germans in triumph, had been brought to its conclusion by the Germans in defeat.

It is man who kills, man who creates or suffers injustice; he who shares his bed with a corpse, having lost all restraint, is not a man. He who has waited for his neighbor to die in order to take his piece of bread is, albeit blameless, farther from the model of thinking man than the most primitive pygmy or the most vicious sadist.

Part of our existence lies in the feelings of those near us. This is why the experience of someone who has lived for days during which man was merely a thing in the eyes of man is non-human. We three were for the most part immune, and for this we owe one another gratitude; it is why my friendship with Charles will endure.

But thousands of meters above us, in the gaps between the gray clouds, the complicated miracles of aerial duels were unfolding. Above us, exposed, helpless, and unarmed, men of our time sought mutual death with the most refined of instruments. One movement of a finger could cause the destruction of the entire camp, could annihilate thousands of men; while the sum total of all our efforts and exertions would not be sufficient to prolong by a minute the life of a single one of us.

The saraband stopped at night and the room was once again filled with Sómogyi's monologue.

In utter darkness I woke with a start. *"L' pauv' vieux"* was silent; he had finished. With the last gasp of life, he had fallen to the floor from his bunk: I heard the thud of his knees, of his hips, of his shoulders, of his head.

"*La mort l'a chassé de son lit*," Arthur described it.

We certainly could not carry him out during the night. There was nothing to do but go back to sleep.

JANUARY 27. Dawn. On the floor, the shameful disorder of skin and bones, the Sómogyi thing.

There are more urgent tasks: we cannot wash, we cannot touch him until we have cooked and eaten. And, besides, "*. . . rien de si dégoutant que les débordements,*" Charles said justly; the latrine had to be emptied. The living are more demanding; the dead can wait. We began to work as we did every day.

The Russians arrived as Charles and I were carrying Sómogyi a little distance outside. He was very light. We overturned the stretcher onto the

gray snow.

Charles took off his cap. I was sorry that I didn’t have a cap.

Of the eleven men in the *Infektionsabteilung*, Sómogyi was the only one to die in the ten days. Sertelet, Cagnolati, Towarowski, Lakmaker, and Dorget (I have not spoken of him until now; he was a French industrialist who, after an operation for peritonitis, fell ill of nasal diphtheria) died some weeks later in the temporary Russian hospital in Auschwitz. In April, at Katowice, I met Schenck and Alcalai in good health. Arthur has happily rejoined his family and Charles has returned to his profession as a teacher; we have exchanged long letters and I hope to see him again one day.

Avigliana–Turin, December 1945–January 1947

Appendix

I wrote this appendix in 1976 for the school edition of If This Is a Man, *in order to answer the questions that were repeatedly addressed to me by student readers. Yet since they coincide substantially with the questions I get from adult readers, it seemed to me fitting to incorporate my answers into this edition as well.*

Someone wrote long ago that books, like human beings, have a fate of their own, unpredictable, different from what was wished for or expected. This book, too, has had a strange fate. It was born long ago: its birth certificate can be found on one of its pages (page 135), where you read that I "write what I could never tell anyone." The need to tell was so strong in us that I began to write the book there, in that German laboratory permeated by cold, war, and prying glances, although I knew that under no circumstances would I be able to keep those notes, scribbled any way I could—that I would have to throw them away immediately, because if they were found on me they would cost me my life.

But I wrote the book as soon as I returned, in a few months: the memories were burning inside me. The manuscript, rejected by some of the big publishers, was accepted in 1947 by a small publishing house run by Franco Antonicelli; 2500 copies were printed. Then the publishing house closed, and the book fell into oblivion, partly because, in that harsh period after the war, people had little desire to return in memory to the years of suffering they had just endured. The book finally found new life in 1958, when it was reprinted by Einaudi, and since then the interest of the public has not wavered. The book has been translated into six languages, and adapted for the radio and the theater.

It has been greeted by students and teachers with an enthusiasm that has far surpassed my expectations and those of the publisher. Hundreds of students, from all over Italy, have asked me to comment on the book, in

writing or, if possible, in person. Within the limits of my other duties, I have satisfied these requests, willingly adding to my two jobs a third, that of introducing and commenting on myself, or, rather, that distant self who lived through the experience of Auschwitz and wrote about it. In the course of these numerous encounters with student readers, I've had to answer many questions: naïve or knowing, emotional or provocative, superficial or profound. I soon realized that some of these questions recurred repeatedly —that they never failed to come up. And so they must originate in a justified and reasonable curiosity, which in some way the book didn't satisfy. I propose to answer these questions here.

1. In your book there are no expressions of hatred or bitterness toward the Germans, or a desire for revenge. Have you forgiven them?

I am not by nature a person easily roused to hatred. I consider it a crude and brutish feeling, and I prefer my actions and thoughts, as far as possible, to be based, instead, on reason. And so I've never cultivated hatred in myself as a primitive desire for revenge, for suffering inflicted on a real or presumed enemy, or for a private vendetta. I should add that, as far as I can see, hatred is personal, directed toward a person, a name, or a face, whereas our persecutors at the time had neither face nor name, as you can understand from these pages: they were remote, invisible, inaccessible. Wisely, the Nazi system ensured that direct contacts between slaves and masters were reduced to a minimum. You will have noticed that in this book only a single encounter between the author-protagonist and an SS officer is described, and, not coincidentally, it takes place in the final days of the Lager, as it was collapsing, when the system had broken down.

Furthermore, in the months when this book was written—that is, in 1946—Nazism and fascism seemed truly faceless: they seemed to have returned to nothing, vanished like a monstrous dream, justly and deservedly, as ghosts disappear at the crowing of the cock. How could I harbor bitterness, or desire revenge, against a crowd of ghosts?

Not many years later, Italy and the rest of Europe realized that that was an ingenuous illusion: fascism was far from dead; it was only hidden, encysted. It was molting, and would reappear in a new guise, a little less recognizable, a little more respectable, more suited to the new world that had emerged from the catastrophe of the Second World War, which fascism

itself had brought on. I have to confess that, confronted by certain familiar faces, certain old lies, certain figures in search of respectability, a certain tolerance, a certain complicity, I feel a temptation to hatred, and with some violence. But I am not a Fascist; I believe in reason and discussion as supreme tools of progress, and so I place justice before hatred. For that very reason, in writing this book, I deliberately assumed the calm and sober language of the witness, not the lament of the victim or the anger of the avenger: I thought that my word would be more credible and useful the more objective it appeared and the less impassioned it sounded; only in that way does the witness in court fulfill his function, which is to prepare the ground for the judge. It is you who are the judges.

I would not, however, want my refraining from explicit judgment to be confused with an indiscriminate forgiveness. No, I have forgiven none of the guilty, nor am I disposed now or in the future to forgive any of them, unless they can demonstrate (in deeds: not in words, and not too late) that they are aware of the crimes and errors of fascism, ours and other nations', and are determined to condemn them, to uproot them from their own conscience and that of others. In that case, yes, I, though not a Christian, am willing to follow the Jewish and Christian commandment to forgive my enemy; but an enemy who repents has ceased to be an enemy.

2. Did the Germans know? Did the Allies know? How could the genocide, the extermination of millions of human beings, have taken place in the heart of Europe without anyone knowing anything?

The world in which we in the West live today displays many serious flaws and dangers, but compared with the world of yesterday it enjoys a huge advantage: everyone can immediately know everything about everything. Information today is the "fourth estate": in theory, at least, the reporter and the journalist have a clear path everywhere; no one can stop them or remove them or silence them. It's easy: if you want, you listen to the radio of your country or any other country; you go to the newsstand and choose the newspaper you prefer, an Italian paper of any political stripe, or American, or Soviet, within a vast array of alternatives; you buy and read the books you want, without risk of being charged with "anti-Italian activities" or having your house searched by the political police. Of course

it’s not easy to avoid *all* biases, but at least you can choose the type of bias that you prefer.

Things are different in an authoritarian state. There is a single Truth, proclaimed from on high; all the newspapers are the same, and all repeat that same unique truth. So, too, do the radio broadcasts, and you can’t listen to those of other countries, because in the first place it’s a crime, and you risk ending up in prison, and, in the second place, your country’s transmitters emit on the appropriate wavelengths a signal that jams foreign broadcasts so that they can’t be heard. As for books, only those approved of by the State are translated and published; for others, you have to look abroad, and introduce them to your country at your own risk, because they’re considered more dangerous than drugs or explosives. If you’re found with them at the border, they are confiscated and you are punished. Books of earlier periods that are not approved or are no longer approved are publicly burned in the town squares. So it was in Italy between 1924 and 1945, and in Nazi Germany; so it is still in many countries, among which it grieves me to have to include the Soviet Union, though it fought heroically against fascism. In an authoritarian state it is considered permissible to alter the truth, to rewrite history after the fact, and to distort the news, suppressing truths and adding falsehoods—information is replaced by propaganda. In fact, in such a country you are not a citizen, who holds rights, but, rather, a subject, and as such you owe the State (and the dictator who embodies it) fanatic loyalty and servile obedience.

It’s clear that in these conditions it becomes possible (if not always easy: it’s never easy to violate the core of a human being) to erase even large fragments of reality. In Fascist Italy the assassination of the Socialist deputy Matteotti[1] was carried out successfully and, after a few months, successfully hushed up; and Hitler and his minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, showed themselves far superior to Mussolini in this work of controlling and hiding the truth.

Yet it wasn’t possible to conceal the existence of the enormous system of concentration camps from the German people, nor was it in fact (from the Nazi point of view) desirable. Creating and maintaining an atmosphere of undefined terror was part of Nazism’s goal: it was useful for people to know that opposing Hitler was extremely dangerous. In fact, hundreds of thousands of Germans were imprisoned in the Lagers from the first months of Nazism—Communists, Social Democrats, liberals, Jews, Protestants, and

Catholics—and the whole country knew it, and knew that in the Lager people suffered and died.

Nevertheless, it's true that the great mass of Germans didn't always know the more atrocious details of what happened later in the camps: the methodical, industrialized extermination on the scale of millions, the toxic gas chambers, the vile exploitation of the corpses—all that was not meant to be known, and few did know, until the end of the war. Among the precautions taken to maintain secrecy was the use of cautious, cynical euphemisms in the language of officialdom: not "extermination" but "final solution," not "deportation" but "transfer," not "killing by gas" but "special treatment," and so on. Hitler rightly feared that this appalling information, if it was known, would compromise the nation's blind faith in him and the morale of the fighting troops. Furthermore, the Allies would find out and use it as propaganda; this happened, but the horrors of the Lagers, which were described many times by Allied radio broadcasts, were not generally believed, because of their very enormity.

The most convincing summary of the German situation at the time that I've found is in the book *Der SS Staat* (*The Theory and Practice of Hell)*, by Eugen Kogon, a political prisoner at Buchenwald who became a professor of political science at the University of Munich:

> What did the Germans know about the concentration camps? Beyond the fact of their existence, almost nothing, and even today they know little. Without a doubt, the method of keeping the details of the terrorist system secret, thus making the horror vague, and therefore more profound, turned out to be effective. As I've said elsewhere, even many officials of the Gestapo didn't know what happened in the Lagers to which they sent their prisoners; the majority of the prisoners themselves had a very imprecise idea of the functioning of their camp and the methods that were employed. How could the German people have known? Those who entered the camps found themselves faced with an unfathomable universe, totally new to them: this is the best demonstration of the power and effectiveness of the secrecy.
>
> And yet . . . and yet, there was not a German who did not know of the existence of the camps, or who considered them sanatoriums. There were few Germans who did not have a relative or acquaintance in the camps, or who didn't at least know that this one and that one had been sent there. All the Germans had witnessed anti-Semitic barbarities: millions of them had watched with indifference, or with curiosity, or with scorn, or maybe with malicious pleasure, the burning of the synagogues or the humiliation of Jews forced to kneel in the mud on the streets. Many Germans had learned something from foreign radio broadcasts, and many had come in contact with prisoners working outside the Lagers. Not a few Germans had, on the streets or in the train stations, run into wretched groups of detainees: in a circular dated November 9, 1941, and addressed by the chief of police and the security services to all . . . police officers and commanders of the Lagers we read: "In particular, it must be stated that during the transfers on foot, for example from the station to

> the camp, a not negligible number of prisoners fall down dead or faint from exhaustion. . . . It's impossible to prevent the population from knowing about such events." Nor could a German not know that the prisons were overflowing, and that executions were constantly taking place throughout the country; the judges and police officials, the lawyers, priests, and social workers who knew generally that the situation was very serious numbered in the thousands. Many businessmen had supplier relationships with the SS in the Lagers, many industrialists who wished to hire slave workers applied to the administrative and economic officials of the SS, and many employees of the hiring office . . . were aware of the fact that numerous big companies were using the slave workforce. Not a few workers were engaged in activities near the concentration camps or even inside them. Various university professors collaborated with Himmler's medical research institutes, and various state doctors and doctors in private institutes collaborated with professional murderers. Many members of the air force had been transferred to the employment of the SS, and they, too, must have been aware of what happened there. Many high Army officers knew of the mass slaughter of Russian prisoners of war in the Lagers, and many soldiers and members of the military police must have known precisely what frightful horrors were committed in the camps, in the ghettoes, in the cities and countryside of the occupied Eastern territories. Is it possible that any one of these statements is false?

In my opinion, none of those statements are false, but another should be added to complete the picture: in spite of the various possible ways of getting information, the majority of the Germans didn't know because they didn't want to know; rather, they wanted to not know. It's certainly true that state terrorism is a very strong weapon, and hard to defend against; but it's also true that the German people, as a whole, didn't even try. In Hitler's Germany a particular code of behavior was widespread: those who knew didn't speak, those who didn't know didn't ask questions, those who asked questions didn't get answers. In this way the typical German citizen acquired and protected his ignorance, which seemed to him a sufficient justification for his adherence to Nazism: closing his mouth, his eyes, and his ears, he constructed the illusion of not knowing, and thus of not being complicit in, what was happening on his doorstep.

To know and to make known would have been a way (essentially not so dangerous) of distancing oneself from Nazism; I think that the German people, as a whole, did not resort to it, and of this deliberate omission I consider them fully guilty.

3. Were there prisoners who escaped from the camps? Why were there no mass revolts?

These are among the questions that are most frequently asked, and so they must originate in some particularly urgent curiosity or need. My

interpretation is optimistic: for the young people of today freedom is a right that cannot *under any circumstances* be relinquished, and so for them the idea of prison is immediately linked to the idea of escape or revolt. It's true that under the military codes of many countries the prisoner of war is bound to try to get free however he can, in order to return to his post as a fighter, and that under the Hague Convention an escape attempt is not supposed to be punished. The theme of escape as a moral obligation is a constant in romantic literature (remember the Count of Monte Cristo?), in popular literature, and in movies, in which the hero, unjustly (or perhaps justly) incarcerated, always tries to escape, even in the most unlikely circumstances, and his attempt is invariably crowned with success.

Perhaps it's good that the condition of the prisoner, non-freedom, is felt as unjust, abnormal: as an illness, in other words, that must be cured by escape or rebellion. But, unfortunately, this picture bears very little resemblance to the reality of the concentration camps.

The number of prisoners who tried to escape, for example from Auschwitz, was a few hundred, and those who succeeded a few dozen. Escape was difficult and extremely dangerous: the prisoners were weakened, as well as demoralized, by hunger and ill treatment; their heads were shaved; they wore striped clothing that was immediately recognizable and wooden shoes that hindered rapid and silent movement; they had no money and, in general, didn't speak Polish, the local language; they had no contacts in the area, and, besides, its geography was unfamiliar. Moreover, to deter escape attempts, fierce reprisals were instituted: anyone who was recaptured was hanged publicly in Roll Call Square, often after being brutally tortured. When an escape was discovered, the friends of the escapee were considered his accomplices and were starved to death in prison cells; the entire barrack was forced to stand for twenty-four hours; and sometimes the parents of the "guilty" person were arrested and deported to the Lager.

SS soldiers who killed a prisoner in the course of an escape attempt were given a special leave, and so it often happened that an SS soldier shot at a prisoner who had no intention of escaping, just for the purpose of getting the leave. This fact artificially increased the official number of cases of escape recorded; as I mentioned, the real number was very small. Given the situation, only a few "Aryan" (that is, non-Jewish, in the terminology of the time) Polish prisoners managed to escape successfully—prisoners who

didn’t live far from the Lager, and who therefore had a place to go and the assurance that they would be protected by the population. In the other camps the situation was analogous.

As for the absence of rebellion, here the matter is somewhat different. First of all, we should recall that in some camps uprisings did take place: in Treblinka, in Sobibór, and even in Birkenau, one of the subcamps of Auschwitz. They did not have much numerical weight: like the analogous Warsaw Ghetto uprising, they represent, rather, examples of extraordinary moral force. In all instances, they were planned and led by prisoners who were in some sense privileged, and so in better physical and spiritual condition than the ordinary prisoners. This should not be surprising: only at first glance does it seem paradoxical that the ones who revolt are those who suffer least. Even outside the Lager, uprisings are rarely led by the subproletariat. The “ragged” do not rebel.

In the camps for political prisoners, or where the politicals predominated, their experience of conspiracy proved valuable and often led, rather than to open revolts, to fairly effective activities of resistance. Depending on the camp and the time, the prisoners managed, for example, to blackmail or corrupt SS officials, curbing their indiscriminate powers; sabotage the work for the German war industries; organize escapes; communicate with the Allies by radio, providing news of the atrocious conditions in the camps; improve the treatment of the sick, replacing SS doctors with prisoner-doctors; “guide” the selections, sending spies or traitors to their death and saving prisoners whose survival had for some reason particular importance; and prepare to resist, militarily as well, in case, with the approach of the front, the Nazis decided (as in fact they often did decide) to totally liquidate the Lagers.

In the camps that were predominantly Jewish, like the ones in the Auschwitz zone, any sort of resistance, active or passive, was particularly difficult. Here the prisoners, in general, were without any organizational or military experience; they came from all the countries of Europe and spoke different languages, and so didn’t understand one another; above all, they were more starving, weaker, and more exhausted than the others, because their conditions of life were harsher, and because often they had already had a long life of hunger, persecution, and humiliation in the ghettos. As a result, their sojourn in the Lager was tragically short; they were, in other words, a fluctuating population, continually thinned by death, and renewed

by the ceaseless arrival of new convoys. It's understandable that in a human fabric so deteriorated and so unstable the seed of revolt did not easily take root.

One might ask why the prisoners who had just got off the trains, and waited for hours (sometimes for days) to enter the gas chambers, didn't rebel. To what I've already said I should add here that for this feat of collective death the Germans had perfected a diabolically clever and versatile strategy. In the majority of cases, the new arrivals didn't know what they were facing: they were greeted with cold efficiency but not brutally, invited to strip "for a shower," sometimes given a towel and soap, and promised hot coffee afterward. The gas chambers were camouflaged as shower rooms, with pipes, taps, dressing rooms, clothes hooks, benches, etc. However, if the prisoners gave the least sign of knowing or suspecting their imminent fate, the SS or their collaborators moved in brutally and without warning against these baffled and desperate people, racked by five or ten days in sealed freight cars, shouting, threatening, kicking, firing shots, and unleashing against them dogs that were trained to kill.

Given the situation, the statement, sometimes put forward, that the Jews didn't rebel out of cowardice seems absurd and offensive. No one rebelled. It need only be recalled that the gas chambers of Auschwitz were tested on a group of three hundred Russian prisoners of war, young men trained as soldiers, politically sophisticated, and not hindered by the presence of women and children: and they did not rebel, either.

I would like to add a final consideration. The deep-rooted awareness that one must not bow to oppression but, rather, resist was not widespread in Fascist Europe, and was particularly weak in Italy. It was the heritage of a small circle of politically active men, but fascism and Nazism had isolated them, expelled them, terrorized and even destroyed them. We must not forget that the first victims of the German Lagers, numbering hundreds of thousands, were the members of the anti-Nazi political parties. Without their expertise, the popular will to resist, to organize a resistance, did not arise until much later, with the help of the European Communist parties, which, after Germany, in June 1941, suddenly attacked the Soviet Union, breaking the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of August 1939, threw themselves into the fight against Nazism. Finally, to reproach the prisoners for failing to rebel represents an error of historical perspective: it means expecting

from them a political consciousness that today is a nearly common heritage but at the time belonged only to an élite.

4. Have you returned to Auschwitz since the liberation?

I returned to Auschwitz in 1965, on the occasion of a ceremony commemorating the liberation of the camps. As I've mentioned in my books, the concentration-camp empire of Auschwitz was made up not of just one Lager but of some forty: the camp of Auschwitz itself was constructed on the outskirts of the city of that name (Oświęcim in Polish), had a capacity of around twenty thousand prisoners, and was, so to speak, the administrative capital of the complex. Then, there was the Lager (or more precisely the group of Lagers, from three to five, depending on circumstances) of Birkenau, which held as many as sixty thousand prisoners, of whom around forty thousand were women, and where the gas chambers and the crematorium ovens were situated; and, finally, there was a constantly varying number of labor camps, some as far as hundreds of kilometers away from the "capital." My camp, called Monowitz, was the biggest of these, and held as many as twelve thousand prisoners. It was situated about seven kilometers east of Auschwitz. The entire area is at present part of Poland.

I didn't have a strong feeling upon visiting the Central Camp: the Polish government has transformed it into a kind of national monument, the barracks have been cleaned and painted, trees have been planted, flower beds laid out. There is a museum in which pitiable relics are displayed: tons of human hair, hundreds of thousands of pairs of eyeglasses, combs, shaving brushes, dolls, children's shoes. But still it's a museum, something static, arranged, manipulated. The whole camp seemed like a museum to me. As for my Lager, it no longer exists; the rubber factory it was attached to is now in Polish hands and has expanded to occupy the area completely.

And yet when I entered the Birkenau Lager, which I had never seen as a prisoner, I felt a violent anguish. Here nothing is changed: there was mud, and there is still mud, or suffocating dust in summer; the barracks (the ones that weren't burned during the passage of the front) remain as they were, low, dirty, constructed of loose planks, with a floor of packed earth; there are no bunks but bare wooden boards, up to the ceiling. Nothing has been beautified here. With me was my friend Giuliana Tedeschi, a survivor of

Birkenau. She showed me that on every board of 1.8 by 2 meters as many as nine women slept. She pointed out that from the small window the ruins of the crematorium were visible; at that time, you could see the flame at the top of the chimney. She had asked the older inmates: “What is that fire?” And they answered: “It’s we who are burning.”

Faced with the grim evocative power of those places, each of us survivors behaves in a different way, but two typical categories can be identified. The first category is made up of those who refuse to return, or even talk about the subject; those who would like to forget, but can’t, and are tormented by nightmares; and those who, instead, have forgotten, have repressed everything, and who began to live again from zero. I’ve noticed that in general these are individuals who ended up in the Lager “through bad luck,” that is, without a precise political commitment. Their suffering was a traumatic experience, but it had no meaning, taught them nothing, like an accident or an illness: for them the memory is something alien, a painful body that intruded on their life, and which they have tried (or are still trying) to eliminate. The second category is made up of former “political” prisoners, or people who had had some political education or religious conviction, or a strong moral conscience. For these survivors, remembering is a duty: they don’t want to forget, and above all they don’t want the world to forget, because they understand that their experience was not without meaning, and that the Lagers were not an accident, an unforeseeable historical event.

The Nazi Lagers were the apex, the crown of European fascism, its most monstrous manifestation; but there was fascism before Hitler and Mussolini, and, in forms both open and disguised, it has survived the defeat of the Second World War. Anywhere in the world, if one begins by denying the fundamental freedoms of Man, and equality between men, one is heading toward a concentration-camp system, and this is a trajectory that is difficult to stop. I know many former prisoners who understand clearly what a terrible lesson their experience holds, and who every year return to “their” camp leading groups of young people. I would gladly do that if I had the time, and if I didn’t know that I could achieve the same goal by writing books and discussing them with students.

5. Why do you speak about only the German Lagers, and not the Russian ones?

As I wrote in response to the first question, I prefer the role of witness to that of judge: I have testimony to offer, about the things I endured and saw. My books are not history books: in writing them I limited myself strictly to reporting the facts of which I had direct experience, and excluded those that I learned later from books or newspapers. You will note, for example, that I haven't quoted the figures for the massacre of Auschwitz, nor have I described the details of the gas chambers and the crematoriums. I didn't know those facts when I was in the Lager, and I learned them only afterward, when the whole world learned them.

For the same reason I don't generally speak about the Russian Lagers: luckily for me I wasn't there, and would be able to repeat only what I've read—that is, what everyone who is interested in the subject knows. And yet it's clear that by saying this I neither can nor wish to avoid the duty, which every man has, to make a judgment and form an opinion. It seems to me that, besides the obvious resemblances, substantial differences can be observed between the Soviet Lagers and the Nazi concentration camps.

The main difference consists in the purpose. The German Lagers constitute something unique in the admittedly bloody history of humanity: to the old goal of eliminating or terrifying political adversaries they added a modern and monstrous goal, that of annihilating from the world entire peoples and cultures. Starting around 1941, they became gigantic machines of death: gas chambers and crematoriums were planned deliberately to destroy lives and human bodies on a scale of millions; the horrific record belongs to Auschwitz, with 24,000 dead in a single day, in August 1944. The Soviet camps certainly were not and are not places for a pleasant stay, but not even in the darkest years of Stalinism was the death of the prisoners explicitly sought. Death was frequent, and tolerated with brutal indifference, but not in essence deliberate; it was, in other words, a by-product of hunger, cold, disease, exhaustion. In this grim comparison between two models of hell it should also be added that in the German Lagers, in general, one entered not to come out: no end other than death was expected. In the Soviet camps, on the contrary, there was always an end: in Stalin's time the "guilty" were sometimes given very long sentences (even fifteen or twenty years), with frightening carelessness, but a hope of freedom, however slight, existed.

From this fundamental difference others emerge. The relations between guards and prisoners in the Soviet Union are less inhuman: they all belong

to the same people, they speak the same language, they are not “supermen” and “submen,” as under Nazism. The sick are attended to, if poorly; in the face of work that is too hard a protest is conceivable, either individual or collective; corporal punishment is rare and not so brutal; it’s possible to receive letters and food packages from home—in other words, the human personality is not repudiated, and totally lost. By contrast, at least regarding Jews and Gypsies, in the German Lagers the slaughter was almost complete: it didn’t even stop at children, who were killed in the gas chambers by the hundreds of thousands, something unique among the atrocities of human history. As a general rule, the mortality rates are very different between the two systems. In the Soviet Union, it seems that in the harshest periods mortality was around 30 percent, including all who entered, and that is certainly an intolerably high figure; but in the German Lagers the mortality rate was 90 to 98 percent.

The recent Soviet innovation in which certain dissident intellectuals have been abruptly declared insane, shut up in psychiatric institutions, and subjected to “treatments” that not only cause terrible suffering but distort and weaken mental functions seems very serious to me. It demonstrates that dissent is feared: the intent is no longer to punish but to destroy it, by means of drugs (or the fear of drugs). Maybe the technique isn’t so widespread (it seems that in 1975 there were no more than a hundred of these political inmates), but it’s odious, because it entails a vile use of science, and unforgivable prostitution on the part of the doctors who slavishly comply with the wishes of authority. It indicates an extreme contempt for democratic debate and civil liberties.

By contrast, regarding the quantitative aspect, the Lager phenomenon in the Soviet Union at present appears to be in decline. Around 1950, it seems, there were millions of political prisoners; according to data from Amnesty International (an apolitical organization whose goal is to help all political prisoners, in all countries, and independent of their opinions), there are today (1976) around twelve thousand.

Finally, the Soviet camps remain a deplorable manifestation of illegality and inhumanity. They have nothing to do with socialism, and stand out as an ugly stain on Soviet socialism; they should instead be considered a barbaric remnant of tsarist absolutism, from which the Soviet rulers are unable or unwilling to free themselves. Anyone who reads *The House of the Dead*, written by Dostoyevsky in 1862, would have no difficulty

recognizing the same features in the prison described by Solzhenitsyn a hundred years later. But it's possible, in fact easy, to imagine a socialism without Lagers; in many parts of the world it has been realized. A Nazism without Lagers, on the other hand, is unthinkable.

6. Which of the individuals in *If This Is a Man* did you see again after the liberation?

Unfortunately, the majority of the individuals who appear in these pages died, either during the days in the Lager or during the tremendous evacuation march mentioned in the last chapter of the book. Others died later from diseases contracted while in prison, and there are still others I've never been able to trace. A few survived, and I was able to maintain or reestablish contact with them.

Jean, the Pikolo of "The Canto of Ulysses," is alive and well. His family was destroyed, but he married after his return, now has two children, and leads a quiet life as a pharmacist in a provincial French city. We sometimes meet in Italy, where he comes for vacations; other times I've gone to see him. Oddly, he has forgotten a lot about his year in Monowitz; predominant are the atrocious memories of the journey of evacuation, during which he saw all his friends (including Alberto) die of exhaustion.

I see the person I call Piero Sonnino quite frequently, and it is he who appears as Cesare in *The Truce*. He, too, after a difficult period of readjustment, found a job and has a family. He lives in Rome. He recounts willingly and vividly the hardships he endured in the camp and during the journey home, but in his narratives, which often become like dramatic monologues, he tends to highlight the adventures in which he was the hero rather than the tragic events he witnessed.

I've also seen Charles again. He was taken prisoner in the hills of the Vosges, near his home, where he was a partisan, in November 1944, and had been in the Lager for only a month; but that month of suffering, and the savage events he witnessed, marked him profoundly, destroying his joy in life and the wish to build a future for himself. Returning home after a journey not that different from the one I recounted in *The Truce*, he took up his profession as a teacher in the tiny school in his village, where he also taught the children to raise bees and plant a tree nursery, of firs and pines. He's been retired for a few years; he recently married a colleague, a woman

his age, and together they've built a new house, which is small but comfortable and pretty. I went to see him twice, in 1951 and 1974. The last time, he told me about Arthur, who lives in a nearby village: he is old and ill, and doesn't wish to receive visits that might reawaken former anguish.

Dramatic, unexpected, and joyful for both of us was a reunion with Mendi, the "modernist rabbi" who is mentioned briefly in the chapter "Chemistry Examination." He recognized himself when, in 1965, he happened to read the German translation of this book: he remembered me, and wrote me a long letter, addressing it to the Jewish Community of Turin. We corresponded at length, informing each other of the fates of our common friends. In 1967, I went to see him in Dortmund, in West Germany, where he was then a rabbi: he was the same as he had been, "stubborn, courageous, keen," and also extraordinarily cultured. He married an Auschwitz survivor and they have three grown children; the entire family intends to move to Israel.

I never again saw Doktor Pannwitz, the chemist who subjected me to a cold "state examination," but I learned about him from that Doktor Müller who is the subject of the chapter "Vanadium" in my book *The Periodic Table*. With the arrival of the Red Army imminent, he behaved like a bully and a coward: he ordered his civilian workers to hold out to the end; he forbade them to get on the last train that was departing for the area behind the lines but got on it himself at the last moment, taking advantage of the confusion. He died in 1946 of a brain tumor.

7. How do you explain the Nazis' fanatical hatred of the Jews?

Hatred of the Jews, improperly called anti-Semitism, is a specific case of a wider phenomenon, and that is aversion toward those who are different from us. Undoubtedly, it originates in a zoological phenomenon: animals belonging to different groups of a single species manifest signs of intolerance toward one another. This happens even among domestic animals: we know that a hen from one henhouse, introduced into another, is pecked for several days, as a sign of rejection. The same happens among rats and bees and, in general, all species of social animals. Now, man is certainly a social animal (Aristotle confirmed it), but we would be in trouble if all the zoological urges that survive in man were tolerated! Human laws are useful precisely for this: to restrain animal impulses.

Anti-Semitism is a typical instance of intolerance. For intolerance to develop, there must be a perceptible difference between the two groups that come into contact: it can be a physical difference (blacks and whites, dark-haired people and blonds), but our complicated civilization has made us sensitive to more subtle differences, such as language, or dialect, or even accent (southern Italians forced to move to the north are well aware of this); religion, with all its external manifestations and its profound influence on daily life; ways of dressing or gesturing; public and private habits. The tortured history of the Jewish people has meant that Jews almost everywhere display one or more of these differences.

In the extremely complex tangle of peoples and nations in conflict with one another, the history of the Jewish people has some particular characteristics. The Jews were (and in part still are) the repository of a strong internal bond, both religious and traditional in nature; as a result, in spite of their numerical and military inferiority, they opposed the Roman conquest with desperate courage, and though they were defeated, deported, and dispersed, the bond survived. The Jewish colonies that developed along all the coasts of the Mediterranean and, later, in the Middle East, Spain, the Rhineland, southern Russia, Poland, Bohemia, and elsewhere remained stubbornly faithful to that bond, which had been consolidated in the form of an immense body of written laws and traditions, a minutely codified religion, and a particular and conspicuous set of rituals, which pervaded all the actions of daily life. The Jews, a minority in all their settlements, were therefore different, recognizable as different, and often proud, rightly or wrongly, of their differences. All this made them vulnerable, and they were harshly persecuted, in almost all countries and all centuries; some reacted to persecution by assimilating, or by blending in with the surrounding population, the majority by immigrating again, to more hospitable countries. In that way, however, their “differentness” was renewed, exposing them to new restrictions and persecutions.

Although in its deepest essence anti-Semitism is an irrational instance of intolerance, it assumed a predominantly religious, or, rather, theological, guise in all Christian countries, starting with the establishment of Christianity as a state religion. According to St. Augustine, the Jews are condemned to diaspora by God himself, and for two reasons: because they are being punished for not having recognized Christ as the Messiah, and because their presence in all countries is necessary to the Catholic Church,

which itself is everywhere, so that everywhere the deserved unhappiness of the Jews may be visible to the faithful. Thus the diaspora and segregation of the Jews will never end: with their sufferings, they must forever bear witness to their error and, consequently, to the truth of the Christian faith. And since their presence is necessary, they are to be persecuted but not killed.

Yet the Church did not always seem so moderate: since the early centuries of Christianity a heavier charge has been brought against the Jews, that they are, collectively and eternally, responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, in other words, the "deicide people." This formulation, which appears in the Easter liturgy in remote times, and was suppressed only by Vatican II (1962–1965), is at the origin of various pernicious and constantly revived popular beliefs: that by poisoning wells, Jews spread the plague; that they habitually profane the sacred Host; that at Passover they kidnap Christian babies and smear their blood on the unleavened bread. These beliefs have offered a pretext for numerous bloody slaughters, and also for the mass expulsion of the Jews from France and England, and then from Spain and Portugal (1492–1498).

Passing through an uninterrupted series of massacres and migrations, we reach the nineteenth century, which is marked by a general awakening of national consciences and recognition of the rights of minorities: with the exception of tsarist Russia, in all Europe the legal restrictions placed on Jews, which had been called for by the Christian churches, were lifted (depending on the place and time, the obligation to reside in ghettos or special areas, the obligation to wear a mark on their clothing, the prohibition against entering certain careers or professions, the prohibition against mixed marriages, and so on). Anti-Semitism survives, however, especially in countries where a crude religiosity continued to point to Jews as the killers of Christ (in Poland and Russia), and where nationalistic claims had left a wake of general aversion toward neighbors and foreigners (in Germany but also in France, where, at the end of the nineteenth century, an alliance of priests, nationalists, and the military unleashed a violent wave of anti-Semitism, based on the false charge of high treason brought against Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French Army).

In Germany, especially, for the entire previous century an uninterrupted series of philosophers and politicians had promoted the fanatical theory that the German people, for too long divided and humiliated, were supreme in

Europe and perhaps the world, the heir to remote and noble traditions and civilizations, and made up of individuals essentially homogeneous by blood and race. The German people were therefore meant to establish a strong military state, hegemonic in Europe, and clothed in an almost divine majesty.

This idea of the mission of the German nation survived the defeat of the First World War, and emerged strengthened by the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles. It was appropriated by one of the most sinister and evil characters in history, the political agitator Adolf Hitler. The German bourgeois and industrialist classes heed his fiery speeches: Hitler looks promising, he manages to turn against the Jews the loathing that the German proletariat feels for the classes that led the country to defeat and economic disaster. Within a few years, starting in 1933, Hitler is able to take advantage of the anger of a humiliated country and the nationalist pride roused by the prophets who preceded him: Luther, Fichte, Hegel, Wagner, Gobineau, Chamberlain, Nietzsche. He is obsessed by the thought of a dominant Germany, not in the distant future but immediately, and not through a civilizing mission but by force of arms. Everything that is not Germanic appears to him inferior, in fact despicable, and Germany's prime enemies are the Jews, for reasons that Hitler proclaims with dogmatic fury: because they have "different blood"; because they are related to other Jews, in England, in Russia, in America; because they are heirs of a culture in which people argue and discuss before obeying, and are forbidden to bow before idols, while he aspires to be venerated as an idol, and doesn't hesitate to proclaim that "we must not trust intelligence and conscience but place all our faith in instincts." Finally, many German Jews hold important positions in the economy, in finance, in the arts, in science, and in literature: Hitler, a failed painter and failed architect, pours out onto the Jews the resentment and envy of frustration.

This seed of intolerance, falling on ground that is already prepared, takes root there with incredible vigor but in new forms. Anti-Semitism in the Fascist mold, which the Word proclaimed by Hitler awakens in the German people, is more barbaric than all its precedents. It melds artificially distorted biological doctrines, according to which the weak races should yield to the strong; absurd folk beliefs that common sense had buried for centuries; and ceaseless propaganda. Extremes never before seen are reached. Judaism is not a religion that one can escape by baptism, or a

cultural tradition that one can abandon for another: it is a human subspecies, a race different and inferior to all others. The Jews are only apparently human beings: in reality they are something different, abominable and indefinable, “whose distance from the Germans is greater than the distance between man and ape.” They are responsible for everything, for rapacious American capitalism and Soviet Bolshevism, for the defeat of 1918, the inflation of 1923; liberalism, democracy, socialism, and communism are Satanic Jewish inventions, which threaten the monolithic solidity of the Nazi state.

The passage from theoretical preaching to practical action was rapid and brutal. In 1933, just two months after Hitler came to power, the first concentration camp, Dachau, came into being. In May of that year the first pyre of books by Jewish writers or enemies of Nazism was set alight (more than a hundred years earlier Heine, a German Jewish poet, had written, “Where they have burned books they will end in burning men”). In 1935 anti-Semitism was codified in a set of monumental and extremely detailed laws, the Nuremberg Laws. In 1938, in a single night of disturbances led from the top, 191 synagogues and thousands of Jewish shops were destroyed. In 1939 the Jews of newly occupied Poland were shut in ghettos. In 1940 the Auschwitz Lager was opened. In 1941–42 the extermination machine was fully functioning; in 1944 the number of victims rose into the millions.

The hatred and contempt spread by Nazi propaganda found their fulfillment in the daily activity of the extermination camps. Here was not only death but a host of maniacal and symbolic details, all intended to demonstrate and confirm that Jews, and Gypsies, and Slavs are beasts, fodder, garbage. Recall the tattoo of Auschwitz, which branded men with the mark that is used for oxen; the journey in cattle cars that were never opened, forcing the deportees to lie for days in their own filth; the number used in place of the name; the failure to distribute spoons (and yet the storehouses of Auschwitz, at liberation, contained quintals of them), so that the prisoners would have to lick up their soup like dogs; the pitiless exploitation of the corpses, treated like some anonymous matter, the gold extracted from the teeth, the hair serving as material for textiles, the ashes for agricultural fertilizers; men and women debased to guinea pigs, used in medical experiments and then killed.

The very method that was chosen (after careful experimentation) for extermination was openly symbolic. The same poison gas employed for disinfesting ships' holds and rooms infested by bedbugs or lice was to be used, and was used.

As is well-known, the work of extermination was quite far advanced. The Nazis, although they were engaged in a bitter war that by this point was defensive, manifested an inexplicable hurry: the convoys of victims intended for the gas chambers, or to be transferred from the Lagers near the front, had precedence over military transports. The extermination wasn't completed only because Germany was defeated. The political will that Hitler dictated a few hours before killing himself, with the Russians a few meters away, ended thus: "Above all, I order the government and the German people to maintain the racial laws in full force, and to fight relentlessly the poisoner of all nations, international Judaism."

Summing up, we can therefore state that anti-Semitism is a specific case of intolerance; that for centuries it had a mainly religious character; that in the Third Reich it was exacerbated by the nationalistic and militaristic propensity of the German people, and by the peculiar "differentness" of the Jewish people; that it was easily disseminated throughout Germany and, in large part, Europe, thanks to the effectiveness of Fascist and Nazi propaganda, which needed a scapegoat on which to unload all blame and all resentments; and that the phenomenon was brought to a fever pitch by Hitler, a maniacal dictator.

Yet I have to admit that these generally accepted explanations do not satisfy me: they are reductive, not commensurate, not proportional to the facts to be explained. In rereading the accounts of Nazism, from its murky beginnings to its violent end, I can't escape the impression of a general atmosphere of unrestrained madness that seems to me unique in history. This collective madness, this derailment, is usually explained by assuming a combination of many different factors, insufficient if taken singly, and the biggest of these factors is the personality of Hitler, and his profound interaction with the German people. Certainly his personal obsessions, his capacity for hatred, his preaching of violence found a far-reaching echo in the frustration of the German people, which came back to him multiplied, confirming his delirious conviction that he was the Hero prophesied by Nietzsche, the Superman redeemer of Germany.

Much has been written on the origin of his hatred of the Jews. It has been said that Hitler poured out on the Jews his hatred of the entire human race; that he recognized in Jews some of his own defects, and that, hating the Jews, he hated himself; that the violence of his loathing came from the fear that he might have "Jewish blood" in his veins.

Yet again: these do not seem to me adequate explanations. It doesn't seem right to explain a historical phenomenon by placing all the blame on an individual (those who carry out horrific orders *are not* innocent!), and, besides, it is always difficult to interpret the deep motivations of an individual. The hypotheses that have been proposed justify the facts only in part; they explain the quality but not the quantity. I have to admit that I prefer the humility with which some of the most serious historians (Bullock, Schramm, Bracher) confess that they *do not comprehend* Hitler's furious anti-Semitism and, following him, Germany's.

Perhaps what happened cannot be comprehended, or, rather, *shouldn't be* comprehended, because to comprehend is almost to justify. Let me explain: "to comprehend" a human intention or behavior means (etymologically as well) to contain it, to contain the author, put oneself in his place, and identify with him. Now, no normal man will ever be able to identify with Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Eichmann, and innumerable others. This burdens us, and yet it brings us relief: because perhaps it is desirable that their words (and also, unfortunately, their deeds) not be comprehensible to us. They are words and deeds that are not human but, rather, counter-human, without historical precedent, barely comparable to the cruelest events of the biological struggle for existence. War can be traced back to this struggle, but Auschwitz has nothing to do with war; it is not an episode of war, it is not an extreme form of war. War is an everlasting terrible fact: it is deplorable but it is in us, it has a rationality, we "comprehend" it.

But there is nothing rational about the Nazi hatred: it's a hatred that is not in us; it's outside of man, a poisonous fruit arising from the deadly trunk of fascism, but outside and beyond fascism itself. We can't understand it; but we can and must understand its roots, and be on our guard. If understanding is impossible, recognizing is necessary, because what has happened can happen again, consciences can again be seduced and obscured: even our own.

For this reason, reflecting on what happened is a duty for all of us. Everyone has to know, or remember, that Hitler and Mussolini, when they spoke in public, were believed, applauded, admired, and adored like gods. They were “charismatic leaders”; they possessed a secret power of seduction that came not from the credibility or the rightness of the things they said but from the inspiring way in which they said them, from their eloquence, their dramatic art—perhaps instinctive, perhaps patiently practiced and mastered. The ideas they proclaimed weren’t always the same, and in general were abnormal, or foolish, or cruel; and yet they were praised, and followed by millions of the faithful to their death. It should be remembered that those faithful, including the diligent men who carried out inhuman orders, were not born torturers, were not (with few exceptions) monsters: they were ordinary men. Monsters exist, but they are too few to be truly dangerous; more dangerous are the common men, the bureaucrats ready to believe and to obey without question, like Eichmann, like Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, like Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka, like the French soldiers twenty years later, murderers of the Algerians, like the American soldiers thirty years later, murderers in Vietnam.

We must therefore be distrustful of those who try to convince us using tools other than reason, or of charismatic leaders: we must be wary of delegating to others our judgment and our will. Since it’s difficult to distinguish true prophets from false, it’s best to be suspicious of all prophets; it’s better to give up revealed truths, even if they thrill us by their simplicity and their splendor, even if we find them convenient because they can be acquired for nothing. It’s better to content ourselves with other, more modest and less exciting truths, those which are gained laboriously, little by little and without shortcuts, through study, discussion, and reasoning, and which can be verified and proved.

It’s obvious that this prescription is too simple to suffice in all cases: a new fascism, with its wake of intolerance, bullying, and servitude, could originate outside our country and be imported into it, arriving on tiptoe, perhaps, and called by other names; or it could be unleashed from inside with a violence that would rout all defenses. Then the counsels of wisdom are no longer useful, and we have to find the strength to resist: in this case, too, the memory of what happened in the heart of Europe, not long ago, can be a support and a warning.

8. What would you be today, if you hadn’t been a prisoner in the Lager? What do you feel when you remember that time? To what factors do you attribute your survival?

Strictly speaking, I don’t know and I can’t know what I would be today if I hadn’t been in the Lager: no man knows his future, and here it would be a matter of describing a future that didn’t exist. There is some sense in trying to make predictions (though they are bound to be approximate) about the behavior of a population, and yet it’s difficult, or impossible, to predict the behavior of an individual, even on a scale of days. Similarly, the physicist can tell very precisely how long it will take a gram of radium to lose half its radioactivity, but he absolutely can’t say when a single atom of that radium will decay. If a man heads toward a fork in the road, and doesn’t take the one to the left, it’s obvious that he’ll take the one to the right; but our choices are almost never between two alternatives alone. Every choice is followed by others, all multiple, and so on into infinity; and, finally, our future also depends heavily on external factors, completely extraneous to our deliberate choices, and on internal factors, of which we are not aware. For these obvious reasons, we can’t know our own future or that of our neighbor; for the same reasons, no one can say what his past would have been “if.”

I can, however, formulate one particular statement, and it’s this: if I hadn’t had the experience of Auschwitz, I probably would not have written anything. I would have had no motivation, no incentive, to write: I had been a mediocre student in Italian and poor in history; physics and chemistry interested me more, and I then chose a profession, chemist, that had nothing in common with the world of the written word. It was the experience of the Lager that forced me to write. I didn’t have to fight laziness, problems of style seemed to me ridiculous, I miraculously found time to write without ever missing an hour of my daily work. It seemed to me that I had this book ready in my head, that I had only to let it out, let it fall onto the paper.

Many years have passed: the book has had many vicissitudes, and it has positioned itself, oddly, like an artificial memory, but also like a defensive barrier, between my very ordinary present and the savage past of Auschwitz. I say this with hesitation, because I wouldn’t want to seem cynical: when I remember the Lager today, I no longer feel a violent or painful emotion. On the contrary: the much longer and more complex

experience of a writer and witness has been superimposed upon the brief and tragic experience of the deportee, and the sum is distinctly positive; overall, that past has made me richer and more confident. A friend of mine, deported as a young woman to the women's Lager at Ravensbrück, says that the camp was her university. I think I could say the same—that, by experiencing and then writing about and reflecting on those events, I have learned many things about men and the world.

I should, however, hasten to make clear that this positive outcome was a good fortune that only a very few had: of the Italian deportees, for example, only about 5 percent returned, and among these many had lost their family, their friends, their possessions, health, equilibrium, youth. The fact that I survived, and returned unharmed, in my view is due principally to luck. Preexisting factors played only a small role, such as my training in mountain life, and my profession as a chemist, which allowed me some privileges in the last months of prison. Maybe an unfailing interest in the human spirit also helped me, and the will not only to survive (which was common to many) but to survive for the precise purpose of recounting the things we had witnessed and had endured. And perhaps, finally, what also counted was the will, which I tenaciously preserved, to always recognize, even in the darkest days, in my companions and myself, men and not things, and thus to avoid that total humiliation and demoralization that led many to spiritual shipwreck.

November 1976

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1. Giacomo Matteotti (1885–1924) was a Socialist member of the Italian Parliament. He was kidnapped and murdered after denouncing the fraud and violence perpetrated by the Fascists during the elections of 1924. It soon came out that the Fascists were responsible for the crime, but Mussolini nevertheless was able to inaugurate his dictatorship several months later.

Translator's Afterword

Primo Levi had a passion for languages, as well as for words. It emerges very clearly in the text of *If This Is a Man*, in the repeated references to the Babel of tongues in Auschwitz, in the repetition of commands and words in the camp, in the recognition of the inadequacy of language itself to express "this offense, the demolition of a man." Describing the Carbide Tower, he gives the word for "brick" in eight languages, and says, "They were cemented by hate, hate and discord, like the Tower of Babel; and that is what we call it: Babelturm, Bobelturm."

Levi, having established his reputation as a writer, in his later works often explored the potential of changes and permutations in language and dialect. Understandably, he turned primarily to Piedmont, his home region. In the story of Argon, the first element of *The Periodic Table* (1975), he recalled, with a certain nostalgia, the distortion of Hebrew words in the language of Piedmontese Jewish families. The experiences and travels to foreign parts recounted by Faussone, the rigger hero of *The Wrench* (1978), provided the appropriate setting in which to render the impure syntax of Italian translated from Piedmontese dialect: "Nowadays, in factories here in Turin, a different Italian-Piedmontese has emerged, child of a peasant culture, where new expressions, new words, new metaphors have replaced the earlier vocabulary." When he visited New York in 1985, he was attracted by the "rudimentary hybrid" language of Italian immigrants—*fruttistoro* for "fruit store" (or greengrocer), *tracca* for "truck," a house "*senza stima*" (without heating, or *steam*). In his second book, *The Truce* (1963), in which he described the long return journey from Auschwitz (via Poland and Russia), he tried to converse in Yiddish and was ironically amused when he was laughed at by young Jewish Russian girls: "You don't speak Yiddish, so you aren't Jews!" In an interview twenty years later, he explained: "I travel linguistically. The languages I know (I speak them badly, but read them fluently) are French, English, German, and I would

add Piedmontese (I have a passion for linguistics, albeit unreciprocated, which consists of an amateurish but continuous study of these languages and dialects). They, too, serve me in my writing. One cannot know one's own language or use Italian correctly if one doesn't know other languages: it is a concrete, even a tangible experience, above all when one translates."

Already at Auschwitz, but above all in the many months he spent at Katowice and elsewhere in Poland, Levi discovered what he called the "archipelago" of the Ashkenazi communities destroyed by the Nazis. From Lithuania and Poland to Moldavia and Ukraine, these communities all spoke Yiddish; only Jewish immigrants in the United States continued to speak it, but, as Levi observed, it endured as a written language in the works of novelists such as the Nobel Prize–winning Isaac Bashevis Singer. The intense religious and social life of the Ashkenazi Jews was "a cultural universe that was unknown in Italy, and today has disappeared." Levi was so struck by this world that, soon after his return to Turin, in February 1946, he wrote a poem entitled "Ostjuden." For Levi "the slaughter and dispersion of Judaism in Eastern Europe has been of irreparable damage to all humanity." He was certainly responsible for proposing the Congress on Judaism in Eastern Europe, which took place in Turin in February 1984, and which he described as the largest meeting on the theme held in Italy, and perhaps anywhere in Europe, since the Second World War. Throughout his life, Levi read, reflected, and wrote about the cultural world of the Ashkenazi; and he dedicated to them his only novel, *If Not Now, When?* (1982), the story of a Russian-Polish Jewish resistance group that vindicated the ability of the Jews to defend themselves militarily. In a conversation with the novelist Philip Roth, Levi explained that he had wanted to counter the commonplace that Jews were meek and had been humiliated by centuries of persecution: "I also nurtured the ambition of becoming the first Italian writer to describe the Yiddish world."

Levi was not religious, as he repeatedly explained: "I constructed a Jewish culture not because my parents were Jewish, but much later, after the war, when I found that I had come to possess a supplementary culture, and I tried to develop it. But this has never been the case of religion. It is as if my religious sensibility had been amputated; I never had it." It is evident that Levi was fascinated by the practices based on the traditions that characterized the daily life of Ashkenazi Jews, from the "onerous and obsessive" religious teaching of children, based on the interpretation of the

Talmud, to eating kosher according to the precepts of the rabbis that Levi had found in a book by a Kraków rabbi, *Shulkhàn arùkh* (*The Table for a Banquet*). But only when he was in Poland did he begin to feel a need to learn Yiddish, "a fascinating language for linguists (and not just for them) that is intrinsically a multi-language . . . the language of a wandering people."

The first edition of *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*) was published in 1947 by a small anti-Fascist publisher in Levi's native city, Turin. It did not circulate widely, except in the cultural circles there, probably because of the urgency of reconstructing the city, which had suffered heavy Allied bombings during the war. When I arrived in Turin, in 1956, to start my doctoral research on Piedmontese history, the city was still only of middling size, with half a million inhabitants. It was a very hospitable place, especially to a young Englishman from Oxford, and I rapidly made friends. By then, I had met my future wife, Anna Debenedetti, and her family, including her uncle, Leonardo De Benedetti, who had returned from Auschwitz with Levi, and who lived with Anna's family for some years. Levi brought Leonardo the first drafts of what would be the chapters of *Se questo è un uomo* in the months that he wrote them. Anna remembers reading them on thin, closely typed paper.

Levi wrote with a sense of urgency, "without hesitations and without order," immediately after his return to Turin, in December 1945, and continuing until January 1947. Many years later he recalled the driving need to recount the experience while he was still in Auschwitz, in the Chemical Kommando, to the point where he took the risk of jotting down notes with pencil and paper (which he then destroyed), "an absurd and futile audacity." The hope of survival was identified with a different, more precise hope: "We did not hope to live and recount, but to live *in order to* recount." He recalled that he had become "a tireless, overbearing, maniacal narrator," repeating his story dozens of times to friends, enemies, and strangers. *If This Is a Man* was written both as a personal "act of liberation" and as a testimonial, to bear witness. As he later explained in *The Truce*, he had an overwhelming need to recount "an avalanche of urgent things to tell the civilized world, my own but belonging to everyone, things of blood, things

that, it seemed to me, would shake every conscience to its foundations." Many years afterward, he explained with characteristic irony that, in the immediacy of his survival, he felt like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner (a literary reference dear to Levi), "who grabs the wedding guest on the way to the wedding, to inflict on him his story of evil." The need to recount the atrocity of Auschwitz remained with him throughout his life: "I realized that the only way to save myself was to describe it. Writing was an act of liberation, if I had not written the book probably I would have remained a damned soul."

Levi, working, and living, from Monday to Saturday at a factory outside Turin, wrote the chapters of *If This Is a Man* on the train as he traveled to work, through the lunch break, in the factory itself despite the din of the machines, and during the night; then he typed the text. He later described how he wrote *The Truce* in the evenings, after a day's work: "I needed on average a full hour to change my skin, that is, to become a writer in place of a chemist." I have little doubt that he had in mind Machiavelli's description of his change of clothes before entering his study.

Even after the publication of *If This Is a Man*, Levi never lost the compulsion to testify. In addition to his writings, he tirelessly visited schools to talk about Auschwitz, and in 1972 he suggested to his Italian publisher a school edition of *If This Is a Man*, for which he wrote a preface and notes, and which was hugely successful; he was also ready to give interviews, especially in his later years. It was an obligation, he explained, to "assume the calm, sober language of the witness." In *The Periodic Table*, the book that—published thirty years after *If This Is a Man*—brought him an international reputation, he reflected that in the camp "I must have developed a strange callousness, if I was then not only to survive but also to think, to register the world around me." On various occasions, in later years, he ascribed the clarity and concision of his language to the "mental habits" of his training as a chemist: "My model was that of the weekly reports, a normal practice in factories: they must be concise, precise, and written in a language accessible to all levels of the firm's hierarchy." He attributed to that model his remarkable capacity to describe persons, places, and "events" as if they were "samples," "specimens in sealed packages, to be identified, analyzed, and weighed." But in a broader sense, already in *If This Is a Man*, and subsequently in all his books, Levi's observations expressed an ethnological sensibility toward his immediate surroundings,

from the pavements of Turin to the joggers in New York's Central Park. It's not surprising that, later, he translated into Italian two books by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Initially the chapters that Levi wrote on his return to Turin were not conceived as a book; some were published in a provincial political weekly. In 1958, the preeminent Italian publisher Giulio Einaudi contracted to republish the original 1947 edition of *If This Is a Man*, and that became the standard edition. Levi made substantial additions and then continued to introduce small changes and modifications to the text, even at the proof stage and, subsequently, in later editions. I have become particularly aware of this through the occasional discrepancies between my original translation of *If This Is a Man* and the Italian text in Levi's complete works (*Opere I*), edited by Marco Belpoliti and published by Einaudi in 1997. We now know that this was intrinsic to Levi's mode of writing, with minor changes not only in the successive editions of his first book but in many of the short stories subsequently collected in books, and (perhaps most notably) in his final book, *The Drowned and the Saved*.

I read the first edition of *Se questo è un uomo* soon after I came to Turin, and was convinced, no doubt influenced by the fact that I am Jewish, that the book needed to circulate in English. In the arrogant innocence of my youth, I think I had already decided that I would translate the book myself; certainly I did not consider how to find a publisher. My impression was (and still is) that, until well after the Eichmann trial in 1961, knowledge of the Nazi extermination camps was not widespread in England, except among Jews. The term "Holocaust," which has become generalized since the late 1970s, is—as Levi pointed out—improper, since it is derived from the Greek word for "sacrifice." "'Holocaust' means literally 'wholly burnt' and refers to the sacrifice of animals to the gods. When it first appeared it irritated me considerably." The Hebrew word *Shoah* entered into general usage only after Levi's death, in 1987.

The Debenedetti family introduced me to Primo, who was obviously delighted at the prospect of an English translation. He took me at my word, without any knowledge of my capacities as a translator (nor for that matter did I know anything about them). He told me early on that he had not been

consulted about the French translation and that he was very dissatisfied with it. Perhaps this underlay his proposal that we work together closely. It was fundamental for Levi that his descriptions of and ethical reflections on the Nazi extermination camps not lose their efficacy in translation. Compared with that of most authors, his interest in the translation of his books was exceptional. Years later, when *Se questo è un uomo* had been translated into a multitude of languages, he told me that he had bought a grammar and dictionary in Romanian so as to be able to read the translation. Most important of all was the translation into German, which was published very soon after my English translation. Levi insisted on a clause in the contract saying that the translator send him each chapter as soon as it was ready. The translation had to be "intimately faithful," for the obvious reason that it was a book to be read by Germans about their recent past. "Perhaps it is my presumption," he wrote to the translator (in a letter published subsequently as the preface to the German edition), that "I, prisoner number 174517, am able to speak to the Germans through you, to remind them of what they did, and to say to them: 'I am alive, and I would like to understand you so that I can judge you.'"

We arranged to meet regularly in the evenings in his flat, just around the corner from the Debenedetti home. His timetable was fashioned by his employment as an industrial chemist in a factory at Settimo, just outside Turin. Every Tuesday and Thursday evening for the best part of a year, I went to Levi's apartment with the latest pages of my translation. The commitment to our regular meetings worked effectively in obliging me not to interrupt my rhythm of translation. In reality, I never felt it as a burden, least of all in the sense of the splendid description by the Italian writer Luciano Bianciardi (*La vita agra*; *It's a Hard Life*) of the obligation to translate a daily quota of pages in order to earn a living. In different circumstances (not as a source of income), this was something I was later to experience with other translations in which I found myself engaged professionally as a historian.

Initially when I brought my translated pages to Primo, we concentrated almost exclusively on them. The unusual circumstances of our arrangement, and the mutual pleasure that we increasingly derived from it, created for us a particular moment of insulated detachment from the normality of routine. I cannot remember the exact year, but (on the basis of the textual differences) it must have coincided with the Einaudi edition in 1958.

Primo and I always spoke in Italian. His spoken English was then still fairly poor; I imagine he became fluent as he traveled increasingly as an industrial chemist. He had read exceptionally widely in English, as well as in French, still normal in Turin in those years, and, after his return from Auschwitz, in German. He put to good use his remarkable memory when he was not fully convinced that I had adequately rendered the precise weight of his wording. He had astonishing recall and I was regularly amazed at the range and aptness of the English phrases that he quoted to me as providing possible alternatives for what he regarded as too flat a translation. Readers of his works will not be surprised that Melville and Conrad, as well as Coleridge, were present; far more unusually—which is why I still remember it—was a phrase from the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible. Even though for the most part I rejected his suggestions, essentially as not sounding right, or not reading well in the specific context, they served the purpose of making me search for what would be right.

Perhaps at this point it is opportune to recall that half a century ago the complexities, ambiguities, and compromises that have become inherent in the expression of one culture in the language of another were not yet discussed; even less had the techniques of translation acquired the status of a specialized discipline. Professional translators were of course present in Italy, as in England and the United States, but the quality of their production was extremely variable. At the most humdrum level, the “false friends” trap of translation was probably more common than today (I remember my mother-in-law’s delight in reading in an Italian translation that “oysters [*ostriche*, in Italian] bury their head in the sand”); at the other extreme, some distinguished Italian writers—such as Cesare Pavese in his translation of *Moby-Dick*—took inventive liberties in a stylish and effective rendering of the original text. I had never received literary training, primarily because of the excessive specialization in English grammar schools, particularly marked during what were the years of transition to a new national system of examination. I was, and remain, impressed by the breadth and quality of the education provided by the Italian *liceo* (as by the French *lycée*), which leaves a lifelong cultural imprint, visible to the present day in the reading habits and musical interests of Italian bourgeois families. I had always read reasonably widely, particularly the great Western and Russian novelists and prose writers, but never poetry. I note, somewhat to my embarrassment, that the only cut pages in my 1951 edition of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* are those

of the Canto of Ulysses, which I read with new understanding after a discussion with Primo. When, at the end of our collaboration, I explained to him that I did not feel capable of translating his powerful and essential introductory poem, he reassured me and translated it himself.

During the lengthy period of our translation of *If This Is a Man*, I was ever more conscious of the direct influence on me, a young foreigner, of Levi's culture and personality. Increasingly, as the translation advanced, we talked about other things, never (that I can remember) about Auschwitz, but about Turin, Piedmont, the differences in social behavior between English and Italians, and much, much else. I lived the experience as a particularly important and enjoyable part of my daily life. I did not appreciate its abnormality, probably because I was so young and inexperienced (and still so close to the leisure and apparently unlimited availability of time of my undergraduate years). By the end, the translation had almost become an excuse for the intimacy of spending an evening with an old friend. When the translation was finally completed, we both felt the loss of these evenings. With his quiet observation of his fellows, Primo had identified my concern to learn more about contemporary Italy, and gave me *Viaggio in Italia* (*Travels in Italy*), a book by an intelligent and cultured journalist and novelist, Guido Piovene. And soon afterward, although, as he explained to me, he regarded himself as outside the Turin Jewish community, Primo accepted my request that he be my best man when Anna and I had a religious marriage. On our frequent visits to Turin, we would always spend an evening with him, in his or the Debenedetti apartment.

As I look back on our intense and concentrated discussions of my translation of *If This Is a Man*, it now seems to me evident that, for Primo, there was no separation between content and literary form, even if he was not aware of this when he wrote the book: expression and above all language were fundamental to the sense of responsibility he felt to render comprehensible to ordinary people the experience and significance of Auschwitz; this is even more evident in the textual changes he made in the 1958 Einaudi edition. The intensity of the contrast in the language of his writing about Auschwitz and that of his description of the renewed hopes of a ravaged Europe that he first witnessed during the seemingly infinite journey back to Italy is immediately apparent: the essentialist need to deploy style and language to express the message of Auschwitz was replaced by a liberating sequence of adventures and sketches expressed in a

far more literary fashion, in which Primo gave vent to his primary quality of curiosity, with the irony that characterizes so many of his later writings. Years afterward, he told us with slightly rueful amusement that, although he had changed all the names of the personages he wrote about, with the exception of Leonardo (De Benedetti), one of them—Cesare from Rome—had recognized himself and felt deeply offended.

A small American publisher, Orion Press, had contacted me for the rights to the translation of *Se questo è un uomo.* I don't know how he knew about it, but Ian Thomson (Primo Levi's most authoritative biographer) explains that Orion had an office in Florence. I sent the completed text to the London-based partner, but never received my (very small) fee. Months later, to my surprise, I received the proofs while Anna and I were on our honeymoon. I protested to the New York partner and refused to return the corrected proofs until I received payment. I made a number of corrections, but evidently too late, as I now find that I noted them in the margins of my copy of the book. *If This Is a Man* was published by Orion in the United States in 1959, and the following year by André Deutsch in Britain; regrettably, the subsequent editions of *If This Is a Man* in the United States were published under the highly inappropriate title *Survival in Auschwitz.*

It seems to me fitting to conclude this afterword with a comment on Primo Levi's views and personal experiences of translating. As I look back on the cultural differences between my inexperience and his vast readings of English literature, and the friendship that developed in the many months of discussing the text of *If This Is a Man*, it now seems to me evident that his prime concern was that "our" translation should be as literal as possible with respect to the original. I am sure that he absorbed and learned much about the complications of translation from our lengthy period of direct collaboration, but as an author, in a different way from me.

For this revised version of *If This Is a Man*, which appears more than a half century after the original, I have used the definitive text of *Se questo è un uomo,* included in the 1997 Einaudi edition of Primo Levi's *Complete Works*. I have made what I believe to be improvements in the translation, and I owe thanks to Peter Hennig for sending me a substantial list of alternative words and phrases, some of which I have adopted.

—STUART WOOLF

The Truce

Translated by Ann Goldstein

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In the savage nights we dreamed
Dense and violent dreams
Dreamed with soul and body:
Of returning; eating; telling.
Until the dawn command
Resounded curt and low:
“Wstawać”;
And our hearts broke in our breasts.

Now we’re home again.
Our bellies are full,
We’ve finished with telling.
It’s time. Soon we’ll hear again
The strange command:
“Wstawać.”

(TRANS. J. GALASSI)


LITHUANIA
East Prussia
Minsk
Smolensk
Starye Dorogi
Bobruysk
Slutsk
U. S. S. R.
The Hague
HOLLAND
Berlin
Warsaw
POLAND
GERMANY
Ovruch
BELGIUM
Kiev
LUX.
Luxembourg
Zhitomir
Prague
Katowice
Krakow
Rawaw
Kazatin
Auschwitz
Tarnów
Przemysl
Ternopol
Proskurov
Vinnesa
Zhmerynka
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
FRANCE
Mogilev
Munich
St. Valentin
Wels
Vienna
Bratislava
Bubi
Braunau
Amstetten
St. Pölten
Gmunden
Stuhl
Budapest
Berne
Innsbruck
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
Iasi
Odessa
SWITZERLAND
Brenner Pass
Sinaia
Kiskunfélegyháza
ROMANIA
Vadul
Bolzano
Békéscsaba
Bârlad
Trento
Hódmezővásárhely
Cuntid
Arad
Alba Iulia
Turin
Milan
Verona
Brasov
Braila
Ploiesti
ITALY
Belgrade
Bucharest
YUGOSLAVIA
BULGARIA
Sofia

The Thaw

In the first days of January 1945 the Germans, under pressure from the approaching Red Army, had hastily evacuated the Silesian mineral basin. While elsewhere, in analogous conditions, they hadn't hesitated to destroy by fire or weaponry the Lagers, together with their inhabitants, in the district of Auschwitz they acted differently: orders from on high (apparently dictated by Hitler himself) decreed that they "retrieve," at whatever cost, every able-bodied man. Thus all the healthy prisoners were evacuated, under frightful conditions, to Buchenwald and to Mauthausen, while the sick were abandoned to themselves. The Germans' original intention to leave no man alive in the concentration camps can be deduced from various clues; but a violent nighttime aerial attack, and the speed of the Russian advance, led them to change their mind, and to flee, leaving their duty and their task incomplete.

In the Buna-Monowitz infirmary eight hundred of us remained. Of these, around five hundred died of their illnesses or of cold or hunger before the Russians arrived, and two hundred others, in spite of aid, in the days immediately following.

The first Russian patrol came in view of the camp around midday on January 27, 1945. Charles and I were the first to catch sight of it: we were carrying to the common grave the body of Sómogyi, the first of the men in our room to die. We overturned the stretcher onto the dirty snow, because the grave was by now full, and no other burial could be given: Charles took off his cap, to salute the living and the dead.

Four young soldiers on horseback, machine guns under their arms, proceeded warily along the road that followed the perimeter of the camp.

When they reached the fences, they paused to look, and, with a brief, timid exchange of words, turned their gazes, checked by a strange embarrassment, to the jumbled pile of corpses, to the ruined barracks, and to us few living beings.

They seemed to us miraculously physical and real, suspended (the road was higher than the camp) on their enormous horses, between the gray of the snow and the gray of the sky, motionless under the gusts of a damp wind that threatened thaw.

It seemed to us, and so it was, that the void filled with death in which for ten days we had wandered like spent stars had found a solid center, a nucleus of condensation: four armed men, but not armed against us; four messengers of peace, with rough boyish faces under the heavy fur helmets.

They didn’t greet us, they didn’t smile; they appeared oppressed, not only by pity but by a confused restraint, which sealed their mouths, and riveted their eyes to the mournful scene. It was a shame well-known to us, the shame that inundated us after the selections and every time we had to witness or submit to an outrage: the shame that the Germans didn’t know, and which the just man feels before a sin committed by another. It troubles him that it exists, that it has been irrevocably introduced into the world of things that exist, and that his goodwill availed nothing, or little, and was powerless to defend against it.

So for us even the hour of freedom struck solemn and oppressive, and filled our hearts with both joy and a painful sense of shame, because of which we would have liked to wash from our consciences and our memories the monstrosity that lay there; and with anguish, because we felt that this could not happen, that nothing could ever happen that was good and pure enough to wipe out our past, and that the marks of the offense would remain in us forever, and in the memories of those who were present, and in the places where it happened, and in the stories that we would make of it. Since—and this is the tremendous privilege of our generation and of my people—no one could ever grasp better than us the incurable nature of the offense, which spreads like an infection. It is foolish to think that it can be abolished by human justice. It is an inexhaustible source of evil: it breaks the body and soul of those who are drowned, extinguishes them and makes them abject; rises again as infamy in the oppressors, is perpetuated as hatred in the survivors, and springs up in a thousand ways, against the

very will of all, as a thirst for revenge, as moral breakdown, as negation, as weariness, as resignation.

These things, at the time not clearly discerned, and noted by the majority only as a sudden wave of mortal fatigue, accompanied the joy of liberation. Therefore few among us ran to the saviours, few fell in prayer. Charles and I stood still near the ditch overflowing with livid limbs, while others knocked down the fence; then we returned with the empty stretcher, to bring the news to our companions.

For the rest of the day nothing happened, a thing that did not surprise us, and that we had long since become accustomed to. In our room the bunk of the dead Sómogyi was immediately occupied by old Thylle, to the visible disgust of my two French companions.

Thylle, as far as I knew then, was a "red triangle," a German political prisoner, and was one of the old inhabitants of the Lager; as such, he had belonged by right to the aristocracy of the camp, had done no manual labor (at least in recent years), and had received food and clothing from home. For these reasons the German political prisoners were rarely guests of the infirmary, where, on the other hand, they enjoyed various privileges: most important, they avoided the selections. Since, at the moment of the liberation, Thylle was the only "political," he had been invested by the SS in flight with the job of barracks chief of Block 20, which was made up of our room of highly contagious sick people, along with the TB ward and the dysentery ward.

Being German, he had taken this provisional appointment very seriously. During the ten days that separated the departure of the SS from the arrival of the Russians, while each man fought his last battle against hunger, cold, and illness, Thylle had carried out diligent inspections of his new domain, checking the state of the floors and the bowls and the number of blankets (one for every inmate, whether living or dead). On one of his visits to our room he had even praised Arthur for the order and cleanliness he had been able to maintain; Arthur, who didn't understand German, and even less Thylle's Saxon dialect, had answered "*Vieux dégoutant*" and "*Putain de boche.*" Nevertheless Thylle, from that day on, with obvious abuse of his authority, had got in the habit of coming every night to our room to make use of the comfortable slop bucket that was installed there—the only one in the whole camp whose maintenance was seen to regularly, and the only one situated near a stove.

Thus, until that day old Thylle had been a stranger to me, and therefore an enemy; in addition, he was powerful, and therefore a dangerous enemy. For people like me, that is to say the general population of the Lager, there were no other nuances: during the entire long year I spent in the Lager, I had never had either the curiosity or the occasion to investigate the complex structures of the camp hierarchy. The shadowy edifice of evil powers lay entirely above us, and our gaze was turned to the ground. And yet it was this Thylle, an old militant hardened by innumerable struggles for his party and within his party, and ossified by ten years of fierce and ambiguous life in the Lager, who was the companion and confidant of my first night of freedom.

For the whole day, we had had too much to do to have time to comment on the event, which we nevertheless felt marked the crucial point of our entire existence; and perhaps unconsciously we had sought activity, precisely for the purpose of not having time, because in the face of freedom we felt lost, emptied, atrophied, unsuited to our role.

But night came, our sick companions slept, and Charles and Arthur also slept the sleep of innocence, since they had been in the Lager only a month, and hadn’t absorbed its poison: I alone, although I was exhausted, couldn’t sleep, because of the very weariness and the illness. All my limbs ached, the blood pulsed convulsively in my head, and I felt invaded by fever. But it wasn’t only this. As if a dike had given way just at the moment when every threat seemed to diminish, when hope of a return to life ceased to be insane, I was overwhelmed by a new and vaster suffering, which had been buried and relegated to the margins of consciousness by other, more urgent sufferings: the pain of exile, of my distant home, of solitude, of lost friends, of lost youth, and of the multitude of corpses all around.

In my year in Buna I had seen four-fifths of my companions die, but I had never endured the concrete presence, the siege of death, its sordid breath close by, outside the window, in the next bunk, in my own veins. I therefore lay in a sick half-sleep that was full of baleful thoughts.

But I soon realized that someone else was awake. Superimposed on the heavy breathing of the sleepers there was at times a hoarse and irregular panting, interrupted by coughing and by stifled groans and sighs. Thylle was weeping, a weary, shameless old man’s weeping, unbearable as an old man’s nudity. Perhaps he noticed, in the dark, some movement of mine; and the solitude, which until that day both of us, for different reasons, had

sought, must have weighed as much on him as on me, because in the middle of the night he asked me, “Are you awake?” and not waiting for the answer he climbed laboriously up to my bunk and without asking permission sat down beside me.

It wasn’t easy to make myself understood by him, not only for reasons of language but also because the thoughts that lay in our breasts on that long night were endless, marvelous, terrible, and above all confused. I told him that I suffered from homesickness; and he, who had stopped crying, said to me, “Ten years—ten years!” and, after ten years of silence, in a thin, strident voice, he began singing the “Internationale,” grotesque and solemn at the same time, leaving me disturbed, distrustful, and moved.

Morning brought the first signs of freedom. Twenty Polish civilians, men and women, arrived (evidently ordered by the Russians), and with very little enthusiasm got busy organizing and cleaning the barracks and getting rid of the corpses. Around midday a frightened child appeared, dragging a cow by the halter; he made us understand that it was for us, and that the Russians had sent it, then he abandoned the beast and fled in a flash. I can’t say how, the poor animal was butchered in a few minutes, gutted, and cut up, and its remains were dispersed throughout all the corners of the camp where survivors lurked.

Starting the next day, we saw more Polish girls going around the camp, pale with pity and disgust: they cleaned the sick and treated the wounds as well as they could. They also lit an enormous fire in the middle of the camp, which they fed with debris from the bomb-damaged barracks, and on which they cooked soup in any containers they could find. Finally, on the third day, we saw entering the camp a four-wheeled cart, driven cheerfully by Yankel, a Häftling: he was a young Russian Jew, perhaps the only Russian among the survivors, and as such he found himself naturally filling the function of interpreter and liaison with the Soviet command. Amid sonorous cracks of the whip he announced that he was charged with bringing to the central Auschwitz Lager, now transformed into a gigantic quarantine hospital, all the living among us, in small groups of thirty or forty a day, and beginning with the most seriously ill.

Meanwhile the thaw had arrived, which we had been dreading for days, and as the snow melted the camp became a squalid swamp. The corpses and the garbage made the soft, foggy air unbreathable. Nor had death ceased reaping: the sick died by the dozens in their cold beds, and here and there on the muddy streets, as if struck by lightning, the most voracious survivors died. Blindly following the imperious command of our ancient hunger, they had stuffed themselves on the rations of meat that the Russians, still engaged in combat on the nearby front, sent irregularly to the camp: sometimes a little, sometimes nothing, sometimes in mad abundance.

But I was aware only fitfully and indistinctly of all that was happening around me. It seemed that the weariness and the illness, like fierce, vile beasts, had been lying in wait for the moment when I was stripped of every defense to assault me from behind. I lay in a feverish torpor, only half conscious, watched over in a brotherly way by Charles, and tormented by thirst and by acute pain in my joints. There were neither doctors nor medicines. My throat also hurt, and half of my face was swollen: the skin had become red and rough, and stung like a burn; perhaps I was suffering from several illnesses at once. When my turn came to get into Yankel's cart, I was no longer able to stand up.

I was hoisted onto the cart by Charles and Arthur, along with a load of dying men from whom I did not feel very different. It was raining, and the sky was low and dark. While the slow pace of Yankel's horses hauled me toward very distant freedom, the barracks where I had suffered and had grown up passed before my eyes for the last time, along with Roll Call Square, where, side by side, stood the gallows and a giant Christmas tree, and the gateway of slavery, on which the three mocking words, now hollow, could still be read: *Arbeit Macht Frei*, Work makes us free.

The Big Camp

At Buna we didn't know much about the "Big Camp," properly known as Auschwitz: the Häftlinge transferred from camp to camp were few, not talkative (no Häftling was), and not easily believed.

When Yankel's cart crossed the famous threshold, we were stunned. Buna-Monowitz, with its twelve thousand inhabitants, was a village by comparison: what we entered was a vast metropolis. Not one-story wooden "Blocks" but countless grim square buildings of bare brick, three stories high and exactly the same; between these ran paved streets, straight or at right angles, as far as the eye could see. It was all deserted, silent, crushed under the low sky, a place of mud and rain and abandonment.

Here, too, as at every turning point of our long journey, we were surprised to be greeted by a bath, when we needed so many other things. But this was not a bath of humiliation, a grotesque-diabolical-ritual bath, a black-Mass bath like the one that had marked our descent into the concentration-camp universe, nor was it a functional, antiseptic, highly technological bath, like that of our passage, many months later, into the hands of the Americans; rather, it was a bath in the Russian manner, on a human scale, extemporaneous and rough.

I don't mean to question whether a bath, for us in those conditions, was fitting: it was in fact necessary, and not unwelcome. But in it, and in each of those three memorable washings, it was easy to see, behind the concrete, literal aspect, a great symbolic shadow, the unconscious desire, on the part of the new authority that each time absorbed us into its sphere, to strip us of the vestiges of our former life, to make of us new men, conforming to its models, to impose on us its brand.

The strong arms of two Soviet nurses removed us from the cart. “*Po malu, po malu!*” (“Slowly, slowly!”): those were the first Russian words I heard. The two girls were energetic and skilled. They led us into one of the Lager facilities that had been hastily put back in working order, stripped us, indicated that we were to lie down on the wooden lattice that covered the floor, and, with compassionate hands, but without much ceremony, they soaped us, rubbed us, massaged and dried us from head to foot.

The operation went smoothly and quickly with all of us, apart from some moralistic-Jacobin protests from Arthur, who proclaimed himself *libre citoyen*, and in whose subconscious the contact of those female hands with his bare skin was in conflict with ancestral taboos. But it met a serious stumbling block when the turn came of the last man in the group.

None of us knew who he was, because he wasn’t able to speak. He was a phantom, a bald little man, gnarled as a vine, skeletal, crumpled by a horrible contraction of all his muscles. He had been removed bodily from the cart, like an inanimate block, and now he lay on the ground on one side, curled up and rigid, in a desperate position of defensiveness, with his knees pressed against his forehead, his elbows locked to his sides, and his hands in a wedge with the fingers pointed toward his shoulders. The Russian nurses, perplexed, tried in vain to lay him on his back, at which he emitted sharp cries, like a mouse. Besides, it was a futile effort; his limbs yielded elastically under the force, but as soon as they were let go they snapped back to their initial position. Then the women made up their minds and carried him under the shower just as he was; and since they had precise orders, they washed him as well as they could, forcing sponge and soap into the woody knot of that body; at the end, they rinsed him conscientiously, pouring a couple of buckets of tepid water over him.

Charles and I, naked and steaming, watched the scene with pity and horror. While one of the arms was extended, we saw for an instant the tattooed number: he was a 200000, one from the Vosges. “*Bon Dieu, c’est un français!*” Charles said, and turned in silence to the wall.

They gave us a shirt and underpants, and led us to a Russian barber, so that, for the last time in our career, our heads could be shaved. The barber was a dark-skinned giant, with wild, feverish eyes: he was impetuous and

violent in the practice of his art, and for reasons unknown to me he carried a machine gun over his shoulder. “Italian Mussolini,” he said to me, glaring, and to the two Frenchmen, “*Fransé Laval*”; and here one can see how little general ideas help the understanding of individual cases.

At this point we parted: Charles and Arthur, recovered and relatively healthy, joined the group of Frenchmen, and disappeared from my view. I was sick, and was taken to the infirmary, summarily examined, and rushed to a new Infectious Diseases Ward.

This infirmary was such in intention, and also because it was in fact teeming with sick people (the Germans in flight had left, in Monowitz, Auschwitz, and Birkenau, only the most seriously ill, and these had all been collected by the Russians in the Big Camp): it was not, nor could it be, a place of care, because there were only a few dozen doctors, for the most part sick themselves, and a complete lack of medicines and medical supplies, while at least three-quarters of the five thousand inmates of the camp needed medical attention.

The area I was assigned to was an enormous dark room, filled to the roof with suffering and laments. For perhaps eight hundred sick people, there was only one doctor on duty, and no nurse; it was the sick themselves who had to provide for their most urgent needs. I spent a single night there, which I remember as a nightmare; in the morning, the corpses, in the bunks or left in a heap on the floor, could be counted by the dozen.

The following day I was transferred to a smaller place, which contained only twenty bunks: in one of these I lay for three or four days, oppressed by a very high fever, conscious only at intervals, incapable of eating, and tormented by an atrocious thirst.

On the fifth day the fever vanished: I felt light as a cloud, hungry, and ice-cold, but my head was clear, my eyes and ears as if sharpened by the enforced vacation, and I was able to resume contact with the world.

In the course of those few days, an enormous change had taken place around me. It had been the last great swing of the scythe, the closing of accounts: the dying were dead, in everyone else life was beginning to flow tumultuously. Outside the windows, although it was snowing hard, the grim streets of the camp were no longer deserted, in fact they were swarming with a rapid, confused, and noisy coming and going, which seemed an end in itself. Until late at night one heard shouts, cheerful or angry, one heard cries, songs. Nevertheless, my attention, and that of my bunkmates, could

rarely escape the obsessive presence, the mortal assertive force of the smallest and most defenseless among us, the most innocent, a child, Hurbinek.

Hurbinek was a nothing, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He appeared to be about three; no one knew anything about him; he didn't know how to talk and didn't have a name. That odd name, Hurbinek, had been assigned by us, perhaps by one of the women, who had interpreted with those syllables one of the inarticulate sounds that the child every so often emitted. He was paralyzed from the lower back down, and his thin, sticklike legs had atrophied; but his eyes, lost in his pinched, triangular face, flashed, terribly alive, full of demand, of insistence, of the will to be unchained, to shatter the tomb of his muteness. The speech that he lacked, that no one had taken care to teach him, the need for speech, persisted in his gaze with explosive urgency: it was a gaze both savage and human, or, rather, mature and judgmental, so charged with force and pain that none of us could sustain it.

No one except Henek: a strong, healthy Hungarian boy of fifteen whose bed was next to mine. Henek spent half his days beside Hurbinek's bed. He was maternal rather than paternal: it's likely that, if our precarious shared life had been extended beyond a month, Hurbinek would have learned to speak from Henek, certainly more than from the Polish girls, who were too tender yet too empty, intoxicating him with caresses and kisses but avoiding intimacy.

Henek, on the other hand, sat beside the little sphinx, calm and persistent, immune to the sad power that emanated from him; he brought him food, arranged his blankets, cleaned him with skillful hands, devoid of repugnance; and he talked to him, in Hungarian, naturally, in a slow, patient voice. After a week, Henek announced seriously, but without a hint of presumption, that Hurbinek had "said a word." What word? He didn't know, a difficult word, not Hungarian: something like "*mass-klo*," "*matisklo*." At night we strained our ears: it was true, every so often from Hurbinek's corner came a sound, a word. Not always exactly the same, in truth, but it was certainly an articulated word, or, rather, slightly different articulated words, experimental variations on a theme, a root, maybe a name.

Hurbinek continued his obstinate experiments as long as he lived. In the following days, we all listened to him in silence, anxious to understand—

and there were among us speakers of all the languages of Europe—but Hurbinek's word remained secret. No, it was certainly not a message, not a revelation: perhaps it was his name, if he had even been blessed with one; perhaps (according to one of our hypotheses) it meant "eat," or "bread"; or possibly "meat" in Bohemian, as one of us, who knew that language, maintained, with solid arguments.

Hurbinek, who was three years old and had perhaps been born in Auschwitz and had never seen a tree; Hurbinek, who had fought like a man, to his last breath, to gain entrance into the world of men, from which a bestial power had banned him; Hurbinek, nameless, whose tiny forearm had been marked with the tattoo of Auschwitz—Hurbinek died in early March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine.

Henek was a good companion, and a perpetual source of surprise. His name, too, like Hurbinek's, was a nickname. His real name, which was König, had been altered to Henek, the Polish diminutive of Henry, by the two Polish girls, who, although they were at least ten years older, felt for Henek an ambiguous friendliness that soon became open desire.

Henek-König, alone in our microcosm of affliction, was neither ill nor convalescent; rather, he enjoyed splendid health in body and spirit. He was small in stature and had a gentle face, but he was built like an athlete; affectionate and helpful with Hurbinek and with us, he nevertheless harbored calmly bloodthirsty instincts. The Lager, a death trap, a "bone mill" for everyone else, had been for him a good school; in a few months it had made him a quick, shrewd, fierce, and prudent young carnivore.

In the long hours we spent together, he told me the essential facts of his short life. He was born and lived on a farm in Transylvania, in the woods, near the Romanian border. On Sundays, he often went with his father through the woods, both of them carrying guns. Why guns? To hunt? Yes, to hunt; but also to shoot Romanians. And why shoot Romanians? Because they are Romanians, Henek explained to me, with disarming simplicity. And, every so often, they shot at us.

He had been captured and deported to Auschwitz with his whole family. The others had been killed immediately: he had declared to the SS that he

was eighteen and a mason, although he was fourteen and a student. So he had entered Birkenau; but in Birkenau he had instead insisted on his actual age, had been assigned to the children's Block, and, being the oldest and strongest, had become its Kapo. The children in Birkenau were like birds of passage: after a few days, they were transferred to the Block for experiments, or directly to the gas chambers. Henek had immediately understood the situation, and as a good Kapo had got "organized," had established solid relations with an influential Hungarian Häftling, and had survived until the liberation. When there were selections in the children's Block, it was he who chose. Didn't he feel remorse? No: why should he? Was there another way to survive?

During the evacuation of the Lager, he had, wisely, hidden: from his hiding place, through a cellar window, he had seen the Germans empty out the fabled warehouses of Auschwitz in a great hurry, and had noted how, in the confusion of departure, they had scattered on the street a good quantity of canned food. They hadn't taken the time to retrieve the cans but had tried to destroy them by running over them with their tanks. Many cans were stuck in the mud and snow, undamaged: at night, Henek went out with a sack and collected a fantastic treasure of cans, dented, flattened, but still full: meat, lard, fish, fruit, vitamins. He hadn't told anyone, naturally: he told me, because my bed was next to his, and I could be useful as a guard. In effect, since Henek spent many hours wandering through the Lager, in mysterious undertakings, while I was unable to move, my work as a guard was quite useful to him. He trusted me. He arranged the sack under my bed, and in the following days he repaid me with a fair recompense in kind, authorizing me to take those extra rations that he considered suitable, in quality and quantity, to my condition as a sick person and to the extent of my services.

Hurbinek was not the only child. There were others, in relatively good health; they had established a small "club" of their own, very restricted and private, into which the intrusion of adults was evidently unwelcome. They were wild and sensible little animals, who chattered among themselves in languages I didn't understand. The most authoritative member of the clan was not more than five years old, and his name was Peter Pavel.

Peter Pavel didn’t talk to anyone and didn’t need anyone. He was a fine, strong, fair-haired child, with an intelligent, impassive face. In the morning he got down from his bunk, which was on the third tier, with slow but sure movements, went to the showers to fill his bowl with water, and washed himself carefully. Then he disappeared for the whole day, making only a brief appearance to collect his soup in that same bowl. Finally he returned for dinner; he ate, went out again, returned shortly afterward with a chamber pot, placed it in the corner behind the stove, sat there for a few minutes, left with the chamber pot, returned without it, climbed slowly up to his place, meticulously arranged the covers and the pillow, and slept until morning without changing position.

A few days after my arrival, I saw, apprehensively, a known face appear: the pathetic and unpleasant profile of the Kleine Kiepura, the mascot of Buna-Monowitz. Everyone in Buna knew him: he was only twelve and the youngest of the prisoners. Everything about him was irregular, starting with his very presence in the Lager, which normally children did not enter alive: no one knew how or why he had been admitted, and at the same time everyone knew it all too well. His situation was irregular, since he didn’t march to work but sat in semi-seclusion in the officials’ Block; and, finally, his appearance was notably irregular.

He had grown too fast and awkwardly: very long arms and legs stuck out from his short, stocky upper body, like a spider’s; and beneath his pale face, whose features were not without childish grace, an enormous jaw protruded, more prominent than his nose. The Kleine Kiepura was the attendant and favorite of the Lager-Kapo, the Kapo of all the Kapos.

No one loved him except his protector. In the shadow of authority, well fed and well dressed, exempt from the work, he had led until the last day the ambiguous and frivolous existence of a favorite, full of gossip, informing, and twisted affections; his name, wrongly, I hope, was always whispered in the most outrageous cases of anonymous denunciations to the political section and the SS. Therefore everyone feared him and avoided him.

Now the Lager-Kapo, stripped of all power, was marching to the west, and the Kleine Kiepura, recovering from a slight illness, had followed our fate. He had a bed and a bowl, and he inserted himself into our limbo. Henek and I said a few cautious words to him, since we felt toward him distrust and a hostile compassion; but he barely answered us. He was silent

for two days; he stayed in his bunk all curled up, with his gaze fixed on emptiness and his fists clenched on his chest. Then he suddenly started to talk, and we missed his silence. The Kleine Kiepura talked to himself, as if in a dream; and his dream was to have worked his way up and become a Kapo. We couldn't understand if it was madness or a childish, sinister game: relentlessly, from the height of his bed, which was near the ceiling, the boy sang and whistled the marches of Buna, the brutal rhythms that marked our weary steps every morning and every evening; and he shouted imperious commands in German to a mass of nonexistent slaves.

"Get up, pigs, do you understand? Make the beds, hurry up; clean your shoes. All together, check for lice, check the feet. Show your feet, swine! Dirty again, you, sack of s——. Pay attention, I'm not joking. I catch you again and you'll go to the crematorium." Then, shouting in the manner of the German soldiers: "Line up, close ranks, fall in. Collar down: in step, keep time. Hands on the pant seams." And then, after a pause, in an arrogant, strident voice: "This is not a sanatorium. This is a German Lager, it's called Auschwitz, and the only way out is through the Chimney. If you like it, that's it. If you don't like it, all you have to do is go and touch the electric fence."

The Kleine Kiepura disappeared after a few days, to the relief of all. Among us, weak and ill, but filled with timid and fearful joy in our regained freedom, his presence was offensive, like that of a corpse, and the compassion he roused in us was mixed with horror. We tried in vain to wrench him out of his delirium: the infection of the Lager was too far advanced in him.

The two Polish girls who carried out (in reality quite badly) the nursing duties were called Hanka and Jadzia. Hanka was a former Kapo, as could be deduced from her unshaved head, and even more certainly from her aggressive ways. She couldn't have been more than twenty-four; she was of medium height, with an olive complexion and hard, coarse features. In that atmosphere of Purgatory, full of sufferings past and present, of hope and pity, she spent days in front of the mirror, or filing her fingernails and toenails, or parading before the indifferent and ironic Henek.

She was, or considered herself, higher in rank than Jadzia, though in fact it didn't take much to surpass in authority a creature so withdrawn. Jadzia was a small, timid girl, with a sickly pink complexion; her wrapping of anemic flesh was tortured, lacerated from the inside, ravaged by a continuous secret storm. She wanted, needed, had a compelling necessity for a man, any man, immediately, all men. Every man who passed through the camp attracted her: attracted her physically, heavily, the way a magnet attracts iron. Jadzia stared at him with spellbound, dazed eyes; she got up from her corner, advanced toward him with the uncertain step of a sleepwalker, sought contact with him. If the man moved away, she followed at a distance, silently, for a little way, then, eyes lowered, returned to her inertia; if the man waited for her, Jadzia enveloped him, incorporated him, took possession of him, with the blind, mute, tremulous, slow but sure movements that amoebas demonstrate under the microscope.

Her first and principal objective was, naturally, Henek, but Henek didn't want her; he mocked her, insulted her. Still, like the practical boy he was, he took an interest in the case, and mentioned it to Noah, his great friend.

Noah didn't live in our room; rather, he lived in no place and in all places. He was a nomadic, free man, happy in the air he breathed and the earth he walked on. He was the *Scheissminister* of free Auschwitz, the superintendent of the latrines and black wells; but in spite of this responsibility, like a gravedigger's (which he had taken on voluntarily), there was nothing base about him, or, if there was, it was overcome and canceled out by the force of his vital strength. Noah was a very young Pantagruel, as strong as a horse, greedy and lewd. As Jadzia wanted all men, so Noah wanted all women: but while the feeble Jadzia was limited to spreading her flimsy nets, like a reef mollusk, Noah, a high-flying bird, cruised through all the streets of the camp, from dawn to dark, on the box of his repulsive cart, cracking the whip and singing lustily. The cart stood at the entrance to every Block, and while his foul stinking henchmen carried out their dirty task, cursing, Noah wandered through the women's rooms like an oriental prince, wearing a varicolored jacket with an arabesque design, covered with patches and braid. His love meetings were like hurricanes. He was the friend of all the men and the lover of all the women. The flood was over; in the black sky of Auschwitz Noah saw the rainbow shine, and the world was his, to repopulate.

Frau Vitta—rather, Frau Vita (or Life), as everyone called her—loved all human beings with a simple, brotherly love. Frau Vita, with her ravaged body and her sweet open face, was a young widow from Trieste, half Jewish, a survivor of Birkenau. She spent many hours beside my bed, speaking to me of a thousand things at once, with a Triestine talkativeness, laughing and crying; she was in good health, but profoundly wounded, ulcerated by what she had undergone and seen in a year of the Lager, and in those final horrible days. In fact she had been "commanded" to transport corpses, pieces of corpses, wretched anonymous remains, and those last images weighed on her like a mountain; she tried to exorcise them, to wash herself of them, throwing herself headlong into tumultuous activity. She was the only one who took care of the sick and the children; she did it with frenzied compassion, and when she had time left she washed the floors and windows with savage fury, she noisily rinsed the bowls and glasses, she ran through the rooms carrying messages, true or fictitious; she returned out of breath, and sat panting on my bed, her eyes wet—hungry for words, for intimacy, for human warmth. At night, when all the day's work was done, she jumped out of her bed, incapable of enduring solitude, and danced alone amid the beds, to the sound of her own songs, hugging affectionately to her breast an imaginary partner.

It was Frau Vita who closed the eyes of André and Antoine. They were two young farmers from the Vosges, who had been my companions during the ten days of the interregnum, both ill with diphtheria. It seemed to me that I had known them for centuries. In an odd parallel, they were stricken simultaneously by a form of dysentery that soon proved to be very serious, of tubercular origin; and in a few days the scale of their fate tipped. They were in neighboring beds, they didn't complain, they endured the atrocious abdominal attacks with clenched teeth, not understanding their fatal nature; they spoke only to each other, timidly, and did not ask anyone for help. André was the first to go, while he was speaking, in the middle of a sentence, the way a candle goes out. For two days no one came to remove him: the children went to look at him with baffled curiosity, then continued playing in their corner.

Antoine remained silent and alone, shut up in a wait that transfigured him. He was reasonably well nourished, but in two days he underwent a poignant metamorphosis, as if sucked up by his neighbor. Along with Frau Vita we managed, after many vain attempts, to get a doctor to come: I asked

him, in German, if there was something to do, if there was hope, and urged him not to answer in French. He answered in Yiddish, with a short sentence that I didn't understand; then he translated it into German: "*Sein Kamerad ruft ihn*," his companion is calling him. Antoine obeyed the call that night. They were not yet twenty, and had been in the Lager only a month.

And finally Olga came, on a silent night, to bring me the grim news of the Birkenau camp, and of the fate of the women in my transport. I had been waiting for her for many days: I didn't know her personally, but Frau Vita, who in spite of the medical prohibitions also visited the sick in the other wards, in search of sufferings to relieve and passionate conversations, had informed us of each other's presence, and had organized the illicit meeting, in the middle of the night, while everyone was sleeping.

Olga was a Croatian Jewish partisan, who in 1942 had hidden in the region of Asti, and had been interned there; so she belonged to that wave of several thousand foreign Jews who had found hospitality, and a brief peace, in the paradoxical, officially anti-Semitic Italy of those years. She was a woman of great intelligence and culture, strong, beautiful, and wise; deported to Birkenau, she had survived, alone of her family.

She spoke Italian perfectly; out of gratitude and temperament, she had soon become a friend of the Italian women in the camp and, more specifically, of those who had been deported in my convoy. She told me their story with her eyes on the floor, in the light of a candle. The furtive glow drew from the shadows only her face, emphasizing the precocious wrinkles, and transforming it into a tragic mask. A bandanna covered her head; she untied it suddenly, and the mask became macabre, like a skull. Olga's head was bare, except for a covering of short gray fuzz.

They had all died. All the children and all the old people, immediately. Of the five hundred and fifty people I had lost track of when I entered the Lager, only twenty-nine women had been admitted to Birkenau: of these, only five had survived. Vanda had been gassed, fully conscious, in the month of October; she herself, Olga, had obtained two sleeping pills for her, but they were not enough.

The Greek

Toward the end of February, after a month in bed, I felt not recovered but stable. I had the clear impression that, until I got myself (maybe with an effort) into a vertical position, and put shoes on my feet, I wouldn't regain health and strength. So on one of the rare examination days, I asked to be discharged. The doctor examined me, or made a show of examining me; he verified that the desquamation of the scarlet fever had stopped; he told me that as far as he was concerned I could go; he urged me ridiculously not to expose myself to fatigue or cold, and wished me good luck.

So I cut myself a pair of walking shoes from a blanket, grabbed as many cloth jackets and pants as I could find around (since no other garments could be had), said goodbye to Frau Vita and Henek, and left.

I was rather shaky on my feet. Just outside the door, there was a Soviet officer; he photographed me and gave me five cigarettes. A little farther on, I was unable to avoid a fellow in civilian clothes, who was looking for men to get rid of the snow; he grabbed me, deaf to my protests, handed me a shovel, and added me to a team of shovelers.

I offered him the five cigarettes, but he rejected them with irritation. He was an ex-Kapo, and naturally had remained in service: who else would have made people like us shovel snow? I tried to shovel, but it was physically impossible. If I could get around the corner no one would see me anymore, but it was essential to get rid of the shovel; to sell it would have been interesting, but I didn't know to whom, and to carry it with me, even for a few steps, was dangerous. There wasn't enough snow to bury it. I finally dropped it through the window of a cellar, and was free.

I went into a Block. There was a guard, an old Hungarian, who didn't want to let me in, but the cigarettes persuaded him. Inside it was warm, full of smoke and noise and unknown faces; but in the evening I, too, was given some soup. I was hoping for a few days of rest and gradual practice for an active life, but I didn't know I had been unlucky. Immediately, the next morning, I fell into a Russian transport heading for a mysterious transit camp.

I can't recall exactly how and when my Greek emerged out of the nothingness. In those days and in those places, shortly after the front passed, a high wind blew over the face of the Earth: the world around us seemed to have returned to a primal Chaos, and was swarming with deformed, defective, abnormal human examples; and each of them was tossing about, in blind or deliberate motion, anxiously searching for his own place, his own sphere, as the cosmogonies of the ancients say, poetically, of the particles of the four elements.

I, too, overwhelmed by the whirlwind, thus found myself many hours before dawn on a freezing night, after a copious snowfall, loaded onto a horse-drawn military cart, along with a dozen companions I didn't know. The cold was intense; the sky, thick with stars, was growing light in the east, promising one of those marvelous sunrises of the plain that, in the time of our slavery, we watched interminably from Roll Call Square in the Lager.

Our guide and escort was a Russian soldier. He sat on the box singing to the stars at the top of his lungs, and every so often addressed himself to the horses in that strangely affectionate way Russians have, with gentle inflections and long modulated phrases. We had questioned him about our destination, naturally, but without learning anything comprehensible, except that, as it seemed from some rhythmic puffing and a piston-like movement of his elbows, his task was evidently limited to taking us to a railroad.

So in fact it was. When the sun rose, the cart stopped at the foot of a slope; above ran the tracks, severed and torn up for fifty meters by a recent bombardment. The soldier pointed out to us one of the two stumps, helped us get down from the cart (and it was necessary: the trip had lasted almost two hours, the cart was small, and many of us, because of our uncomfortable position and the penetrating cold, were so stiff we couldn't

move), said goodbye to us with cheerful, incomprehensible words, turned the horses, and went off, singing sweetly.

As soon as the sun rose it disappeared behind a veil of fog; from the height of the railroad slope one could see only an endless, flat, deserted countryside, buried in snow, without a roof, without a tree. Hours passed: none of us had a watch.

As I said, we were a dozen. There was a *Reichsdeutscher*, an ethnic German, who, like many other "Aryan" Germans, after the liberation had assumed relatively courteous and frankly ambiguous manners (this was an amusing metamorphosis, which I had seen happen in others: sometimes progressively, sometimes in a few minutes, at the first appearance of the new bosses with the red star, on whose broad faces it was easy to read a tendency not to be too particular). There were two tall, thin brothers, Viennese Jews in their fifties, silent and cautious like all the old Häftlinge; an officer from the regular Yugoslav Army, who seemed unable to shake off the submissiveness and inertia of the Lager, and looked at us with empty eyes. There was a kind of human wreck, of an indefinable age, who talked to himself without stopping, in Yiddish: one of the many whom the savage life of the camp had half destroyed, leaving them to survive wrapped in (and perhaps protected by) a thick armor of insensitivity or obvious madness. And there was, finally, the Greek, with whom destiny was to join me for an unforgettable vagabond week.

His name was Mordo Nahum, and at first sight he appeared unremarkable, except for his shoes (leather, almost new, of an elegant model: a true miracle, given the time and the place), and the sack that he carried on his back, which had a considerable mass and a corresponding weight, as I was to verify in the days that followed. In addition to his own language, he spoke Spanish (like all the Jews of Salonika), French, a broken Italian but with a good accent, and, I found out later, Turkish, Bulgarian, and a little Albanian. He was forty; he was quite tall, but he walked bent over, with his head forward, as if he were nearsighted. He was red-haired and red-skinned, he had large pale, watery eyes, and a big hooked nose, which gave his entire person an aspect at once rapacious and clumsy, as of a nocturnal bird surprised by the light, or a predator fish out of its natural element.

He was recovering from an unspecified illness, which had caused spells of a very high, debilitating fever; even then, on the first nights of the

journey, he sometimes fell into a state of prostration, shivering and delirious. Yet, without feeling particularly attracted to each other, we were brought together by two common languages, and by the fact—very noticeable in the circumstances—that we were the only two Mediterraneans in the little group.

The wait was interminable; we were hungry and cold, and were forced to stand or lie in the snow, because as far as the eye could see there was neither roof nor shelter. It must have been nearly noon when, heralded from a distance by puffing and smoke, the hand of civilization was charitably extended toward us, in the form of a puny little train consisting of three or four freight cars hauled by a small locomotive, of the type that in normal times is used to maneuver cars around a station.

The train stopped in front of us, at the edge of the cut-off track. Some Polish peasants got out, but we couldn't get any information from them that made sense: they looked at us with blank faces, and avoided us as if we were contagious. In fact we were, probably in the literal sense, and, besides, our appearance could not have been pleasing; but we had deluded ourselves that we would receive a more cordial welcome from the first "civilians" we met after our liberation. We all got into one of the cars, and the little train started up again almost immediately, backward, pushed, rather than pulled, by the toy locomotive. At the next stop two peasant women got on, and, once the initial distrust and the difficulty of the language had been overcome, we learned from them some important geographic facts and some information that, if true, to our ears sounded little less than disastrous.

The break in the tracks was not far from a place called Neu Berun, where a branch line from Auschwitz, since destroyed, had once ended. One of the two trunks that went off from the break led to Katowice (to the west), the other to Kraków (to the east). Both these places were around sixty kilometers from Neu Berun, which, in the frightful condition in which the war had left the line, meant at least two days of travel, with an uncertain number of stops and transfers. The train we were on was traveling toward Kraków: until a few days earlier the Russians had been shunting into Kraków an enormous number of former prisoners, and now all the barracks, the schools, the hospitals, the convents were overflowing with people in a state of acute need. The very streets of Kraków, according to our informants, were swarming with men and women of all races, who in the

blink of an eye had been transformed into smugglers, black marketeers, or even thieves and bandits.

For several days now, the former prisoners had been concentrated in other camps, around Katowice: the two women were very surprised to find us traveling toward Kraków, where, they said, the Russian garrison itself was suffering deprivation. Having heard our story, they consulted briefly with each other, then declared themselves certain that it must have been simply an error of our guide, the Russian cart driver, who, with little experience of the country, had directed us to the eastern stub rather than the western.

This information threw us into a tangle of doubts and anguish. We had hoped for a short and safe journey, toward a camp equipped to welcome us, toward an acceptable surrogate for our homes; and that hope was part of a much larger hope, hope in a right and just world, miraculously reestablished on its natural foundations after an eternity of disruptions, mistakes, and slaughters, after our long time of endurance. It was a naïve hope, like all hopes that rest on sharp divisions between evil and good, between past and future: but we lived on them. That first crack, and the many others, large and small, that inevitably followed, was a cause of suffering for many of us, the more deeply felt because it had not been foreseen: since one does not dream for years, for decades, of a better world without imagining it to be perfect.

Instead no, something had happened that only a very few sages among us had predicted. Freedom, improbable, impossible freedom, so far from Auschwitz that only in dreams had we dared to hope for it, had arrived: but it had not brought us to the Promised Land. It was around us, but in the form of a pitiless, deserted plain. More trials awaited us, more labors, more hunger, more cold, more fears.

I had now been without food for twenty-four hours. We sat on the wooden floor of the train car, close against one another to protect ourselves from the cold; the tracks were uneven, and at every jolt our heads, infirm on our necks, bumped against the wooden sides. I felt exhausted, not only in my body: like an athlete who has run for hours, using up all his resources, the natural ones first, and then the ones that are squeezed out, created from nothing in moments of extreme need; an athlete who arrives at the finish line, and, in the act of collapsing, exhausted, on the ground, is brutally pulled to his feet and forced to start running again, in the dark, toward

another finish line, an unknown distance away. I had bitter thoughts: that nature rarely grants compensation, and neither does human society, being timid and slow to diverge from nature's gross schemes; and such an achievement would represent, in the history of human thought, the ability to see in nature not a model to follow but a shapeless block to carve, or an enemy to fight.

The train traveled slowly. In the evening, dark, apparently deserted villages appeared; then utter night descended, atrociously frigid, with no lights in the sky or on the earth. Only the jolting of the car kept us from slipping into a sleep that the cold would have rendered fatal. Finally, after interminable hours of traveling, perhaps around three in the morning, we stopped in a small, dark, badly damaged station. The Greek was delirious; none of the others—some out of fear, some out of pure inertia, some in the hope that the train would leave soon—wanted to leave the car. I got out, and wandered in the darkness with my ridiculous baggage until I saw a lighted window. It was the telegraph room, full of people; there was a glowing stove. I went in, wary as a wild dog, ready to vanish at the first threatening gesture, but no one noticed me. I collapsed onto the floor and fell asleep instantly, as one learns to do in the Lager.

I woke some hours later, at dawn. The booth was empty. The telegrapher saw me raise my head, and placed beside me, on the floor, a gigantic slice of bread and cheese. I was stunned (besides being half paralyzed by cold and sleep), and I'm afraid I didn't thank him. I stuffed the food into my stomach and went outside: the train hadn't moved. In the car, my companions lay stupefied; seeing me, they roused themselves, all except the Yugoslav, who tried in vain to move. The cold and the lack of movement had paralyzed his legs: if you touched him he screamed and groaned. We had to massage him a long time, and then cautiously move the limbs, the way you clear a rusty machine.

It had been a terrible night for everyone, perhaps the worst of our entire exile. I talked about it with the Greek: we found ourselves in agreement in deciding to form an alliance with the purpose of avoiding by any means another freezing night, which we felt we wouldn't survive.

I think that the Greek, thanks to my nighttime expedition, in some way overestimated my qualities as a *débrouillard et démerdard*, as people used, elegantly, to say. As for me, I confess that I counted chiefly on his large sack, and the fact that he was a Salonikan, which, as everyone at Auschwitz knew, was a guarantee of sophisticated mercantile skills, of knowing how to get by in all circumstances. Liking, on both sides, and respect, on one, came later.

The train departed, and by a tortuous and indeterminate route brought us to a place called Szczakowa. Here the Polish Red Cross had established a wonderful hot-food service: a fairly substantial soup was distributed, at all hours of the day and night, to anyone who showed up, without distinction. A miracle that no one of us would have dared dream of in his boldest dreams; in a certain sense, it was the Lager reversed. I don't remember the behavior of my companions. I proved to be so greedy that the Polish nurses, although accustomed to the starving clientele of the place, made the sign of the cross.

We departed again in the afternoon. The sun shone. Our wretched train stopped at sunset, with engine trouble; in the distance the belltowers of Kraków glowed red. The Greek and I got out of the car, and went to question the engineer, who was standing in the snow, completely dirty, busily contending with jets of steam bursting from some broken pipe. "*Maschina kaput*," he answered concisely. We were no longer slaves, we were no longer protected, we had emerged from guardianship. For us the hour of trial had come.

The Greek, restored by the hot soup of Szczakowa, felt in fairly good health. "*On y va*?" "*On y va*." So we left the train and our bewildered companions, whom we would never have to see again, and set off on foot in a dubious search for the Civilized World.

Following his peremptory request, I was carrying the famous load. "But it's your stuff!" I had tried in vain to protest. "Precisely because it's mine. I organized it and you carry it. It's the division of labor. Later, you'll profit from it, too." So we walked, he first and I second, on the trampled snow of a street on the outskirts; the sun had set.

I've already mentioned the Greek's shoes; as for me, I wore a pair of odd shoes such as in Italy I've seen worn only by priests: of very delicate leather, up to the anklebone, with two large pins and no laces, and two side pieces of an elastic material that were supposed to ensure that they closed and stayed on. I also wore a good four pairs of pants of Häftling material, a cotton shirt, a jacket that was also striped, and that's all. My baggage consisted of a blanket and a cardboard box in which I had first saved some pieces of bread but which was now empty—all things that the Greek looked at with unconcealed contempt and scorn.

We had been grossly deceived about the distance to Kraków: we would have to go at least seven kilometers. After twenty minutes of walking, my shoes were gone; the sole of one had fallen off, and the other was coming undone. The Greek had until then preserved a meaningful silence. When he saw me put down the bundle, and sit on a stone marker to observe the disaster, he asked me: "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five," I answered.

"What is your profession?"

"I'm a chemist."

"Then you're a fool," he said calmly. "Anyone who doesn't have shoes is a fool."

He was a fine Greek. Few times in my life, before or since, have I felt such concrete wisdom hanging over my head. I could hardly object. The validity of the argument was palpable, obvious: the two formless wrecks on my feet, and the two shining marvels on his. There was no excuse. I was no longer a slave, but, after the first steps on the path of freedom, here I was sitting on a post, with my feet in my hand, clumsy and useless as the broken-down locomotive we had just left. So did I deserve freedom? The Greek seemed dubious.

". . . But I had scarlet fever, I was in the infirmary: the shoe warehouse was far away, we weren't allowed to get near it, and then they said it had been ransacked by the Poles. And didn't I have the right to think that the Russians would provide them?"

"Words," said the Greek. "Everybody knows how to say words. I had a forty degree fever, and I didn't know if it was day or night. But one thing I knew, that I needed shoes and other things, so I got up and went to the warehouse to study the situation. And there was a Russian with a machine gun in front of the door; but I wanted shoes, and I walked around it, I broke

a window, and I went in. So I had shoes, and also the sack and everything that's in the sack, which will be useful later. That is foresight; yours is stupidity, it's not taking account of the reality of things."

"You're the one who's full of words now," I said. "I may have made a mistake, but now we have to get to Kraków before night, with shoes or without." And so saying I struggled, with my numb fingers, and with some bits of wire I had found on the road, to at least temporarily tie the soles to the uppers.

"Forget it, you'll get nowhere like that." He handed me two pieces of strong cloth he had dug out of his bundle, and showed me how to wrap up shoes and feet, so as to be able to walk as well as possible. Then we continued in silence.

The outskirts of Kraków were anonymous and bleak. The streets were utterly deserted; the shop windows were empty, all the doors and windows were barred or smashed. We reached the end of a tram line. I hesitated, since we had no way to pay for a ride, but the Greek said, "Get on, then we'll see." The car was empty; after a quarter of an hour the driver appeared, and not the conductor (from which you see that once again the Greek was right; and, as will be seen, he was right in all the affairs that followed, except one); we left, and during the journey we found with joy that one of the passengers who got on was a French soldier. He explained to us that he was billeted in an ancient convent, which the tram would soon pass; at the next stop, we would find a barrack requisitioned by the Russians and full of Italian soldiers. My heart rejoiced: I had found a home.

In reality everything did not go so smoothly. The Polish sentinel on guard at the barrack first invited us curtly to go away. "Where?" "What do I care? Away from here, anywhere." After much persistence and prayer, he was finally induced to call an Italian marshal, evidently the one who made decisions on admitting other guests. It wasn't simple, he explained to us: the barrack was already full to overflowing, the rations were limited; that I was Italian he could admit, but I wasn't a soldier; as for my companion, he was Greek, and it was impossible to have him come in among former combatants in Greece and Albania—certainly scuffles and brawls would break out. I responded with my greatest eloquence, and with genuine tears in my eyes: I guaranteed that we would stay only one night (and thought to myself: once inside . . .), and that the Greek spoke Italian well and anyway would scarcely say a word. My arguments were weak and I knew it; but the

Greek knew how all the military services of the world function, and while I was talking he was digging in the sack hanging on my shoulders. Suddenly he pushed me aside and silently placed under the nose of the Cerberus a dazzling can of pork, adorned with a multicolored label, and with futile instructions in six languages on the right way to handle the contents. So we won a roof and a bed in Kraków.

It was now night. Contrary to what the marshal wished us to believe, inside the barrack the most sumptuous abundance reigned: there were lighted stoves, candles and carbide lamps, food and drink, and straw to sleep on. The Italians were arranged ten or twelve to a room, but we at Monowitz had been two per cubic meter. They wore good military clothes, padded jackets, many had wristwatches, all had hair shiny with brilliantine; they were noisy, cheerful, and kind, and overwhelmed us with attentions. As for the Greek, he was practically carried triumphantly. A Greek! A Greek is here! The news spread from room to room, and soon a festive crowd had gathered around my stern ally. They spoke Greek, some fluently, these veterans of the most pitiful military occupation that history records: they recalled with vivid sympathy places and events, in tacit, gallant recognition of the desperate valor of the invaded country. But there was something more, which opened the way for them: mine was not an ordinary Greek, he was visibly a master, an authority, a super Greek. In a few minutes of conversation, he had performed a miracle, had created an atmosphere.

He possessed the right equipment: he could speak Italian, and (what was more important, and is lacking in many Italians themselves) he knew what to talk about in Italian. He astonished me: he proved to be an expert in girls and spaghetti, in Juventus and opera, war and gonorrhea, wine and the black market, motorcycles and dodges. Mordo Nahum, with me so laconic, quickly became the center of the evening. I saw that his eloquence, his successful effort at *captatio benevolentiae* were not motivated only by opportunistic considerations. He, too, had fought in the Greek campaign, with the rank of sergeant: on the other side, of course, but this detail at this moment seemed negligible to everyone. He had been at Tepelenë, as had many Italians, too; he had, like them, suffered cold, hunger, mud, and

bombardments; and at the end he, like them, had been captured by the Germans. He was a colleague, a fellow soldier.

He told curious war stories. Once, after the Germans broke through the front, he, along with six of his soldiers, had been ransacking the second floor of a bombed, abandoned villa in search of provisions, and had heard suspicious noises on the floor below; he had cautiously gone down the stairs with the machine gun on his hip, and had run into an Italian sergeant who with six soldiers was doing the same job on the ground floor. The Italian had leveled his gun, in turn, but the Greek had pointed out that in those conditions a gun battle would be especially stupid, that they were both, Greeks and Italians, in the same soup, and that he didn't see why they couldn't make a small separate local peace and continue searching in their respective occupied territories—a proposal that the Italian had readily agreed to.

For me, too, it was a revelation. I knew he was nothing but a somewhat shady merchant, expert in scams and without scruples, egotistical and cold, and yet I felt that, encouraged by the sympathy of his listeners, a new warmth flowered in him, an unsuspected humanity, singular but genuine, and rich in promise.

Late at night, from somewhere or other, a flask of wine appeared. It was the final blow: for me everything was celestially shipwrecked in a warm purple haze, and I barely managed to crawl on all fours to the bed of straw that the Italians, with maternal care, had made in a corner for the Greek and me.

Day had barely broken when the Greek woke me. Alas, disappointment! Where had the jovial guest of the night before gone? The Greek who was before me was hard, secretive, taciturn. "Get up," he said in a tone that admitted no response. "Put on your shoes, get the sack, and let's go."

"Go where?"

"To work. To the market. Do you think it's right to let someone support us?"

To this argument I felt completely resistant. It seemed to me that, apart from being comfortable, it was extremely natural for someone to support me, and also right. I had found the previous night's explosion of national solidarity—rather, of spontaneous humanity—wonderful, thrilling. Besides, full of self-pity as I was, it seemed to me just, and good, that the world should finally feel compassion for me. In any case, I didn't have shoes, I

was sick, I was cold, I was tired; and finally, in the name of heaven, what in the world could I do at the market?

I set out these considerations, which to me were obvious. But "*C'est pas des raisons d'homme*," he answered, in irritation: I had to realize that I had insulted an important moral principle of his, that he was seriously shocked, that on that point he was not disposed to negotiate or discuss. Moral codes, all of them, are rigid by definition: they do not admit nuances, or compromises, or mutual contamination. They are accepted or rejected entire. This is one of the main reasons that man is a herd animal, and more or less consciously seeks proximity not to his neighbor in general but only to one who shares his deep convictions (or his lack of such convictions). I had to realize, with disappointment and amazement, that such precisely was Mordo Nahum: a man of profound convictions, which, moreover, were very far from mine. Now, we all know how difficult it is to have business relations—indeed, to live together—with an ideological opposite.

Fundamental to his ethic was work, which he felt as a sacred duty but which he understood in a very broad sense. Work was that and only that which leads to gain without limiting freedom. The concept of work thus also includes, for example, besides certain legal activities, smuggling, theft, fraud (not robbery: he wasn't a violent man). On the other hand, he considered reprehensible, because humiliating, all activities that do not involve initiative or risk, or that assume discipline and hierarchy: that is, any employee relationship, any providing of services, which, even if it was well compensated, he considered altogether "servile work." But it wasn't servile work to plow one's own field, or sell fake antiquities to tourists at the port.

As for the loftier activities of the spirit, creative work, I quickly understood that the Greek was divided. These were a matter of delicate judgments, to be made case by case: it was permissible, for example, to pursue success in itself, even by selling fake paintings or bad literature, or anyway by harming one's neighbor, but it was reprehensible to persist in following an unprofitable ideal, and sinful to withdraw from the world in contemplation. Permissible, however, in fact commendable, was the path of the man who devotes himself to meditation and acquiring wisdom, provided he doesn't believe that he should receive his bread for nothing from the civilized world: even wisdom is goods, and can and should be exchanged.

Since Mordo Nahum was not a fool, he understood clearly that his principles could not be shared by individuals of different origin and upbringing, and in particular by me; but he was firmly convinced of them, and it was his ambition to translate them into acts, to show me their general validity.

In conclusion, my proposal to sit calmly and wait for bread from the Russians could only appear to him detestable: because it was “bread not earned”; because it involved a relationship of subjugation; and because every kind of order, of structure, was for him suspect, whether it led to a loaf every day or a pay envelope every month.

So I followed the Greek to the market, not so much because I was convinced by his arguments as through inertia and curiosity. The evening before, while I was navigating in a sea of vinous fogs, he had diligently informed himself of the location, customs, tariffs, demands, and supplies of the free market of Kraków, and duty called him.

We left, he with the sack (which I carried), I in my decrepit shoes, by virtue of which every single step became a problem. The market of Kraków had grown up spontaneously, right after the front passed by, and in a few days had occupied an entire neighborhood. You could buy or sell anything, and the whole city made its way there: bourgeois residents sold furniture, books, paintings, clothes, and silver; peasants padded like mattresses offered meat, chickens, eggs, cheese; children, their noses and cheeks reddened by the frigid wind, sought smokers for the rations of tobacco that the Soviet military administration distributed with peculiar generosity (three hundred grams a month for everyone, even newborns).

I was overjoyed to meet a small group of fellow countrymen: skilled types, three soldiers and a girl, cheerful and openhanded, who in those days were doing excellent business with hot pancakes, made with strange ingredients in a doorway not far away.

After a first general survey, the Greek decided on shirts. Were we partners? Well, he would contribute capital and mercantile experience; I, physical work and my (tenuous) knowledge of German. “Go,” he said, “and take a look at all the stalls where shirts are sold, ask how much they cost, say it’s too much, then come back and report. Don’t attract too much

attention.” I prepared unwillingly to carry out this market research: I harbored in myself old hunger and cold, and inertia, and at the same time curiosity, carelessness, and a new, piquant desire to start conversations, to open human relations, to flaunt and waste my boundless freedom. But the Greek, behind the backs of my interlocutors, followed me with a harsh eye: hurry up, damn it, time is money, business is business.

I came back from my tour with some prices for reference, which the Greek made a mental note of, and with a certain number of disjointed philological notions: that “shirt” is said something like *kosciúla*; that Polish numerals resemble Greek ones; that “how much is it” and “what time is it” are said approximately *ile kostúie* and *ktura gogína;* a genitive ending in -*ego* that made clear to me certain Polish curses often heard in the Lager; and other shreds of information that filled me with a silly, childish joy.

The Greek calculated in his head. One shirt could be sold for between fifty and a hundred zloty; an egg cost five or six zloty; with ten zloty, according to the information of the Italians with the pancakes, one could get soup and main course at the soup kitchen for the poor, behind the cathedral. The Greek decided to sell one of the three shirts he had, and to eat at that soup kitchen; the rest he would invest in eggs. Then we would see what to do.

So he handed me the shirt, and told me to display it, and to shout, “Shirt, gentlemen, shirt.” For “shirt” I already had the information; for “gentlemen” I thought the correct form was *panowie*, a word that I had heard used a few minutes earlier by my competitors, and that I interpreted as the vocative plural of *pan*, sir. On the latter term, besides, I had no doubts: it appears in an important dialogue in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It must have been the right word, because several clients spoke to me in Polish, asking me incomprehensible questions about the shirt. I was embarrassed: the Greek intervened authoritatively, pushed me aside, and conducted the negotiations directly; they were long and laborious but ended happily. At the invitation of the buyer, the exchange of property took place not in the public square but in a doorway.

Seventy zloty, equal to seven meals or a dozen eggs. I don’t know about the Greek: I for fourteen months had not had at my disposal such an amount of foodstuffs, all at once. But was it really at my disposal? That seemed dubious: the Greek had pocketed the sum in silence, and with his whole

attitude gave me to understand that he intended to administer the proceeds himself.

We made the rounds of the egg sellers' stalls, where we learned that, for the same price, hard-boiled and raw eggs could be acquired. We bought six, to dine on: the Greek made his purchase with extreme care, choosing the largest after minute comparisons and after many perplexities and second thoughts, utterly indifferent to the critical gaze of the seller.

The soup kitchen was behind the cathedral: it remained to find out which, among the many beautiful churches of Kraków, was the cathedral. Whom to ask, and how? A priest went by: I would ask the priest. Now, that priest, young and with a kind face, understood neither French nor German; as a result, for the first and only time in my post-scholastic career, I got some use out of years of classical studies by initiating in Latin the strangest and most tangled of conversations. From the first request for information ("*Pater optime, ubi est mensa pauperorum?*") we talked confusedly about everything, about my being a Jew, about the Lager ("*castra*"? "Lager" was better, unfortunately understood by anyone), about Italy, about the inadvisability of speaking German in public (which I came to understand later, through direct experience), and about countless other things, to which the unusual guise of the language gave a curious flavor of the pluperfect.

I had completely forgotten hunger and cold, since the need for human contact should truly be numbered among the elemental needs. I had even forgotten the Greek; but he hadn't forgotten me, and showed up brutally after a few minutes, ruthlessly interrupting the conversation. Not that he was against human contact, and not that he didn't understand the good of it (he had shown it the night before in the barrack): but these were things outside of working hours, for holidays, accessories, not to be mixed with that serious and strenuous business that is daily work. He responded to my weak protests only with a harsh look. We set off; the Greek was silent for a long time, then, in conclusive judgment of my assistance, he said to me thoughtfully, "*Je n'ai pas encore compris si tu es idiot ou fainéant*."

Guided by the priest's valuable information, we reached the soup kitchen, which was a very depressing place, but warm and full of delicious smells. The Greek ordered two soups and a single portion of beans with lard: it was the punishment for the unsuitable and foolish way I had behaved that morning. He was angry; but once he had swallowed the soup he softened noticeably, so much that he left me a good quarter of his beans.

Outside it had begun to snow, and a savage wind was blowing. Maybe it was pity for my striped garments, or indifference toward the rules; for a large part of the afternoon, the kitchen staff left us alone, thinking, and making plans for the future. The Greek's mood seemed to have changed: maybe the fever had returned, or maybe, after the solid business of the morning, he felt on vacation. He felt, in fact, in a benevolently pedagogical mood. Gradually, as the hours passed, the tone of his conversation imperceptibly warmed, and at the same time the relationship that bound us was changing: from master–slave at noon, to boss–employee at one, to master-disciple at two, to older brother–younger brother at three. The conversation returned to my shoes, which neither of us, for different reasons, could forget. He explained to me that to be without shoes is a very grave offense. In war, there are two things you must think of above all: in the first place shoes, in the second food, and not the other way around, as the populace maintains—because someone who has shoes can go around looking for food, while the opposite is not true. "But the war is over," I objected; and I thought it was over, like many in those months of truce, in a more universal sense than one dares to think today. "There is always war," Mordo Nahum answered, memorably.

We all know that no one is born with a set of rules, that each of us constructs his own along the way or, ultimately, on the store of his experiences, or those of others, similar to his; and so the moral universe of each of us, properly interpreted, coincides with the sum of our previous experiences, and thus represents a condensed version of our biography. The biography of my Greek was linear: that of a strong, cold man, solitary and logical, who had moved from childhood within the rigid meshes of a mercantile society. He was (or had been) open also to other aspirations: he wasn't indifferent to the sky and the sea in his country, the pleasures of home and family, dialectic encounters. But he had been conditioned to push all this to the margins of his day and of his life, so that it did not disturb what he called the *travail d'homme*. His had been a life of war, and he considered cowardly and blind anyone who rejected that universe of iron. The Lager had come to us both: I had perceived it as a monstrous distortion, an ugly anomaly of my history and the history of the world, he as a sad confirmation of well-known things. "There is always war," man is a wolf toward man: an old story. Of his two years in Auschwitz he never spoke to me.

He talked to me, instead, eloquently, about his many activities in Salonika, of the batches of goods bought, sold, smuggled by sea, or at night across the Bulgarian border; of the scams shamefully endured and those gloriously perpetrated; and, finally, of the happy, tranquil hours passed on the shore of the gulf, after the day of work, with his merchant colleagues, in certain cafés on stilts that he described with unusual abandon, and of the long conversations that were held there. What conversations? About money, about customs, about freight charges, naturally; but also about other things. What is to be understood by "knowledge," by "spirit," by "justice," by "truth." What is the nature of the fragile tie that binds the soul to the body, how it is established at birth and released at death. What is freedom, and how to reconcile the conflict between freedom of the spirit and fate. What follows death, too; and other grand Greek things. But all this in the evening, of course, when the trafficking was done, with coffee or wine or olives, a brilliant game of intellect among men active also in idleness: without passion.

Why the Greek told me these things, why he confessed to me, isn't clear. Maybe, in front of me, who was so different, so foreign, he felt alone, and his conversation was a monologue.

We left the soup kitchen in the evening, and returned to the Italians' barrack. After much insistence, we had got permission from the Italian colonel in charge to stay in the barrack one more night, only one. No ration, and we were not to attract any attention—he didn't want to have trouble with the Russians. The next morning, we would have to leave. For dinner each of us had two of the eggs acquired in the morning, saving the last two for breakfast. After the events of the day, I felt much "younger" compared with the Greek. When it came to the eggs, I asked if he knew how to distinguish between a raw egg and a hard-boiled one from the outside (you spin the egg rapidly, on a table, for example; if it's hard it spins for a long time, if it's raw it stops almost immediately): it was a minor skill I was proud of. I hoped that the Greek didn't know it, and so I would be able to rehabilitate myself in his eyes, if in a small way.

But the Greek looked at me with his cold, wise serpent's eyes: "What do you take me for? Do you think I was born yesterday? You think that I never dealt in eggs? Come on, tell me some item I've never dealt in!"

I had to make my retreat. The episode, in itself negligible, was to return to my mind many months later, in the middle of summer, in the heart of

White Russia, on the occasion of my third and last encounter with Mordo Nahum.

We left the following morning, at dawn (this is a tale interwoven with cold dawns), with Katowice as our goal: it had been confirmed that there actually existed various transit centers for scattered Italians, French, Greeks, and so on. Katowice was only about eighty kilometers from Kraków: little more than an hour by train in normal times. But in those days there wasn't a twenty-kilometer section of track without a transfer, many bridges had been blown up, and because of the terrible state of the line the trains proceeded very slowly during the day and at night didn't run at all. It was a labyrinthine journey, which lasted three days, with nighttime stops in places ridiculously far from the junction between the two ends: a journey of cold and hunger, which brought us the first day to a place called Trzebinia. Here the train stopped, and I went out onto the platform to stretch my legs, which were stiff with cold. Maybe I was among the first dressed in "zebra stripes" to appear in that place called Trzebinia: I was immediately at the center of a dense circle of the curious who questioned me volubly in Polish. I answered as well as I could in German; and in the middle of the group of workers and peasants a middle-class man came forward, in a felt hat, with eyeglasses and a leather portfolio in his hand—a lawyer.

He was Polish, he spoke French and German well, he was polite and kind; in short, he possessed all the qualities that enabled me finally, after the long year of slavery and silence, to recognize in him the messenger, the spokesman from the civilized world—the first I had met.

I had an avalanche of urgent things to tell the civilized world, my own but belonging to everyone, things of blood, things that, it seemed to me, would shake every conscience to its foundations. The lawyer really was polite and kind: he questioned me, and I spoke dizzily of my so recent experiences, of Auschwitz, nearby and yet, it seemed, unknown to all, of the massacre I alone had escaped, everything. The lawyer translated into Polish for the public. Now, I did not know Polish, but I knew how to say "Jew," and how to say "political"; and I quickly realized that the translation of my account, although heartfelt, was not faithful. The lawyer described me to the audience not as an Italian Jew but as an Italian political prisoner.

I asked for an explanation, surprised and almost offended. He answered, embarrassed, "*C'est mieux pour vous. La guerre n'est pas finie*." The words of the Greek.

I felt the warm wave of feeling free, of feeling myself a man among men, of feeling alive, recede into the distance. I was suddenly old, wan, tired beyond any human measure: the war isn't over, war is forever. My listeners trickled away; they must have understood. I had dreamed something like that, we all had, in the Auschwitz night: to speak and not be listened to, to find freedom again and remain alone. Soon, I remained alone with the lawyer; after a few minutes, he, too, left me, apologizing urbanely. He urged me, as the priest had, to avoid speaking German. When I asked why, he answered vaguely, "Poland is a sad country." He wished me good luck and offered me some money, which I refused; he seemed to me moved.

The locomotive whistled its departure. I got back in the freight car, where the Greek was waiting for me, but I didn't tell him what had happened.

It wasn't the only stop: others followed, and at one of these, at night, we realized that Szczakowa, the place where there was hot soup for everyone, was not far. It was in fact north, and we were supposed to go west, but since at Szczakowa there was hot soup for all, and we had no plan other than to satisfy our hunger, why not head to Szczakowa? So we got out, waited for the right train, and showed up many more times at the Red Cross counter; I believe that the Polish nurses recognized me easily, and remember me still.

As night fell, we settled ourselves to sleep on the floor, right in the middle of the waiting room, since all the places along the sides were occupied. Perhaps made compassionate or curious by my outfit, a few hours later a Polish gendarme arrived, whiskered, ruddy, and corpulent. He questioned me in vain in his language; I answered with the first sentence one learns in any unknown language, and that is *Nie rozumiem po polsku*, I don't understand Polish. I added, in German, that I was Italian, and that I spoke a little German. At which, a miracle! the gendarme began to speak Italian.

He spoke a terrible Italian, guttural and aspirated, studded with new, invented curses. He had learned it, and this explains everything, in a valley near Bergamo, where he had worked some years as a miner. He, too, and he was the third, urged me not to speak German. I asked why: he answered with an eloquent gesture, passing his index and middle fingers, like a knife,

between chin and larynx, and adding cheerfully, “Tonight all Germans kaput.”

Certainly it was an exaggeration, and yet an opinion-hope. But in fact the next day we met a long train of freight cars, closed from the outside; it was headed east, and through the peepholes many human faces could be seen, in search of air. That sight, strongly evocative, roused in me a knot of confused and opposing feelings, which even today I would have a hard time sorting out.

The gendarme, very kindly, proposed to the Greek and me that we spend the rest of the night in the warmth of the guardroom; we accepted willingly, and in the unusual environment did not wake until late in the morning, after a restorative sleep.

We left Szczakowa the next day, for the last stop on the journey. We reached Katowice without incident; there really did exist a transit camp for Italians, and one for Greeks. We separated without many words; but at the moment of farewell, in a fleeting yet distinct way, I felt a solitary wave of friendship move in me toward him, veined with faint gratitude, contempt, respect, animosity, curiosity, and regret that I wouldn’t see him again.

I did see him again, in fact: twice. I saw him in May, in the glorious and turbulent days of the end of the war, when all the Greeks in Katowice, a hundred, men and women, filed past our camp singing, headed to the station: they were leaving for their country, for home. At the head of the column was he, Mordo Nahum, lord among the Greeks, and he was holding the white-and-blue banner: but he put it down when he saw me, left the crowd to greet me (a little ironically, since he was leaving and I was staying: but it was right, he explained, because Greece belonged to the United Nations), and with an unusual gesture he extracted from his famous sack a gift: a pair of pants, of the type used in Auschwitz in the last months, and that is with a large “window” on the left hip, held together by a piece of striped fabric. Then he disappeared.

But he was to reappear one more time, many months later, against the most unlikely background and in the most unexpected incarnation.

Katowice

The transit camp of Katowice, which welcomed me, hungry and tired, after the week of wandering with the Greek, was situated on a small rise, in an outlying neighborhood called Bogucice. In its time, it had been a tiny German Lager, and had housed the miner slaves employed in a coal mine that opened in the vicinity. It was made up of a dozen small brick single-story barracks; the double fence of barbed wire was still in place, though by now purely symbolic. The gate was guarded by a Soviet soldier, with a sleepy, lazy air. On the other side of the camp there was a big hole in the fence, through which one could go out without even ducking; the Russian command didn't seem to be worried about it in the least. The kitchens, the dining room, the infirmary, the washhouses were outside the fence, so the gate was the site of continuous traffic.

The sentinel was a gigantic Mongol of around fifty, armed with machine gun and bayonet; he had enormous gnarled hands, a drooping gray mustache like Stalin's, and eyes of fire, but his fierce, barbaric appearance was utterly incongruous with his innocuous duties. He had no replacement, and so he was dying of boredom. His behavior toward those who entered and exited was unpredictable: at times he demanded one's *propusk*—that is to say, a pass—at other times he asked only one's name and, at still others, a little tobacco, or even nothing. On some days, however, he rejected everyone ferociously, but he made no objection if he then saw someone going out through the hole at the back, which was certainly visible. When it was cold, he tranquilly left his guard post, went into one of the rooms where he could see a smoking stove, threw his machine gun down on a cot, lit his pipe, and offered vodka if he had some, or if he didn't asked around for it,

and cursed disconsolately if he didn't get any. Sometimes he even handed the machine gun to the first of us who happened by, making it clear by means of gestures and shouts that he was to replace him at the guard post; then he napped near the stove.

When I arrived with Mordo Nahum, the camp was occupied by an extremely mixed population, of about four hundred people. There were French, Italians, Dutch, Greeks, Czechs, Hungarians, and others; some had been civilian workers in the Todt Organization,[1] others interned soldiers, still others former Häftlinge. There were also about a hundred women.

In fact, the organization of the camp was entrusted largely to individual or group initiatives, but nominally it was subject to a Soviet Kommandantur, which was the most picturesque example of a Gypsy band one can imagine. There was a captain, Ivan Antonovich Egorov, a little man no longer young, with a rough and aloof manner; three "old lieutenants"; an athletic and jovial sergeant; a dozen members of the Territorial Army[2] (among whom was the sentinel described above); a quartermaster; a *doktorka*;[3] a doctor, Pyotr Grigorievich Dancenko, who was very young, a great drinker, smoker, and lover, and indifferent to the job; a nurse, Marya Fyodorovna Prima, who quickly became my friend; and an undefined group of girls, as solid as oaks. It was hard to tell if these girls were military or militarized or auxiliaries or civilians or looking for something to do. Their duties were various and vague: as laundresses, cooks, typists, secretaries, waiters, current lovers of this one or that, occasional fiancées, wives, daughters.

The entire caravan lived in harmony, without a schedule or rules, near the camp, housed in the rooms of an abandoned elementary school. The only one who paid attention to us was the quartermaster, who seemed to be the highest in authority, if not in rank, of the entire command. On the other hand, the hierarchical relations were all indecipherable: the Russians talked to one another for the most part with friendly simplicity, like a large temporary family, without military-style formalities; sometimes furious quarrels and fistfights broke out, even between officers and soldiers, but they ended rapidly without disciplinary consequences and without rancor, as if nothing had happened.

The war was about to end, the long, long war that had devastated their country; for them it was already over. It was the great truce, for the hard time that was to follow hadn't yet begun, nor had the cursed name of the

cold war been uttered. They were cheerful, sad, and tired, and were satisfied with food and wine, like the companions of Ulysses after beaching their ships. And yet, under the careless and anarchic appearance, it was easy to discern in them, in each of those coarse, open faces—in the good soldiers of the Red Army, the capable men of Russia old and new, gentle in peace and fierce in war, strong with an inner discipline born of goodwill, mutual love, and love of country—a discipline that was stronger, precisely because it was internal, than the mechanical and servile discipline of the Germans. It was easy to understand, living among them, why the former, and not the latter, had ultimately prevailed.

One of the barracks in the camp was inhabited exclusively by Italians, almost all of them civilian workers, who had moved to Germany more or less voluntarily. They were masons and miners, no longer young, calm, sober, hardworking people, and kindhearted.

The Italian in charge, to whom I was directed to be “registered,” was, however, very different. The accountant Rovi had not been elected by the others or invested by the Russians but had appointed himself camp chief; in fact, although he was an individual of rather meager intellectual and moral qualities, he possessed to a conspicuous degree the virtue that, under every sky, is most essential for gaining power, and that is love of power itself.

Witnessing the behavior of a man who acts not according to reason but according to his own deep impulses is a spectacle of great interest, similar to that enjoyed by the naturalist who studies the activities of an animal with complex instincts. Rovi had won his post by acting with the same atavistic spontaneity with which the spider constructs its web, since, like the spider without a web, Rovi couldn’t survive without a position. He had immediately begun to weave; he was basically a fool, and didn’t know a word of German or Russian, but from the first day he secured the services of an interpreter and presented himself ceremoniously to the Soviet command as a plenipotentiary for the interests of the Italians. He had organized a desk, with forms (written by hand, in beautiful writing with flourishes), stamps, pencils of various colors, and a ledger; although he wasn’t a colonel, or in fact even a soldier, he had hung outside the door a large sign that read “Italian Command—Colonel Rovi”; and he had

surrounded himself with a small court of dishwashers, scribes, sacristans, spies, messengers, and bullies, whom he remunerated in kind, with provisions purloined from the rations for the community, and exempted from any work for the common good. His courtiers, who, as always happens, were much worse than him, ensured (even by force, though it was seldom necessary) that his orders were carried out, served him, gathered information for him, and flattered him intensely.

With surprising foresight, which is to say by means of a highly complex and mysterious mental process, he had understood the importance, indeed the necessity, of possessing a uniform, since he had to deal with people in uniform. He had got one that was quite imaginative, in fact theatrical, with a pair of Soviet boots, a Polish railway worker's cap, and jacket and pants found I don't know where, which seemed to be made of thick wool and perhaps they were. He had insignia sewn on the lapels, gold threads on the cap, stripes and chevrons on the sleeves, and a chest full of medals.

On the other hand, he wasn't a tyrant, or a bad administrator. He had the good sense to keep oppression, extortion, and abuse within modest limits, and possessed an undeniable vocation for paperwork. Now, since those Russians were curiously sensitive to the fascination of paperwork (even if its possible rational significance escaped them), and seemed to love bureaucracy with the platonic and spiritual love that does not achieve possession and doesn't desire it, Rovi was benevolently tolerated, if not exactly admired, in the environs of the Kommandantur. Further, he was bound to Captain Egorov by a paradoxical, improbable bond of sympathy between misanthropes: for both were sad, dutiful, disgusted, dyspeptic individuals, and in the general euphoria sought isolation.

In the Bogucice camp, I found Leonardo, who was already valued as a doctor, and was besieged by an unremunerative but numerous clientele; he came, like me, from Buna, and had arrived in Katowice several weeks earlier, following less tortuous paths. Among the Häftlinge in Buna there was an excess of doctors, and very few (in practice, only those who had mastered German, or were very skilled in the art of survival) had managed to be recognized as such by the medical chief of the SS. So Leonardo had not enjoyed any privilege; he had been subjected to the most severe manual labor and had lived his year in the Lager in an extremely precarious way. He didn't tolerate hard work and cold well, and had been admitted to the infirmary many times, for swellings on his feet, infected wounds, and

general debility. Three times, in three selections in the infirmary, he had been chosen to die in the gas chambers, and three times the solidarity of his colleagues in charge had riskily saved him from his fate. Besides luck, however, he possessed another virtue essential in those places: an unlimited capacity to endure, a silent courage, not innate, not religious, not transcendent, but deliberate and willed hour by hour, a manly patience, which sustained him miraculously at the edge of collapse.

The Bogucice infirmary was set up in the same school that housed the Russian Command, in two small, fairly clean rooms. It had been created out of nothing by Marya Fyodorovna. Marya was a military nurse around forty, like a forest cat, with oblique, wild eyes, a short nose with flared nostrils, and agile, silent movements. In fact, she came from the forest: she was born in the heart of Siberia.

Marya was an energetic, gruff, disorderly, and impatient woman. She obtained medicines partly by normal administrative means, collecting them from the Soviet military stores, partly through the multiple channels of the black market, and partly (and it was the largest part) by actively cooperating in ransacking the warehouses of the former German Lagers and abandoned German infirmaries and pharmacies, whose stock, in turn, was the result of previous looting carried out by the Germans in all the nations of Europe. Thus every day the infirmary of Bogucice received supplies without plan or method: hundreds of boxes of specialized pharmaceutical products, bearing labels and instructions for use in all the languages, which had to be sorted and catalogued for possible use.

Among the things I had learned in Auschwitz, one of the most important was that it is essential to avoid being “ordinary.” All paths are closed to those who seem useless, all are open to one who performs a function, even the most inane. So, after consulting with Leonardo, I introduced myself to Marya, and offered my services as a polyglot pharmacist.

Marya Fyodorovna examined me with an eye expert in weighing males. Was I *doktor*? Yes, I was, I maintained, aided in the misunderstanding by the strong linguistic overlap. The Siberian did not in fact speak German, but (although she wasn’t Jewish) she knew a little Yiddish, learned who knows where. I didn’t have a very professional or attractive appearance, but maybe I would do in the back room. Marya drew from her pocket a creased and crumpled piece of paper, and asked me my name.

When to “Levi” I added “Primo,” her green eyes lit up, suspicious at first, then questioning, finally benevolent. Then we’re practically relatives, she explained: I was Primo and she Prima—Prima was her surname, her *família*, Marya Fyodorovna Prima. Very good, I could start work. Shoes and clothes? Well, it wasn’t a simple matter, she would talk to Egorov and certain of her acquaintances, maybe later something could be found. She scribbled my name on the piece of paper, and the next day solemnly handed me my *propusk*, a permit with a rather homemade look, which authorized me to enter and leave the camp at any hour of the day or night.

I lived in a room with eight Italian laborers, and every morning I went to work in the infirmary. Marya Fyodorovna handed me hundreds of multicolored little boxes to sort, and gave me small friendly presents: packets of glucose (very welcome); licorice and mint lozenges; shoelaces; sometimes a packet of salt or pudding mix. One evening, she invited me to have tea in her room, and I noticed that on the wall over her bed hung seven or eight photographs of men in uniform, most of them portraits of known faces, that is, of soldiers and officers of the Kommandantur. Marya called them all familiarly by name, and spoke of them with affectionate simplicity; she had known them for many years now, and they had all been through the war together.

After a few days, since my job as pharmacist left me plenty of free time, Leonardo called on me to help in the clinic. The Russians intended it to serve only the inhabitants of the Bogucice camp; in reality, since the treatment was free and there was nothing formal about it, Russian soldiers, civilians from Katowice, people passing through, beggars, and dubious types who wanted nothing to do with the authorities also showed up to ask for an examination or for medicines.

Neither Marya nor Dr. Dancenko found anything to object to in this state of affairs. (Dancenko never found anything to object to in anything; he didn’t care about anything except courting the girls, with gallant charm, like a grand duke in an operetta, and early in the morning, when he arrived for a rapid inspection, he was already drunk and happy.) A few weeks later, however, Marya summoned me, and with a very officious expression informed me that, “by orders from Moscow,” the activity of the clinic had

to be checked scrupulously. Thus I was to keep a record, and note down every evening the name and age of the patients, their illness, and the type and quantity of medicines administered or prescribed.

In itself, the thing didn't seem unreasonable, but certain practical details had to be decided, which I discussed with Marya. For example, how would we verify the identity of the patients? Marya considered that objection negligible: if I wrote down the stated personal information, "Moscow" would certainly be satisfied. A more serious difficulty emerged, however: in what language should the record be kept? Not in Italian or French or German, which neither Marya nor Dancenko knew. In Russian, then? No, I didn't know Russian. Marya thought about it, perplexed, then she brightened and exclaimed, "Galina!" Galina would resolve the situation.

Galina was one of the girls attached to the Kommandantur; she knew German, so I would be able to dictate the reports to her in German and she would translate them into Russian on the spot. Marya immediately sent for Galina (Marya's authority, although of an ill-defined nature, appeared to be great), and so began our collaboration.

Galina was eighteen, and was from Kazatin, in Ukraine. She was dark-haired, pretty, and vivacious; she had an intelligent face with sensitive, delicate features, and among all her companions she was the only one who dressed with a certain elegance, and whose shoulders, hands, and feet were of acceptable dimensions. She spoke German reasonably well; with her help the famous reports were laboriously compiled evening after evening, with a stub of a pencil, in a file of grayish paper that Marya had given me, like a holy relic. How do you say "asthma" in German? and "ankle"? and "sprain"? and what are the corresponding Russian terms? At every lexical obstacle we were forced to stop, overcome by doubt, and resort to complicated gestures, ending in squeals of laughter on the part of Galina.

Much more rarely on my part. In front of Galina I felt weak, ill, and dirty; I was painfully conscious of my wretched appearance, of my crudely shaved beard, of my clothes from Auschwitz; I was acutely aware of Galina's gaze, which was still almost childlike, and in which a tentative pity was accompanied by a definite repulsion.

Still, after several weeks of working together, we had established an atmosphere of tenuous mutual confidence. Galina gave me to understand that the business of the reports was not so serious after all, that Marya Fyodorovna was "old and crazy," and we had only to give the pages back to

her covered with writing; and that Dr. Dancenko was busy with completely other business (known to Galina in an astonishing abundance of detail), with Anna, with Tanja, with Vassilissa, and the reports interested him “like last year’s snow.” So the time devoted to the grim bureaucratic gods diminished, and Galina took advantage of the pauses to tell me her story, in bits and pieces, as she smoked.

Two years earlier, in the middle of the war, in the Caucasus, where she had taken refuge with her family, she had been recruited by this very Kommandantur: recruited in the simplest way, that is to say stopped in the street and taken to the Command to type some letters. There she had gone and there remained; she hadn’t managed to break away (or, more likely, I thought, she hadn’t even tried). The Kommandantur had become her real family; she had followed it for tens of thousands of kilometers, through the devastated areas behind the lines and along the endless front, from the Crimea to Finland. She didn’t have a uniform, or even a status or a rank: but she was useful to her fighting companions, she was their friend, and so she followed them, because there was the war, and each one had to do his duty; and then the world was big and varied, and it’s wonderful to travel through it when you’re young and without a care.

Galina had no cares, not even the shadow of one. You would meet her in the morning going to the washhouse, with a sack of laundry balanced on her head, and singing like a lark; or in the offices of the Command, barefoot, pounding on the typewriter; or on Sunday walking on the ramparts, arm in arm with a soldier, never the same one; or at night on the balcony, romantically rapt, while a shabby Belgian suitor serenaded her on a guitar. She was a sharp, ingenuous country girl, a bit flirtatious, very lively, not especially well educated, not especially serious; and yet you felt the same virtue operating in her, the same dignity, as in her companion-boyfriends, the dignity of someone who works and knows why, who fights and knows he is right, who has his life before him.

In the middle of May, a few days after the end of the war, she came to say goodbye to me. She was leaving; they had told her she could go home. Did she have a travel order? Did she have money for the train? “No,” she answered laughing, “*nye nada*, there’s no need, these things always arrange themselves.” And she disappeared, sucked up by the emptiness of the Russian space, into the pathways of her boundless country, leaving behind a bitter scent of earth, of youth, of joy.

I also had other duties: to help Leonardo in the clinic, naturally; and to help him in the daily inspection for lice.

This last job was necessary in those places and those times, when epidemic typhus spread, fatally. The job was not very pleasant: we had to go through all the barracks, and ask each person to strip to the waist and show us his shirt, in whose folds and seams the lice customarily nested, and suspended their eggs. This type of lice have a red spot on their back: according to a joke that was tirelessly repeated by our clients, that spot, observed under strong enough magnification, would reveal itself to be formed by a tiny hammer and sickle. They are also called “the infantry,” whereas fleas are the artillery, mosquitoes the air force, bedbugs the parachutists, and cockroaches the sappers. In Russian they’re called *vshi*; I learned that from Marya, who had given me a second file, in which I was to mark the number and name of those who had lice that day, and underline recidivists in red.

Recidivists were rare, with the single notable exception of the Ferrari. The Ferrari, to whose name the article was added because he was Milanese, was a marvel of inertia. He was part of a small group of common criminals, formerly detained in the San Vittore Prison, who in 1944 had been offered the choice between prison in Italy and work in Germany, and who had chosen the latter. There were about forty, almost all thieves or fences; they were a colorful, rowdy, self-contained microcosm, a perpetual source of trouble for the Russian Command and for accountant Rovi.

But the Ferrari was treated by his colleagues with open contempt, and was thus relegated to an enforced solitude. He was a short man of around forty, thin and yellow, almost bald, with an absent expression. He spent his days lying on his cot, and was an indefatigable reader. He read whatever came to hand: Italian, French, German, Polish newspapers and books. Every two or three days, during the examination, he said to me, “I finished that book. Do you have another to lend me? But not in Russian, you know I don’t understand Russian well.” He wasn’t a polyglot; in fact, he was practically illiterate. But he “read” every book just the same, from the first line to the last, identifying with satisfaction the individual letters, pronouncing them in a whisper, and laboriously reconstructing words, whose meaning he didn’t care about. To him it was enough: the way, at

different levels, others find pleasure in doing crossword puzzles, or solving differential equations, or calculating the orbits of asteroids.

So he was a singular individual, and his story confirmed it. He willingly told it to me, and I repeat it here.

“For many years I went to the school for thieves in Loreto. There was a mannequin with bells and a wallet in his pocket. You had to get the wallet out without the bells ringing, and I never succeeded. So I was never authorized to steal; they had me act as a lookout. I was a lookout for two years. You don’t earn much and you’re at risk. It’s not a nice job.

“I racked my brains, and one fine day I thought that, license or not, if I wanted to earn my bread I had to set off on my own.

“There was the war, the evacuation, the black market, a crowd of people on the trams. It was on the 2, at Porta Lodovica, because around there no one knew me. Near me there was a lady with a big purse; in her coat pocket, you could feel by touch, was the wallet. I got out the *saccagno*, very slowly . . .”

I must here insert a brief technical aside. The *saccagno*, the Ferrari explained to me, is a precision tool that you get by breaking in two the blade of an ordinary razor, freehand. It’s used to cut purses and pockets, so it has to be very sharp. It’s also used occasionally, in matters of honor, to disfigure; and that’s why people with scarred faces are called *saccagnati*.

“. . . slowly, and I started to cut the pocket. I had almost finished when a woman, not the one with the pocket, but another one, started shouting, ‘Stop thief, stop thief.’ I wasn’t doing anything to her, she didn’t know me, and she didn’t know the one with the pocket. She wasn’t even from the police, she was someone who had nothing to do with it. The fact is, the tram stopped, they caught me, I ended up in San Vittore, from there to Germany, and from Germany here. You see? That’s what can happen if you take the initiative.”

From then on, the Ferrari had taken no initiative. He was the most submissive and most docile of my clients: he immediately stripped without protesting, he presented his shirt with the inevitable lice, and the morning after submitted to the disinfection without acting like an offended prince. But the next day the lice, who knows how, were there again. He was like that: he took no initiatives, he put up no resistance, not even to lice.

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My professional activity brought at least two advantages: the *propusk* and better food.

The kitchen of the camp at Bogucice was, to tell the truth, quite generous; we were assigned the Russian military ration, which consisted of a kilo of bread, two soups every day, one *kasha* (that is, a plate with meat, lard, millet, or other vegetables), and Russian-style tea, diluted, abundant, and sugary. But Leonardo and I had to make up for the damage caused by a year in the Lager: we were still racked by an uncontrollable hunger, largely psychological, and the ration wasn't enough for us.

Marya had authorized us to have our midday meal in the infirmary. The infirmary kitchen was managed by two Parisian *maquisardes*, working-class women, no longer young, who were also veterans of the Lager, where they had lost their husbands; they were silent and sorrowful, and on their prematurely aged faces sufferings both long-past and recent were as if dominated and contained by the energetic moral conscience of political fighters.

One, Simone, worked in our dining hall. She ladled the soup once, and a second time. Then she looked at me, almost with apprehension. "*Vous répétez, jeune homme?*" I timidly nodded yes, ashamed of that animal voracity. Under Simone's severe gaze, I rarely dared to *répéter* a fourth time.

As for the *propusk*, it constituted more a sign of social distinction than a specific advantage. In fact, anyone could easily go out through the hole in the fence, and go into the city as free as a bird in the air. And, for example, many of the thieves did, to go and practice their art in Katowice or even farther away; they didn't return, or came back to the camp after several days, often giving different personal information, amid the general disinterest.

However, the *propusk* allowed one to go to Katowice without having to make the long journey through the mud that surrounded the camp. With the return of health and good weather, I, too, felt with increasing intensity the temptation to go on a cruise through the unknown city: what was the use of being free if we still spent our days within a frame of barbed wire? Besides, the population of Katowice regarded us with sympathy, and had allowed us free passes on the trams and to the cinemas.

I talked about it one night with Cesare, and we decided on a general program for the next days, during which we would combine the useful with the pleasant, that is to say, business with vagabonding.

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1. The Todt was created in Germany in 1940 for the recruitment of foreign workers.
2. An army made up of ex-soldiers who in wartime were enlisted for auxiliary services behind the lines and inside the country.
3. A woman doctor.

Cesare

I had met Cesare in the last days of the Lager, but it was a different Cesare. In the Buna camp abandoned by the Germans, the ward for infectious diseases, in which the two Frenchmen and I managed to survive and to establish a semblance of civilization, represented an island of relative well-being; in the neighboring ward, for patients with dysentery, death prevailed uncontested.

Through the wooden wall, a few centimeters from my head, I heard Italian spoken. One evening, mobilizing the little energy I had left, I decided to go and see who was living back there. I walked down the dark, frigid corridor, opened the door, and was plunged into a realm of horror.

There were a hundred bunks: half were occupied by corpses that had frozen in the cold. Only two or three candles broke the darkness; the walls and ceiling were lost in shadow, so that you seemed to be entering an enormous cave. There was no heat, except for the infected breath of the fifty patients who were still alive. In spite of the cold, the stench of feces and death was so intense that it took your breath away and you had to do violence to your own lungs to force them to take in that polluted air.

Yet fifty were still alive. They were huddled under the covers; some groaned or cried, others struggled out of their bunks to evacuate on the floor. They called out names, prayed, cursed, begged for help in all the languages of Europe.

I groped my way along one of the aisles between the bunks, stumbling and staggering in the dark on the layer of frozen excrement. At the sound of my footsteps, the cries redoubled: clawlike hands emerged from under the covers, held me by my clothes, coldly touched my face, tried to bar my

path. Finally I reached the dividing wall, at the end of the aisle, and found the men I was looking for. They were two Italians in a single bunk, entangled with each other to protect themselves from the cold: Cesare and Marcello.

I knew Marcello well: he came from Cannaregio, the ancient ghetto of Venice; he had been at Fòssoli with me, and had crossed the Brenner in the freight car next to mine. He was healthy and strong, and until the last weeks of the Lager he had held on, valiantly enduring hunger and toil; but the winter cold had subdued him. He no longer spoke, and, in the light of the match I lit, I had trouble recognizing him: a yellow face, all nose and teeth, a black beard; his eyes shining and dilated by delirium, staring into space. For him there was little to be done.

Cesare, on the other hand, I scarcely knew, since he had come to Buna from Birkenau a few months earlier. He asked for water, before food: water, because he had had nothing to drink for four days, and the fever was burning him and the dysentery emptied him. I brought it to him, along with the remains of our soup; and I didn’t know that I was thus bringing the basis of a long and singular friendship.

His capacity for recovery must have been extraordinary, because I found him in the camp of Bogucice, two months later, not only recovered but practically glowing with health, and lively as a cricket; and yet he was the veteran of a further adventure that had put to an extreme test the natural qualities of his character, strengthened in the hard school of the Lager.

After the arrival of the Russians, he, too, had been admitted into Auschwitz among the sick, and since his illness wasn’t serious, and his constitution strong, he was soon cured—in fact, a little too soon. Around the middle of March, the German armies in retreat had been concentrated around Breslau, and had tried a last desperate counteroffensive in the direction of the Silesian mineral basin. The Russians were taken by surprise: perhaps overestimating the adversary’s initiative, they had rushed to prepare a defensive line. A long anti-tank trench was required, which would block the valley of the Oder between Oppeln and Gleiwitz: hands were scarce, the job colossal, the need urgent, and the Russians acted as they usually did, in an extremely brusque and hasty manner.

One morning around nine, Russian soldiers had suddenly blocked some of the main streets in Katowice. In Katowice, and throughout Poland, there was a shortage of men: the male population of working age had

disappeared, imprisoned in Germany and Russia, scattered in partisan bands, slaughtered in battle, in bombings, in reprisals, in the Lagers, in the ghettos. Poland was a country in mourning, a country of old men and widows. At nine in the morning there were only women in the street: housewives with their bags or carts, in search of food and coal in the shops and the markets. The Russians had lined them up four abreast with their bags and everything, led them to the station, and sent them to Gleiwitz.

At the same time—that is, five or six days before I arrived with the Greek—they had surrounded the camp in Bogucice, yelling like cannibals, and shooting into the air to intimidate anyone who tried to escape. They had silenced without ceremony their peaceful colleagues in the Kommandantur, who had timidly tried to intervene, had entered the camp with their machine guns leveled, and forced everyone out of the barracks.

In the central area of the camp a sort of caricatural version of the German selections had taken place. A far less bloody version, since it meant going to work, not to death; on the other hand, improvised and much more chaotic.

While some of the soldiers went through the barracks to flush out the recalcitrant, and then pursued them in a mad race, like a great game of hide-and-seek, others stood at the threshold and examined one by one the men and women who were gradually presented to them by the hunters, or who presented themselves of their own accord. The judgment *bolnoy* or *zdorovy* (sick or healthy) was pronounced collegially, by acclamation, not without noisy disputes in controversial cases. The *bolnoy* were sent back to the barracks, the *zdorovy* lined up in front of the fence.

Cesare had been among the first to grasp the situation (“to catch the drift,” as he said), and, acting with admirable astuteness, had just missed getting away: he had hidden in the woodshed, a place no one had thought of, and stayed there until the hunt was over, quiet and still under the logs, pulling down a pile on top of himself. And then some idiot, in search of a hiding place, had plunged in, along with the Russian who was pursuing him. Cesare had been fished out and declared healthy, purely out of reprisal, because he had emerged from the woodpile looking like Christ on the Cross, or, rather, a half-witted cripple, who would have moved a stone to pity: he was trembling, foaming at the mouth, and walking all lopsided, dragging one leg, his eyes crossed and wild. They had added him just the same to the line of the healthy; after a few seconds, with a sudden inversion

of tactics, he had tried to take to his heels and return to the camp through the hole in the fence. But he had been caught, had got a slap and a kick in the shins, and had resigned himself to defeat.

The Russians had sent them to Gleiwitz on foot, more than thirty kilometers; there they had settled them as well as possible in stalls and haylofts, and had forced them to live a dog's life. Little to eat, and sixteen hours a day of pick and shovel, rain or shine, a Russian always standing there with his machine gun pointed: the men in the trench, and the women (those from the camp and the Polish women found in the streets) peeling potatoes, cooking, and cleaning.

It was hard; but in Cesare the humiliation burned more than the work and the hunger. To get caught like that, like a kid, he who had had a stall at Porta Portese! All Trastevere would have laughed at him. He had to rehabilitate himself.

He worked for three days: on the fourth, he traded his bread for two cigars. One he ate; the other he soaked in water and kept in his armpit all night. The next day he was ready to report sick: he had everything necessary, a very high fever, horrendous stomach pains, vertigo, vomiting. They put him to bed, he stayed there until the poison had cleared out, then at night he slipped away easily, and returned to Bogucice in stages, with a tranquil conscience. I found a way of settling him in my room, and we were not separated again until the journey home.

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"Here we go again," Cesare said, putting on his trousers, his face grim, when, a few days after his return, the nighttime quiet of the camp was dramatically shattered. It was pandemonium, an explosion. Russian soldiers were running up and down the halls, banging on the doors of the rooms with the butt of their machine guns, shouting agitated and incomprehensible orders; soon afterward the general staff arrived, Marya with her hair in tangled locks, Egorov and Dancenko half dressed, followed by accountant Rovi, dazed and sleepy but in full uniform. We were to get up and get dressed immediately. Why? Had the Germans returned? Were they moving us? No one knew anything.

We finally managed to capture Marya. No, the Germans hadn't broken through the front, but the situation was equally serious. *Inspektsiya*: that very morning a general was arriving, from Moscow, to inspect the camp. The entire Kommandantur was in the grip of panic and desperation, as if the day of reckoning had arrived.

Rovi's interpreter galloped from room to room, shouting orders and counterorders. Brooms, rags, buckets appeared; everyone was mobilized, wash the windows, remove trash piles, sweep the floors, polish the knobs, clear out the spiderwebs. Everyone set to work, yawning and cursing. Two, three, four o'clock passed.

Around dawn, we began to hear talk of *ubornaya*: the camp latrine in fact presented a nasty problem.

It was a brick building, situated right in the middle of the camp, and conspicuous, impossible to hide or to disguise. For months no one had seen to cleaning or maintaining it: inside, the floor was submerged by an inch of stagnant filth, so that we had set down on it large stones and bricks, and to enter you had to jump from one to the next in precarious balance. From the doors and cracks in the walls the sewage overflowed outside, crossed the camp in the form of a fetid rivulet, and disappeared downhill amid the fields.

Captain Egorov, who was sweating blood and had completely lost his head, chose a crew of ten men and sent them into the place with brooms and buckets of chlorine, with the job of cleaning up. But it was clear to a child that ten men, even if provided with proper equipment, and not just brooms, would need at least a week; and as for the chlorine, all the perfumes of Arabia would not have been enough to decontaminate the place.

A clash between two necessities frequently produces foolish decisions, where it would be wiser to let the dilemma resolve itself on its own. An hour later (and the entire camp was buzzing like a disturbed beehive), the crew was called back, and all twelve of the Territorials from the Command arrived, with wood, nails, hammers, and rolls of barbed wire. In the blink of an eye all the doors and windows of the scandalous latrine were closed up, barred, sealed with boards of fir three inches thick, and all the walls, up to the roof, were covered by an inextricable knot of barbed wire. Decency was safe: the most diligent of inspectors would not have been physically able to set foot there.

Noon came, evening came, and of the general no trace. The next morning it was talked about a little less; the third day no one talked about it at all, the Russians of the Kommandantur returned to their habitual and benevolent carelessness and neglect, two boards were taken down from the back door of the latrine, and everything returned to order.

An inspector did come, however, some weeks later; he came to check the functioning of the camp and, more precisely, the kitchens, and he wasn't a general but a captain who wore an armband bearing the initials of the NKVD, with its slightly sinister reputation. He came, and he must have found his duties particularly pleasant, or the girls of the Kommandantur, or the air of Upper Silesia, or the neighborhood of the Italian cooks: because he didn't leave, and stayed to inspect the kitchen every day until June, when we left, without evidently practicing any other useful activity.

The kitchen, managed by a barbaric cook from Bergamo and an indefinite number of fat, shiny volunteer assistants, was situated just inside the enclosure, and consisted of a shed filled almost entirely by the two large cooking pots, which rested on a concrete stove. You entered by going up two steps, and there was no door.

The inspector did his first inspection with great dignity and seriousness, taking notes in a notebook. He was a very tall and lanky Jew of around thirty, with a handsome, ascetic face, like Don Quixote. But on the second day he unearthed, from who knows where, a motorcycle, and was struck by such an ardent love that from then on they were never seen apart.

The inspection ceremony became a public spectacle, with numerous of the bourgeois citizens of Katowice always present. The inspector arrived around eleven, like a whirlwind; he braked suddenly, with a horrible screech, and, pivoting on his front wheel, skidded the rear wheel in a quarter circle. Without stopping, he advanced toward the kitchen, head lowered like a charging bull; drove up the two steps with frightening jolts; made two rapid figure eights around the pots, the open exhaust blasting away; flew back down the stairs, gave the public a military salute with a radiant smile, leaned forward over the handlebars, and disappeared in a cloud of noise and blue-green smoke.

The game went smoothly for several weeks; then, one day, neither motorcycle nor captain was seen. The latter was in the hospital with a broken leg; the former in the loving hands of a group of Italian aficionados. But they were soon back in circulation: the captain had made a shelf like a

frame, and there he rested his leg in its cast, in a horizontal position. His face's noble pallor had attained an ecstatic happiness; in that setup, he resumed with scarcely reduced vehemence his daily inspections.

Only when April came, and the last snows melted, and the mild sun had dried the Polish mud, did we begin to feel truly free. Cesare had already been to various cities, and he insisted that I join him on his expeditions: I finally decided to overcome my inertia, and we left together on a splendid day in early April.

At the request of Cesare, who was interested in the experiment, we did not leave through the hole in the fence. I went out first, through the main gate; the sentinel asked my name, then asked for my permit, and I showed it to him. He checked: the name corresponded. I went around the corner and passed the rectangle of paper to Cesare through the barbed wire. The sentinel asked Cesare his name; Cesare answered, "Primo Levi." He asked for the permit; again the name corresponded, and Cesare left in full legality. Not that Cesare cared much about acting legally; but he liked refinements, virtuosities, cheating his neighbor without causing him to suffer.

We went into Katowice as cheerful as schoolboys on vacation, but at every step our carefree mood clashed with the scene we were entering. At every step we came upon traces of the immense tragedy that had touched us and miraculously spared us. Mute and hurried graves at every intersection, of Soviet soldiers who had died in combat, without a cross but surmounted by a red star. An endless war cemetery in a city park, crosses and stars mixed, almost all bearing the same date: the date of the battle for the streets, or perhaps of the last German extermination. In the middle of the main street, three, four German tanks, apparently undamaged, had been transformed into trophies and monuments. The idealized extension of the gun on one of these led to an enormous hole halfway up the house opposite: the monster had died in the act of destroying. Everywhere ruins, skeletons of concrete, beams of blackened wood, people in rags, with a savage and starving look. At the important intersections street signs had been put up by the Russians, oddly in contrast with the shine and prefabricated precision of the analogous German signs, seen before, and the American ones that we

saw later: crude, rough wooden boards, the names scribbled by hand, with tar, in uneven Cyrillic characters. Gleiwitz, Kraków, Częstochowa; or, rather, since the name was too long, “Częstoch” on one board and “owa” on a smaller one, nailed beneath it.

And yet the city was alive, after the nightmare years of the Nazi occupation and the hurricane passage of the front. Many shops and cafés were open; even the free market was flourishing; the trams were functioning, the coal mines, the school, the cinemas. On that first day, since between us we didn’t have a cent, we were content with a reconnaissance tour. After a few hours of walking in the sparkling air our chronic hunger became acute. “Come with me,” Cesare said. “We’re going to have breakfast.”

He led me to the market, to the area where the fruit stalls were. Under the malevolent eyes of the fruit seller at the first stall, he took a strawberry, a single, very large one, chewed it slowly, with the air of a connoisseur, then shook his head. “*Nyé ddobre*,” he said severely. (“It’s Polish,” he explained. “It means they’re no good.”) He passed to the next stall, and repeated the scene; and so on with all until the last. “Well? What are you waiting for?” he said to me then, with cynical pride. “If you’re hungry, just do like me.”

Of course, it was not with the technique of the strawberries that we would get ourselves settled: Cesare had grasped the situation, which was that it was time to devote ourselves seriously to commerce.

He explained his feeling: he was my friend, and didn’t ask anything. If I wanted I could go to the market with him, maybe even give him a hand and learn the trade, but it was indispensable for him to find a true partner, who had available some initial capital and a certain experience. In fact, to tell the truth he had already found him, a fellow named Giacomantonio, an old acquaintance of his from San Lorenzo who had the face of a jailbird. The form of the partnership was very simple: Giacomantonio would buy, he would sell, and they would divide the proceeds into equal parts.

Buy what? Everything, he said—whatever he came across. Cesare, although he was barely over twenty, boasted a surprising education in commodities, comparable to the Greek’s. But, beyond the superficial analogies, I soon realized that between him and the Greek was an abyss. Cesare was full of human warmth, always, in all the hours of his life, not only outside working hours, like Mordo Nahum. For Cesare “work” was at times an unpleasant necessity, at times an amusing opportunity for

encounters, and not a cold obsession, or a Lucifer-like affirmation of himself. One was free, the other a slave to himself; one miserly and reasonable, the other generous and inventive. The Greek was a lone wolf, eternally at war with everyone, old before his time, enclosed in the circle of his bleak ambition. Cesare was a child of the sun, a friend of the whole world. He didn't know hatred or scorn, he was as varying as the sky, joyful, sly, and ingenuous, reckless and cautious, very ignorant, very innocent, and very civilized.

I didn't want to enter into the arrangement with Giacomantonio, but I willingly accepted Cesare's invitation to go with him to the market on occasion, as an apprentice, interpreter, and porter. I accepted not only out of friendship and to escape the boredom of the camp but above all because to watch Cesare's undertakings, even the most modest and trivial, was a unique experience, a vivid and bracing spectacle, which reconciled me to the world and rekindled the joy in life that Auschwitz had extinguished.

A virtue like Cesare's is good in itself, in an absolute sense; it confers nobility on a man, redeems many possible defects, saves his soul. But equally, and on a more practical level, it constitutes a precious store for one who intends to engage in commerce in the public squares; in fact, no one was insensitive to Cesare's charm, neither the Russians of the Command, nor his assorted companions in the camp, nor the citizens of Katowice who frequented the market. Now, it's equally clear that, by the harsh laws of commerce, what is an advantage to the seller is a disadvantage to the buyer, and vice versa.

April was coming to an end, and the sun was already hot and bold, when Cesare came to get me after the clinic closed. His sinister partner had pulled off a series of brilliant coups: for fifty zloty altogether he had bought a ballpoint pen that didn't write, a stopwatch, and a woolen shirt in reasonably good condition. This Giacomantonio, with the expert nose of the fence, had had the excellent idea of keeping watch at the station in Katowice, waiting for the Russian convoys returning from Germany: those soldiers, by now demobilized and on the way home, were the most carefree clients imaginable. They were joyous, easygoing, loaded with booty, they didn't know the local prices, and they needed money.

Besides, it was worthwhile to spend a few hours at the station outside of any utilitarian purpose, just to see the extraordinary spectacle of the Red Army returning home: a spectacle at once as choral and solemn as a

Biblical migration and as vagabond and colorful as a circus parade. Long convoys of freight cars, used as troop trains, stopped in Katowice: they were equipped to travel for months, maybe even to the Pacific, and they housed randomly, by the thousands, soldiers and civilians, men and women, former prisoners, Germans now prisoners themselves, and, in addition, freight, furniture, animals, dismantled industrial installations, provisions, war matériel, pieces of junk. They were moving villages: some cars contained what appeared to be a family nucleus, one or two double beds, a mirrored closet, a stove, a radio, chairs, and tables. Between one car and the next, makeshift electrical wires were hung, coming from the first car, which contained a generator; they were used for lighting, and also to hang out the laundry to dry (and get covered with soot). When in the morning the sliding doors opened, men and women appeared against the background of these domestic interiors, half dressed, with broad sleepy faces: they looked around in bewilderment, without knowing what part of the world they were in, then they got out to wash in the cold water of the hydrants, and offered tobacco and pages of *Pravda* for rolling cigarettes.

So I left for the market with Cesare, who proposed to resell (maybe to the Russians themselves) the three objects described above. The market had by now lost its primitive character as a fair of human miseries. Rationing had been abolished, or rather had fallen into disuse; from the rich surrounding countryside arrived the peasants' carts with quintals of lard and cheese, eggs, chickens, sugar, fruit, butter: a garden of temptations, a cruel challenge to our obsessive hunger and our lack of money, an imperious incitement to get some.

Cesare sold the pen immediately, for twenty zloty, without negotiation. He did not need an interpreter; he spoke only Italian, or, rather Roman, or, rather the dialect of the Roman ghetto, sprinkled with mangled Hebrew words. Certainly he had no other choice, since he didn't know other languages: but, unknown to him, this ignorance worked strongly in his favor. Cesare "was playing on his home field," to put it in sports terms. His clients, on the other hand, straining to interpret his incomprehensible speech and his unfamiliar gestures, were distracted from the necessary concentration; if they made counteroffers, Cesare didn't understand them, or stubbornly pretended not to understand them.

The art of the charlatan is not so widespread as I thought; the Polish public seemed ignorant of it, and was fascinated by it. Cesare, besides, was

a first-class mime: he waved the shirt in the sun, holding it tight by the collar (there was a hole under the collar, but he held it just in the place where the hole was), and proclaimed its praises with torrential eloquence, with novel and inane additions and digressions, calling on this or that person among his listeners with an obscene nickname that he invented on the spot.

He broke off abruptly (he knew by instinct the oratorical value of pauses), kissed the shirt affectionately, and then, in a resolute yet emotional voice, as if it would grieve his heart to be separated from it, and he could be induced to only for love of his neighbor, said, "You, fatso, how much would you give me for this *cosciuletta*?"

The fatso was bewildered. He looked at the *cosciuletta* with longing, and out of the corner of his eye glanced to either side, half hoping and half fearing that someone else would make the first offer. Then he advanced hesitantly, held out an uncertain hand, and muttered something like "*Pingísci*." Cesare drew the shirt to his breast, as if he had seen an asp. "What did he say, that fellow?" he asked me, as if suspecting he had received a mortal insult; but it was a rhetorical question, since he recognized (or guessed) the Polish numbers more quickly than I did.

"You're nuts," he said then, peremptorily, pointing an index finger at his temple and spinning it like a drill. The public roared and laughed, obviously rooting for the fantastic foreigner, who had come from the ends of the earth to work wonders in their squares. The fatso stood gaping, rocking like a bear from one foot to the other. "*Du ferík*," Cesare resumed pitiless (he meant to say "*verrückt*"); then, to clarify, he added, "*Du meshugge*." A hurricane of wild laughter exploded: this they had all understood. The Hebrew *meshugge*, which survives in Yiddish, is universally understood in all of Central and Eastern Europe: it means "crazy," but it contains the secondary idea of vain, melancholy, foolish, lunar madness.

The fatso scratched his head and pulled up his pants, filled with embarrassment. "*Sto*," he said then, looking for peace. *Sto zlotych*, a hundred zloty.

The offer was interesting. Cesare, somewhat tamed, turned to the fatso as man to man, in a persuasive tone, as if to convince him of an involuntary yet gross error. He spoke for a long time, openheartedly, with warmth and familiarity, saying, "You see? You understand? You don't agree?"

"*Sto zlotych*," the man repeated, stubbornly.

“This fellow is from Capurzio!” Cesare said to me. Then, as if suddenly tired out, and in an ultimate attempt at agreement, he put a hand on the man’s shoulder and said maternally, “Listen. Listen, friend. You haven’t understood me well. Let’s do like this, let’s come to an agreement. You give me so much”—and he drew 150 with his finger on his stomach—“you give me *sto pingisciu*, and I put it on your back. All right?”

The fatso snorted and shook his head no, with his eyes down; but Cesare’s clinical eye had caught a sign of capitulation—an imperceptible movement of the hand toward the back pocket of the pants.

“Come on! Cough up those *pignonze*!” Cesare pressed him, beating the iron while it was hot. The *pignonze* (the Polish word, which was hard to spell but whose sound was so oddly familiar, fascinated Cesare and me) were finally coughed up, and the shirt handed over; but Cesare energetically tore me away from my ecstatic admiration.

“Hey, friend. Let’s clear off; otherwise he’ll figure out about the hole.” Thus, out of fear that the client would prematurely notice the hole, we cleared off (or rather took our leave), giving up on the unsalable stopwatch. We walked at a dignified pace to the nearest corner, then sneaked away, as fast as our legs would carry us, and returned to the camp by back streets.

Victory Day

Life in the camp at Bogucice, in the clinic and the market, rudimentary human relations with Russians, Poles, and others, rapid alternations of hunger and a full stomach, of hopes for return and disappointments, expectation and uncertainty, regimentation and improvisation—like a pallid form of military life in a temporary, foreign environment—roused in me uneasiness, homesickness, and chiefly boredom. It was on the other hand consonant with Cesare's habits, character, and aspirations.

At Bogucice, he flourished, visibly, from day to day, like a tree in which the spring sap is rising. He now had a fixed place in the market and a loyal clientele, conjured by him out of nothing: the Bearded Lady, Skin and Bones, Redneck, at least three Big Butts, Travel Order, Franchestein, a Juno-like girl he called Lady Courtroom, and various others. In the camp, he enjoyed an unquestioned prestige: he had quarreled with Giacomantonio, but many others gave him goods to sell, with no contract, out of pure trust, so he always had money.

One evening he disappeared: he didn't show up at the camp for dinner, or in the room to sleep. Naturally, we reported nothing to Rovi, not to mention the Russians, in order not to cause trouble; yet when his absence extended for three days and three nights, even I, who by nature am not very apprehensive, and was even less so about Cesare, began to feel a slight anxiety.

Cesare returned at dawn on the fourth day, battered and surly, like a cat returning from a witches' ride over the roofs. He had shadows under his eyes, but in their depths flashed a proud light. "Leave me alone," he said as soon as he came in, although no one had asked him anything, and the

majority were still snoring. He dropped onto his cot, making a show of extreme exhaustion; but after a few minutes, unable to resist the pressure of the great news that was gnawing at him inside, he came over to me, though I was barely awake. Hoarse and grim, as if he'd been dancing with the witches for three nights, he said, "We're there. I'm set. I got myself a *pagninca*, a girl."

To me the news didn't seem particularly exciting. He certainly wasn't the first: already several other Italians, especially among the soldiers, had got a girl in the city. *Pagninca*—the Polish *panienka*—is the exact equivalent of *segnorina* for *signorina*, and equally disfigured in sound.[4]

It wasn't a very arduous undertaking, because men were scarce in Poland, and many of the Italians had "settled" themselves, driven not only by the national myth of the Italian lover but also by a more profound and serious need, by nostalgia for a home and affection. As a consequence, in some cases the dead or distant spouse was replaced not only in the heart and bed of the woman but in all his duties, and you could see Italians going down into the coal mines with Poles to take "home" the pay envelope, or serving at the counter in a shop, and, on Sunday, strange families decorously walked on the ramparts, the Italian arm in arm with the Pole, and holding a child too fair by the hand.

But, Cesare explained, his case was different (they're all different, always, I thought, yawning). His *pagninca* was beautiful, unmarried, refined, clean, in love with him, and so also economical. She was experienced as well; her only defect was that she spoke Polish. So, if I was his friend, I had to help him.

I wasn't able to help much, I explained, wearily. In the first place, I didn't know more than thirty words of Polish; in the second, I was absolutely ignorant of the sentimental language that he needed; in the third, I didn't feel in the right mood to go along with him. But Cesare wouldn't give in; maybe the girl understood German. He had in mind a very precise program; so would I do him a favor and not be obstructionist, and explain to him how you say this in German, and that, and this other thing.

Cesare overestimated my linguistic knowledge. The things he wanted to know are not taught in any German course, much less had I had occasion to learn them in Auschwitz; besides, they were subtle and idiosyncratic questions, making me suspect that these things don't exist in any language but Italian and French.

I expressed my doubts, but Cesare looked at me in vexation. I was sabotaging him, it was clear: it was all envy. He put his shoes back on and left muttering curses. He returned after midday and threw down in front of me a pocket Italian–German dictionary, bought for twenty zloty at the market. “This has everything,” he said, with the air of someone who will not admit further discussion or quibbles. It didn’t have everything, unfortunately: it lacked even the essential, that which a mysterious convention expunges from the universe of printed paper—a waste of money. Cesare went out again, disappointed in culture, friendship, and printed paper itself.

From then on, he only rarely reappeared in the camp: the girl provided generously for all his needs. At the end of April he disappeared for a whole week. Now, that was not an ordinary end of April: it was the memorable one of 1945.

Unfortunately, we were unable to understand the Polish newspapers, but the type size of the headlines that increased by the day, the names that could be read, the very air that one breathed in the streets, and the Kommandantur made us understand that victory was near. We read, “Vienna,” “Koblenz,” “Rhine”; then “Bologna,” then, with an excitement full of emotion, “Turin” and “Milan.” Finally, “Mussolini” in big block letters, followed by a frightening and indecipherable past participle; and finally, in red ink and on half a page, the conclusive announcement, cryptic and exultant: “*Berlin Upadl!*”

On April 30, Leonardo and I and a few others who had passes were summoned by Captain Egorov: with a curiously sly and embarrassed expression that was unfamiliar he told us through the interpreter that we would have to give back the *propusk*; the next day we would receive a new one. Naturally we didn’t believe him, but we had to hand over the paper just the same. The order seemed absurd and slightly repressive and increased our anxiety and expectation, but the next day we understood the reason.

The next day was May 1; on May 3 there was some important Polish rite; on May 8 the war ended. The news, no matter that it was expected, burst like a hurricane: for eight days, the camp, the Kommandantur, Bogucice, Katowice, all of Poland, and the entire Red Army let themselves go in a paroxysm of delirious excitement. The Soviet Union is a gigantic country, and holds in its heart gigantic tumults, among them a Homeric

capacity for joy and abandon, a primitive vitality, a pure pagan talent for demonstrations, rites, choral revelry.

In a few hours, the atmosphere had become torrid. There were Russians everywhere, emerging like ants from an anthill: they all embraced as if they knew one another, they sang, they shouted; although many were unsteady on their legs they danced together, and overwhelmed with their embraces anyone they met on the street. They fired their guns into the air, and sometimes, too, not into the air: a young soldier, still beardless, a *parashyutist*, was brought to the infirmary pierced by a musket shot from the abdomen to the back. Miraculously, it hadn't damaged vital organs. The child soldier stayed in bed for three days, and submitted tranquilly to the medications, looking at us with eyes as blank as the sea; then, one evening, when a troop of celebrating fellow soldiers passed by in the street, he leaped out from under the covers, completely dressed in uniform and boots and, like a good parachutist, before the eyes of all the other patients, jumped down to the street from the second-floor window.

The already tenuous vestiges of military discipline vanished. In front of the camp gate on the evening of May 1, the sentinel was snoring, lying drunk on the ground, his machine gun over his shoulder; then he was seen no more. It was useless to ask the Kommandantur for anything urgently needed: the person responsible wasn't there or was in bed sleeping off a hangover, or was engaged in mysterious frantic preparations in the school gym. It was lucky that the kitchen and the infirmary were in Italian hands.

What sort of preparations they were we soon learned. The Russians were organizing a grand celebration for the day of the end of the war: a theatrical presentation with choruses, dancing, and recitations, offered by them to us, the guests of the camp. To us Italians: because, in the meantime, following a complicated movement of other nationalities, we remained a large majority in Bogucice, in fact, almost alone, with a few French and Greeks.

Cesare returned on one of those tumultuous days. He was in worse condition than the first time: muddy up to his hair, ragged, distraught, and afflicted by a monstrous stiff neck. He was carrying a bottle of vodka, new and full, and his first order of business was to find another, empty bottle; then, dark and depressed, he constructed an ingenious funnel with a piece of cardboard, poured out the vodka, broke the bottles into little pieces,

gathered the shards in a package, and in great secrecy went to bury them in a hole at the back of the camp.

Something terrible had happened. One evening when he returned from the market to the girl's house, he had found a Russian: he had seen in the hall the military coat with belt and holster, and a bottle. He had taken the bottle, under the category of partial damages, and had sagely left; but the Russian, it seems, had come after him, perhaps because of the bottle, or maybe driven by retroactive jealousy.

Here his account became more obscure and less credible. He had tried in vain to escape and had become convinced that the entire Red Army was on his heels. He had ended up at the amusement park, but there, too, the hunt had continued—all night. The last hours he had spent trapped under the public dance floor, while all Poland danced on his head: but he had not left the bottle, because it represented all that remained to him of a week of love. He had destroyed the original receptacle out of prudence, and insisted that the contents be drunk immediately by us, his friends. The drinking was melancholy and silent.

May 8 arrived: a day of elation for the Russians, of distrustful vigil for the Poles, for us of joy deeply veined with homesickness. From that day, in fact, our homes were no longer forbidden, no front of war any longer separated us, no concrete obstacle, only papers and offices; we felt that homecoming was now owed to us, and every hour spent in exile weighed on us like lead; the utter lack of news from Italy weighed on us even more. We went anyway, all together, to see the Russian performance, and it was a good thing.

The theater had been improvised in the school gym; for that matter, everything was improvised, the actors, the seats, the chorus, the program, the lights, the curtain. Conspicuously improvised was the tailcoat worn by the MC, Captain Egorov himself.

Egorov appeared onstage completely drunk, wearing immense trousers whose waist came up to his armpits, while the tails brushed the floor. He was in the grip of an inconsolable alcoholic sadness, and announced in a sepulchral voice the various comic or patriotic numbers on the program, between deep sobs and outbursts of tears. His balance was dubious: at

crucial moments he clung to the microphone, and then the noise of the audience was suddenly suspended, as when an acrobat jumps from a trapeze into the void.

Everyone appeared on the stage: the entire Kommandantur. Marya as director of the chorus, which was excellent, like all Russian choruses, and sang “Moyà Moskvà” (“My Moscow”) with marvelous momentum and harmony, and undisguised good faith. Galina appeared by herself, in a Circassian costume and boots, performing a dizzying dance in which she revealed fantastic and unsuspected athletic gifts: she was inundated with applause, and she thanked the audience, emotionally, with innumerable eighteenth-century-style bows, her face as red as a tomato and her eyes shining with tears. Dr. Dancenko and the mustachioed Mongol were an equally good duo, who, although full of vodka, performed one of those diabolical Russian dances in which the dancers leap into the air, squat, kick, and pirouette on their heels like a spinning top.

Then came a singular imitation of Chaplin’s Tramp, impersonated by one of the vigorous girls of the Kommandantur, with a large bosom and rear, but scrupulously faithful to the prototype, in bowler hat, mustache, old shoes, and cane. And finally, announced by Egorov in a mournful voice, and greeted by the Russians with a wild shout of acclaim, Vanka Vstanka appeared on the stage.

Who Vanka Vstanka is I couldn’t say precisely: maybe a popular Russian stock character. In this case, he was a shepherd, a timid fool in love, who wants to declare himself to his sweetheart and doesn’t dare. The sweetheart was the giant Vassilissa, the raven-haired brawny Valkyrie responsible for the dining hall, who was capable of knocking down with the back of her hand a disorderly diner or an importunate suitor (and more than one Italian had had proof of it). But on the stage who would have recognized her? She was transfigured by her role; the gray-haired Vanka Vstanka (in reality one of the old lieutenants), his face plastered with pink and white powder, wooed her from a distance, in the courtly manner of Arcadia, for twenty melodious stanzas, unfortunately incomprehensible to us, holding out toward his beloved trembling supplicant hands, which she rebuffed with smiling but determined graciousness, warbling politely mocking replies. But little by little the distance diminished, while the noise of the applause increased proportionately; after many skirmishes, the two shepherds exchanged modest kisses on the cheek and ended by vigorously,

voluptuously rubbing against each other, back-to-back, to the uncontainable enthusiasm of the audience.

We left the theater slightly dazed, but almost moved. The show had satisfied us inwardly. It had been improvised in a few days, and that was obvious; it had been a homemade show, without pretenses, plain, often childish. Yet it assumed something that was not improvised but ancient and strong: a youthful, innate, intense capacity for joy and expression, a loving and friendly intimacy with the stage and with the audience, far from empty display and cerebral abstraction, from convention and a lazy imitation of models. So in its limited way it had been a warm, vivid show, not vulgar, not ordinary, full of freedom and affirmation.

The next day everything returned to order, and the Russians, apart from some faint shadows around their eyes, had assumed their usual faces. I met Marya in the infirmary and told her that I had had a very good time, and that all of us Italians had greatly admired the theatrical talents of her and her colleagues: which was the pure truth. Marya was, by habit and by nature, a not very methodical but very concrete woman, solidly fixed within the tangible outline of the round of the clock and the domestic walls, a friend to men in the flesh and hostile to the smoke of theories. But how many human minds are capable of resisting the slow, fierce, incessant, insensibly penetrating force of rhetoric?

She answered with didactic seriousness. She thanked me officiously for the praise, and assured me that she would share it with the rest of the Command. Then she informed me in very pompous terms that dancing and singing are subjects taught in school in the Soviet Union, as is performance; that it is the duty of a good citizen to try to improve all his abilities or natural talents; that the theater is one of the most valuable instruments for collective education; and other pedagogical platitudes, which sounded absurd and vaguely irritating to my ear, still bursting with the previous night’s great wind of vitality and comic force.

For that matter, Marya herself (“old and crazy,” in the judgment of the eighteen-year-old Galina) seemed to possess a second personality, very distinct from the official one, since she had been seen the evening before, after the theater, drinking like a bottomless pit and dancing like a bacchante late into the night, tiring out innumerable partners, like a furious rider who breaks beneath himself horse after horse.

Victory and peace were celebrated in another way, too, which almost, indirectly, cost me very dearly. In mid-May a soccer match took place between the team from Katowice and a delegation of us Italians.

It was in fact a rematch: a first, not very serious match had been held two or three weeks earlier, which the Italians had won by a wide margin against an anonymous pickup team of Polish miners from the outskirts.

But for the rematch the Poles came up with a first-class team; the rumor was that some players, including the goalie, had been brought for the occasion from Warsaw, no less, while the Italians, alas, were not able to do likewise.

This goalie was a nightmare. He was a tall, lanky, fair-haired man, with an emaciated face, a concave chest, and lazy Apache-like movements. He had none of the snap, the emphatic contractions, or the neurotic unease of the professional; he stood in the goal with insolent condescension, leaning on a post as if he were merely watching the game, with a look at once outraged and outrageous. And yet the few times the ball was kicked into the goal by the Italians he was in its path, as if by chance, but without ever making an abrupt movement. He extended a long arm, just one, which seemed to come out of his body like the horns of a snail and had the same invertebrate and sticky quality. Indeed, the ball clung to him solidly, losing all its living force; it slid over his chest, then down along his body and leg to the ground. The other hand he never even used: he kept it ostentatiously in his pocket during the entire match.

The game took place on a field on the city's outskirts quite far from Bogucice, and, for the occasion, the Russians authorized a free pass for the entire camp. The match was bitterly fought not just between the two contending teams but between both of these and the referee, because the referee—guest of honor, occupant of the authorities' box, director of the competition, and linesman at the same time—was the captain from the NKVD, the ineffectual inspector of the kitchens. Now, with his fracture perfectly healed, he seemed to follow the game with intense interest, but not of a sporting nature: it was a mysterious interest, perhaps aesthetic, perhaps metaphysical. His behavior was irritating, in fact exhausting, to judge from the many experts present among the spectators; in another way it was hilarious, and worthy of a comic of the great school.

He constantly interrupted the game, at random, with aggressive whispering and with a sadistic preference for the moments when the action was taking place at the goal. If the players didn't pay attention to him (and they soon stopped paying attention, because the interruptions were so frequent), he climbed over the edge of the box with his long, booted legs, plunged into the fray, whistling like a train, and kept trying, in every way possible, until he got possession of the ball. Then sometimes he held it in his hand, spinning it in all directions with a suspicious air, as if it were an unexploded bomb; at other times, with imperious gestures, he had it placed in a specific spot on the ground, then, unsatisfied, approached it, moved it a few inches, walked around it thoughtfully for a while, and finally, as if convinced of who knows what, signaled for the game to continue. At still other times, when he managed to get the ball between his feet, he made everyone move away, and he kicked it at the goal with all his might; then he turned radiantly to the spectators, who were bellowing with rage, and gave a long salute, clasping his hands over his head like a victorious prizefighter. He was, however, strictly impartial.

In these conditions, the game (which was deservedly won by the Poles) dragged on for more than two hours, until six in the evening, and would probably have been extended until night if it had depended only on the captain, who wasn't at all worried about the time, acted on the field like the Master after God, and seemed to get a mad and inexhaustible pleasure from his misunderstood function as referee. But around sunset the sky rapidly darkened, and when the first drops of rain fell the whistle blew, signaling the end.

The rain soon became a deluge: Bogucice was far, there was no shelter on the way, and we returned to the barracks soaked. The next day I was sick, with an illness that remained mysterious for a long time.

I couldn't breathe freely. It seemed that in the working of my lungs there was a blockage, a sharp pain, a deep stabbing, situated somewhere above the stomach but behind, near the back; and this prevented me from taking in air beyond a certain point. And this point diminished, from day to day, from hour to hour; the ration of air allowed me was reduced in a slow, constant, terrifying progression. The third day I could no longer move; the fourth, I lay supine on my cot, motionless, with my breath very short and fast, like that of a very hot dog.

4. The American and British soldiers of the Allied armies in Italy said "*segnorina*" instead of "*signorina*."



The Dreamers

Leonardo tried to hide it from me, but he couldn’t understand the illness, and he was seriously worried. What it was exactly was difficult to establish, since his entire professional arsenal was reduced to a stethoscope, and to get the Russians to admit me to the civilian hospital in Katowice would be not only difficult but inadvisable; from Dr. Dancenko there was not much help to be hoped for.

So for several days I lay motionless, swallowing a few mouthfuls of broth, since with every movement I tried to make, and every solid mouthful I tried to swallow, the pain reawakened angrily and cut off my breath. After a week of tortured immobility, Leonardo, by tapping my back and my chest, managed to distinguish a sign: it was a dry pleurisy, nesting treacherously between the two lungs, against the mediastinum and the diaphragm.

He then did much more than you normally expect from a doctor. He became a clandestine merchant and smuggler of medicines, valiantly helped by Cesare, and he traveled on foot dozens of kilometers through the city, from one address to another, in pursuit of sulfonamides and intravenous calcium. In terms of medicines he didn’t have much success, because the drugs were scarce and could be found only on the black market and at prices inaccessible to us; but he found something better. He discovered in Katowice a mysterious brother, who had available a not exactly legal but well-equipped office, a medicine cabinet, a lot of money, and free time, and who was, finally, Italian, or almost.

In truth, everything about Dr. Gottlieb was wrapped in a thick fog of mystery. He spoke Italian perfectly, but German, Polish, Hungarian, and Russian just as well. He came from Fiume, from Vienna, from Zagreb, and

from Auschwitz. He had been in Auschwitz, but in what capacity and condition he never said, nor was he a man whom it was easy to question. Nor was it easy to understand how he had survived in Auschwitz, since he had an ankylosed arm. And it was even harder to imagine by what secret pathways, and by what fantastic arts, he had managed to stay together with a brother and an equally mysterious brother-in-law, and to become in the few months after leaving the Lager, and in defiance of the Russians and the laws, a wealthy man and the most esteemed doctor in Katowice.

He was a remarkably endowed man. He gave off intelligence and shrewdness the way a radio gives off energy: with the same silent and penetrating continuity, without effort, without pause, without signs of exhaustion, in all directions at once. That he was a skillful doctor was evident at the first contact. Whether, then, this professional excellence was only one aspect, one facet, of a lofty intellect, or whether it was in fact his instrument of discernment, his secret weapon for making friends and enemies, for nullifying prohibitions, for turning nos into yeses, I could never establish; this, too, was part of the cloud that enveloped him and moved with him. It was an almost visible cloud, which made it hard to decipher his gaze and the features of his face, and led one to suspect—under every action, every phrase, every silence—a tactic and a technique, the pursuit of imperceptible ends, a continuous shrewd work of exploration, elaboration, integration, and possession.

But the intelligence of Dr. Gottlieb, completely intent on practical ends, was nevertheless not inhuman. Confidence, the habit of victory, faith in himself were so abundant that he had a large supply left over to use for helping his less well endowed neighbor, and especially to help us, we who had escaped like him from the death trap of the Lager, a circumstance he turned out to be oddly sensitive to.

Gottlieb brought me health like a thaumaturge. He came a first time to examine the situation, then several more times, equipped with vials and syringes, and a last time, when he said, “Rise and walk.” The pain had disappeared, my breath was free; I was very weak and hungry, but I rose and was able to walk.

Nevertheless, for some three weeks I didn’t leave the room. I spent the endless days in bed, reading eagerly the few odd books I could get my hands on: an English grammar in Polish, *Marie Walewska: le tendre amour de Napoléon*, an elementary trigonometry textbook, *Rouletabille à la guerre*

(*Rouletabille at War*), *I forzati della Cajenna* (*The Prisoners of the Cajenna)*, and an odd novel of Nazi propaganda, *Die Grosse Heimkehr* (*The Great Repatriation*), which depicted the tragic fate of a Galician village of pure German stock, attacked, looted, and finally destroyed by the fierce Poland of Marshal Beck.

It was sad to be within the four walls while outside the air was full of spring and victory and from the nearby woods the wind brought stirring odors of moss, of new grass, of mushrooms; and it was humiliating to have to depend on my companions even for the most elementary needs, to get food from the dining room, to get water, in the first days even to change position in the bed.

There were about twenty in the dormitory, including Leonardo and Cesare; but the biggest of them, the most remarkable, was the oldest, the Moor of Verona. He must have been descended from a race tenaciously bound to the earth, since his real name was Avesani, and he was from Avesa, the washermen's neighborhood of Verona celebrated by Berto Barbarani. He was more than seventy, and it showed: he was a large, rugged old man, with the skeleton of a dinosaur, tall and straight in the hips, and still as strong as a horse, although his gnarled joints had stiffened with age and toil. His bald head, nobly convex, was surrounded at the base by a crown of white hair; but his gaunt, wrinkled face had a jaundiced color, and his eyes, flashing violently yellow and veined with blood, were sunk under enormous arched eyebrows, like ferocious dogs at the back of their dens.

In the Moor's skeletal yet powerful breast, a gigantic but undefined anger boiled without respite: a senseless anger against everyone and everything, against the Russians and the Germans, against Italy and the Italians, against God and men, against himself and against us, against the day when it was day and the night when it was night, against his fate and all fates, against his trade, although it was in his blood. He was a mason; he had laid bricks for fifty years—in Italy, in America, in France, then in Italy again—and finally in Germany, and every brick was mortared with curses. He cursed continually, but not mechanically, he cursed methodically and deliberately, bitterly, stopping to look for the right word, often correcting himself, and racking his brains when he couldn't find the right word; then he cursed the curse that wouldn't come.

It was clear that he was besieged by a hopeless senile dementia, but there was grandeur in his dementia, and also force, and a barbaric dignity,

the trampled dignity of a beast in a cage, the same that redeems Capaneus and Caliban.

The Moor almost never got off his cot. He would lie there all day, with his enormous bony yellow feet sticking out half a meter into the room. On the floor next to him sat a large shapeless bundle, which none of us would ever have dared touch. It contained, it seems, all his possessions on this earth; a heavy woodsman's ax was hanging on the outside. The Moor usually stared into emptiness with his bloodshot eyes and was silent; but the least stimulus, a noise in the corridor, a question addressed to him, an incautious stumble against his cumbersome feet, an attack of rheumatism, and his deep chest rose like the sea swelling in a storm, and the mechanism of vituperation started up again.

Among us he was respected, and feared with a vaguely superstitious fear. Only Cesare went near him, with the impertinent familiarity of the birds that scratch around on the rhinoceros's rocky back, and he enjoyed provoking his anger with foolish and indecent questions.

Next to the Moor lived the inept Ferrari of the lice, the last in his class in the school in Loreto. But in our dormitory he wasn't the only member of the brotherhood of San Vittore; it was represented notably by Trovati and Cravero as well.

Trovati, Ambrogio Trovati—known as Tramonto (Sunset)—wasn't more than thirty; he was small in stature, but muscular and very agile. Tramonto, he had explained, was a stage name: he was proud of it, and it fit him to a T, because he was dim-witted, and got by on extravagant improvisations, in a state of perpetual frustrated rebellion. He had spent his adolescence and youth between prison and the stage, and the two institutions did not seem to be clearly differentiated in his confused mind. Prison in Germany, then, must have been the final blow.

In his conversation, the true, the possible, and the fanciful were tangled up in a variable and inextricable knot. He spoke of prison and the courtroom as of a theater where no one is truly himself but rather plays, demonstrates his skill, enters into another's skin, takes a role; and the theater, in turn, was a grand obscure symbol, a shadowy instrument of perdition, the external manifestation of a subterranean, spiteful, and omnipresent sect, which rules to the detriment of all, and which comes to your house, seizes you, puts a mask on you, makes you become what you are not and do what you don't want to do. This sect is Society: the great

enemy, against which he, Tramonto, had been fighting forever, and he was always defeated but, every time, rose again heroically.

It was Society that had come to look for him, to challenge him. He lived in innocence, in the earthly paradise: he was a barber, owner of a shop, and had been visited. Two messengers had come to tempt him, to make him the Satanic proposal of selling the shop and devoting himself to art. They well knew his weak point: they had flattered him, praised his physique, his voice, his expression, and the mobility of his face. He had resisted two, three times, then he had given in, and, with the address of the movie studio in his hand, had set off for Milan. But the address was false, he was sent away from every door to another door, until he had understood the plot. The two messengers, in the shadows, had followed him with the movie camera pointed, they had stolen all his words and gestures of disappointment, and so had made him an actor without his realizing it. They had stolen the image, the shadow, the soul. It was they who had caused him to fade, and baptized him Tramonto, Sunset.

So it was over for him: he was in their hands. The shop sold, no contracts, almost no money, some little part every so often, some stealing to make ends meet, until his great epic, the pulpable homicide. He had met on the street one of his two tempters, and had stabbed him; he had been accused of pulpable homicide, and for that crime he was dragged into court. But he hadn’t wanted lawyers, because the whole world, down to the last man, was against him, and he knew it. And yet he had been so eloquent, and had laid out his arguments so well, that the court had absolved him immediately with a great ovation, and everyone wept.

This legendary trial was at the center of Trovati’s cloudy memory; he relived it in every moment of the day, he spoke of nothing else, and often, in the evening after dinner, he forced us all to indulge him and perform his trial as a sort of medieval religious pageant. He assigned each of us a part—you the judge, you the prosecutor, you the jurors, you the court clerk, you others the spectators—and he assigned the parts in a peremptory manner. But the accused, and at the same time the defense attorney, was always and only he, and at every performance, when the moment came for his torrential harangue, he first explained, in a rapid “aside,” that pulpable homicide is when the murderer sticks the knife not in the chest, or in the stomach, but here, between the heart and the armpit, in the flesh, and it’s less serious.

He spoke without stopping, passionately, for an hour straight, wiping real sweat from his forehead; then, throwing over his left shoulder a nonexistent toga with a broad gesture, he concluded, “Go, go, O serpents, and deposit your venom!”

The third from San Vittore, the Turinese Cravero, was on the other hand a complete thief, unadulterated, without nuances, of a type you rarely find, in whom the abstract criminal hypotheses of the penal code seem to take shape and human form. He was familiar with all the jails of Italy, and in Italy he had lived (he admitted it shamelessly, in fact proudly) on stealing, robbing, and pimping. Thanks to these skills, he had found no difficulty in settling himself in Germany: he had worked for only a month with the Todt Organization, in Berlin, then he had disappeared, fading easily into the dark background of the local underworld.

After two or three attempts, he had found a widow who was suitable. He helped her with his experience, found clients, and took care of the financial aspect in contentious cases, stabbing included; she welcomed him. In that house, in spite of the difficulties of the language, and certain curious habits of his protégée, he was perfectly comfortable.

When the Russians were at the gates of Berlin, Cravero, who didn’t like turmoil, had raised anchor, abandoning the woman, who dissolved in tears. But still he had been overtaken by the rapid advance and, moving from camp to camp, had ended up in Katowice; yet he didn’t stay long. In fact he was the first of the Italians who decided to try to get home by his own means. Accustomed as he was to living outside every law, the obstacle of the many frontiers to cross without documents, and of the fifteen hundred kilometers to traverse without money, didn’t worry him too much.

Since he was heading to Turin, he very politely offered to take a letter to my house. I accepted, with a certain thoughtlessness, as it turned out; I accepted because I was sick, because I have a great innate faith in my neighbor, because the Polish mail system wasn’t functioning, and because Marya Fyodorovna, when I proposed that she write a letter for me to the countries of the West, had turned pale and changed the subject.

Leaving Katowice in mid-May, Cravero arrived in Turin in the record time of a month, slipping like an eel through innumerable blockades. He tracked down my mother, delivered the letter (and it was the only sign of life from me that reached its destination in nine months), and explained to her confidentially that I was in an extremely worrisome state of health.

Naturally I hadn’t put that in the letter, but I was alone, sick, abandoned, without money, in urgent need of help, and in his opinion it was urgent to act immediately. Of course the undertaking wasn’t easy; but he, Cravero, my brotherly friend, was available. If my mother gave him two hundred thousand lire, in two or three weeks he would bring me safely home. In fact, if the young lady (my sister, who was present at the interview) would like to come with him . . .

It is to the credit of my mother and sister that they didn’t immediately trust the messenger. They put him off, asking him to come back in a few days, because the sum wasn’t available. Cravero went down the stairs, stole my sister’s bicycle, which was in the entranceway, and disappeared. Two years later, at Christmas, he wrote me an affectionate card of good wishes from the New Prisons, in Turin.

On the evenings when Tramonto exempted us from the performance of his trial, Signor Unverdorben often claimed our attention. A mild, old, and touchy little man from Trieste answered to this strange and beautiful name. Signor Unverdorben, who wouldn’t respond to anyone who didn’t call him “*signore*,” and insisted on being addressed with the polite “you” form, had had a long, adventurous double existence, and, like the Moor and Tramonto, was the prisoner of a dream or, rather, of two.

He had inexplicably survived the Lager of Birkenau, and had come out with a horrendous abscess on his foot; he couldn’t walk, and was the most assiduous and obsequious of those who offered me company and assistance during my illness. He was also very talkative, and if he hadn’t often repeated himself, as old people do, his confidences would make up a separate novel. He was a musician, a great unappreciated musician, composer, and orchestra conductor. He had composed an opera, *The Queen of Navarre*, which had been praised by Toscanini; but the manuscript lay unpublished in a drawer, because his enemies, searching among his papers with vile patience, had finally discovered that four consecutive measures of the score were identical to four measures in *Pagliacci*. His good faith was obvious, crystal clear, but in these matters the law is no joke. Three measures, all right, four no. Four measures constitute plagiarism. Signor Unverdorben was too much of a gentleman to dirty his hands with lawyers and lawsuits; he had manfully said goodbye to art and made a new life as a cook on transatlantic liners.

So he had traveled widely, and had seen things that no one else had seen. Mainly, he had seen extraordinary animals and plants, and many secrets of nature. He had seen the crocodiles of the Ganges, which have a single rigid bone that goes from the tip of the nose to the tail, are very fierce, and run like the wind; but, precisely because of this singular structure, they can move only forward and back, like a train on a track, and so all you have to do is place yourself next to them, just a little to the side of the straight line that constitutes their length, to be safe. He had seen the jackals of the Nile, who drink while they run in order not to be bitten by fish; at night their eyes shine like lanterns, and they sing in hoarse human voices. He had seen Malaysian cabbages, which are made like ours but much bigger; if you merely touch their leaves with a finger, you can't extricate it, and the arm and then the entire person of the incautious are drawn in, slowly but irresistibly, into the monstrous sticky heart of the carnivorous plant, and digested little by little. The only remedy, which almost no one knows, is fire, but you have to act quickly; the little flame of a match under the leaf that has grabbed the prey is enough, and the plant's vitality melts. In this way, thanks to his quickness and knowledge of natural history, Signor Unverdorben had saved the captain of his ship from certain death. Then, there are some little black snakes that dwell in the bleak sands of Australia, and attack man from a distance, in the air, like rifle shots; one bite can make a bull fall on its back. But everything in nature is connected, there is no offense against which there is not a defense, every poison has its antidote: you just have to know it. The bite of these reptiles is readily healed if it's treated with human saliva, but not that of the person who has been attacked. Thus, no one ever travels alone in those lands.

In the long Polish evenings, the air of the dormitory, heavy with tobacco and human odors, was saturated with foolish dreams. This is the most immediate fruit of exile, of being uprooted: the dominion of the unreal over the real. All of us dreamed dreams of the past and of the future, of slavery and redemption, of improbable paradises, of equally mythic and improbable enemies: perverse, subtle cosmic enemies, who pervaded everything, like the air. All, with the exception possibly of Cravero and certainly of D'Agata.

D'Agata didn't have time to dream, because he was obsessed by the fear of bedbugs. No one liked these uncomfortable companions, naturally, but we had all ended up getting used to them. They were not few and scattered

but a solid army, which with the arrival of spring had invaded all our beds; they nested during the day in the cracks in the walls and the wooden bunks, and left on forays as soon as the bustle of the day ceased. We had willingly resigned ourselves to giving up to them a small portion of our blood; it was less easy to get used to feeling them running furtively over our faces and body, under our clothes. Only those who had the good fortune to be heavy sleepers, and who could fall into unconsciousness before the bugs awakened, slept peacefully.

D'Agata, who was a tiny, sober, reserved, and very clean Sicilian mason, was reduced to sleeping during the day, and he spent the nights curled up on his bed, looking around with eyes dilated by horror, by wakefulness, and by his agonizing wait. He gripped tight in his hand a rudimentary contraption, which he had made with a stick and a piece of metal mesh, and the wall next to him was covered with a lurid constellation of bloody spots.

At first these habits were derided: was his skin more sensitive than that of the rest of us? But then pity prevailed, mixed with a trace of envy—because, among us all, D'Agata was the only one whose enemy was concrete, present, tangible, and could be fought, beaten, crushed against the wall.

Heading South

I had walked for hours in the marvelous morning air, breathing it like a medicine deep into my battered lungs. I wasn't very steady on my legs, but I had an imperious need to retake possession of my body, to reestablish contact, cut off for almost two years, with trees and grass, with the heavy brown earth in which you could feel the seeds trembling, with the ocean of air that carried the pollen of the firs, wave upon wave, from the Carpathians to the dark streets of the mining city.

I had been doing this for a week, exploring the outskirts of Katowice. The sweet weakness of convalescence ran in my veins. Also running in my veins, in those days, were strong doses of insulin, which had been prescribed, found, bought, and injected by the joint treatments of Leonardo and Gottlieb. While I walked, the insulin silently fulfilled its miraculous duty; it circulated with the blood in search of sugar, and saw to its diligent combustion and conversion to energy, distracting it from other, less suitable destinations. But the sugar it found wasn't much: suddenly, dramatically, almost always at the same time, the supply was exhausted. Then my legs folded under me, I saw everything turn black, and I was forced to sit down on the ground wherever I was, cold and overcome by an attack of furious hunger. Here the works and gifts of my third protector, Marya Fyodorovna Prima, came to my aid: I took out of my pocket a packet of glucose and gulped it down greedily. After a few minutes, the light returned, the sun grew warm again, and I could resume my walk.

Returning to the camp that morning, I found an unusual scene. In the middle of the open space stood Captain Egorov, surrounded by a dense crowd of Italians. In one hand he was holding a large revolver, which,

however, he was using only to emphasize with broad gestures the crucial passages of the speech he was making. Of his speech little could be understood. Essentially two words, because he kept repeating them, but those two words were heavenly messages: "*ripatriatsiya*" and "*Odyessa*."

Repatriation by way of Odessa, therefore: return. The whole camp instantly went wild. Captain Egorov was lifted off the ground, revolver and all, and carried in precarious triumph. People roared, "Home! Home!" through the corridors, others packed their bags, making as much noise as they could, and throwing out the windows rags, paper, broken shoes, and all kinds of junk. In a few hours the whole camp emptied, under the Olympian eyes of the Russians; some went to the city to take leave of their girls, some in a pure and simple barrage of merrymaking, some to spend their last zloty on provisions for the journey or in other more futile ways.

With that last program in mind Cesare and I went to Katowice, carrying in our pockets our own savings and those of five or six companions. In fact, what would we find at the border? We didn't know, but, from what we had seen until now of the Russians and their methods of proceeding, it didn't seem likely that at the border we would find money changers. Therefore, common sense, along with our happy state of mind, advised us to spend to the last zloty the small sum we had at our disposal: to use it up, for example, by organizing a grand Italian lunch, of spaghetti with butter, which we had been longing for since time immemorial.

We went into a food shop, put all our assets on the counter, and explained our intentions as well as we could to the shopkeeper. I told her, as usual, that I spoke German but was not German; that we were Italians who were leaving, and that we wanted to buy spaghetti, butter, salt, eggs, strawberries, and sugar in the most fitting proportions and for an amount of sixty-three zloty, not one more or one less.

The shopkeeper was a wrinkled old crone, with a crotchety and distrustful expression. She looked at us attentively through tortoiseshell glasses, then said plainly, in excellent German, that in her view we were not Italians at all. First, we spoke German, even if rather badly; then, and principally, Italians have black hair and passionate eyes, and we had neither. At most, she could concede that we were Croatians; in fact, now that she thought about it, she had just met some Croatians who resembled us. We were Croatians, the thing was unquestionable.

I was quite annoyed, and said to her brusquely that we were Italians, whether she liked it or not—Italian Jews, one from Rome and one from Turin—that we came from Auschwitz and were going home, and we wanted to buy and pay, and not waste time in nonsense.

Jews from Auschwitz? The old woman's look softened, even her wrinkles seemed to relax. Then it was a different situation. She invited us into the back of the shop, had us sit down, offered us glasses of real beer, and without delay she told us proudly her fabulous story: her epic, close in time but already broadly transfigured into a chanson de geste, refined and polished by innumerable repetitions.

She knew about Auschwitz, and everything about Auschwitz interested her, because she had been at risk of going there. She wasn't Polish, she was German: at one time she kept a shop in Berlin, with her husband. They hadn't liked Hitler, and maybe they had been imprudent in letting their unusual opinions leak out in the neighborhood: in 1935 her husband was taken away by the Gestapo, and she had never learned anything more about him. It had been a great sorrow, but one has to eat, and she had continued her business until '38, when Hitler, "*der Lump*," had given on the radio the famous speech in which he declared he was going to war.

Then she was angry and had written to him. She had written personally, "To Herr Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Reich, Berlin," sending him a long letter in which she advised him firmly not to go to war because too many people would die, and, further, she showed him that if he did he would lose, because Germany couldn't win against the whole world, and even a child would understand that. She had signed her name, last name, and address: then she had waited.

Five days later the Brownshirts arrived and under the pretext of doing a search they had ransacked and wrecked her house and shop. What had they found? Nothing, she wasn't active politically: only the draft of the letter. Two weeks later they called her to the Gestapo. She thought they would beat her and send her to the Lager: instead they had treated her with boorish contempt, told her they should hang her, but were convinced that she was just *eine alte blöde Ziege*, a stupid old goat, and the noose would be wasted on her. But they had withdrawn her business license and expelled her from Berlin.

She had scraped out a living in Silesia on the black market and by her wits, until, following her predictions, the Germans lost the war. Then, since

the whole neighborhood knew what she had done, the Polish authorities had quickly granted her a license for a food store. So now she lived peacefully, fortified by the thought of how much better the world would have been if the powerful of the Earth had taken her advice.

On the eve of departure, Leonardo and I handed over the keys to the clinic and said goodbye to Marya Fyodorovna and Dr. Dancenko. Marya appeared silent and sad; I asked her why didn't she come to Italy with us, and she blushed as if I had made her a dishonest proposal. Dancenko interrupted; he was carrying a bottle of alcohol and two pieces of paper. First we thought that the alcohol was his personal contribution to the medical supplies for the journey; but no, it was for the farewell toasts, which were dutifully exchanged.

And the paper? We learned to our amazement that the Command expected from us two declarations of thanks for the humaneness and the propriety with which we had been treated at Katowice; Dancenko also begged us to mention explicitly him and his work, and to add to our name the qualification "Doctor of Medicine" when we signed. This Leonardo could do and did; but in my case it would be a lie. I was bewildered, and tried to make Dancenko understand; but he was astonished at my formality and, beating with his finger on the piece of paper, told me irritably not to make trouble. I signed as he wished: Why deprive him of some small help to his career?

But the ceremony wasn't over yet. In turn, Dancenko drew out two testimonials, written by hand in fine calligraphy on two pieces of lined paper, evidently torn from a school notebook. On the one meant for me, he declared with casual generosity that "The doctor of medicine Primo Levi, of Turin, offered for four months his capable and diligent services to the Infirmary of this Command, and has thereby deserved the gratitude of all the workers of the world."

The next day, the dream we had had forever became a reality. In the station at Katowice the train awaited us: a long train of freight cars, which we Italians (we were around eight hundred) took possession of with noisy

cheer. Odessa, and then a fantastic journey by sea through the gateways of the east, and then Italy.

The prospect of traversing many hundreds of kilometers in those rough cars, sleeping on the bare floor, didn't worry us at all, nor did the laughable food supplies delivered to us by the Russians: some bread, and a tin of soy margarine for each car. It was American margarine, heavily salted and hard, like Parmesan cheese: evidently meant for tropical climates, it had ended up in our hands by unimaginable pathways. The rest, the Russians assured us with their habitual carelessness, would be distributed during the journey.

That train filled with hope left in mid-June of 1945. There was no escort, no Russian on board: in charge of the convoy was Dr. Gottlieb, who had spontaneously attached himself to us, and who contained in his person the duties of interpreter, doctor, and consul of the itinerant community. We felt in good hands, far from any doubt or uncertainty; the ship was waiting for us in Odessa.

The journey lasted for six days, and if in the course of it we were not driven by hunger to begging or stealing, and in fact reached its end fairly well nourished, the credit goes exclusively to Dr. Gottlieb. Immediately after our departure it became clear that the Russians of Katowice had sent us off at our peril, without making any provisions or arrangements with their colleagues in Odessa and the intermediate stops. When our convoy stopped in a station (and it stopped often and long, because the regular traffic and military transports had precedence), no one knew what to make of us. The stationmasters and officers in charge of services watched us arrive with astonished and desperate eyes, anxious in turn only to get rid of our inconvenient presence.

But Gottlieb was there, sharp as a sword; there was no bureaucratic tangle, no barrier of negligence, no official obstinacy that he could not defeat in a few minutes, each time in a different way. Every difficulty dissolved into a mist before his boldness, his deep imagination, his saber-like quickness. From each encounter with the monster of a thousand faces, which dwells wherever forms and documents accumulate, he returned to us radiant with victory like a St. George after the duel with the dragon, and he told us about its rapid turns, too conscious of his superiority to glory in it.

The officer in charge at the station, for example, had demanded our travel order, which notoriously didn't exist; Gottlieb had said that he would get it and had gone into the telegraph office nearby and fabricated one in a

few instants, drafted in the most plausible bureaucratic jargon, on an ordinary piece of paper that he had covered thickly with stamps, seals, and illegible signatures, rendering it as holy and venerable as an authentic emanation of Power. Or, again, he had presented himself to the quartermaster of a Kommandantur, and had respectfully notified him that eight hundred Italians were stopped at the station and had nothing to eat. The quartermaster had replied "*Nicevò*," his storehouse was empty, he needed authorization, he would take care of it the next day, and had rudely tried to show him the door, like some ordinary annoying petitioner; but Gottlieb had smiled and said, "Comrade, you haven't understood properly. These Italians *have to* have food, and today—the order is from Stalin." And the provisions had arrived in a flash.

But for me that journey was excruciating. I was surely recovered from pleurisy, but my body was in open rebellion, and seemed determined to make a mockery of doctors and medicines. Every night, while I slept, fever furtively invaded me: an intense fever, of an unknown nature, which reached its peak near morning. I woke prostrate, only half conscious, and with a wrist, or an elbow, or a knee immobilized by stabbing pains. I lay like that, on the floor of the train car or the cement of a platform, racked by delirium and pain, until midday; then, in a few hours, everything returned to order and around evening I felt almost normal. Leonardo and Gottlieb looked at me perplexed and powerless.

The train passed through cultivated plains, gloomy cities and villages, dense, wild forests that I thought had disappeared millennia earlier from the heart of Europe: conifers and birches so thick that, to reach the sunlight, by mutual agreement they were forced to push desperately upward, in an oppressive verticality. The train advanced as if through a tunnel, in a green-black shadow, amid the smooth bare trunks, under a high, unbroken vault of thickly interlaced branches. Rzeszów, Przemyśl with its threatening fortifications, L'viv.

In L'viv, a skeleton city devastated by bombing and by war, the train stopped for the night in a downpour. The roof of our car wasn't watertight: we had to get out and seek shelter. With a few others, we couldn't find anything better than the railway workers' underpass: dark, two inches of mud, and fierce drafts. But the fever arrived punctually at midnight, like a compassionate blow to the head, bringing me the ambiguous kindness of unconsciousness.

Ternopol, Proskurov. The train reached Proskurov at sunset, the locomotive was uncoupled, and Gottlieb assured us that we wouldn't leave until morning. We therefore settled ourselves to spend the night in the station. The waiting room was large: Cesare, Leonardo, Daniele, and I took possession of a corner. Cesare left for the town as the one assigned to provisions, and soon returned with eggs, salad, and a packet of tea.

We lit a fire on the floor (we were not the only ones, or the first: the room was scattered with the remains of innumerable campsites of people who had preceded us, and the ceiling and walls were smoke-blackened like those of an old kitchen). Cesare cooked the eggs, and made a generous and sugary tea.

Now, either that tea was stronger than ours in Italy, or Cesare had mistaken the amounts, for in a short time every trace of sleep and weariness vanished, and we felt instead invigorated by an unusual state of mind—eager, cheerful, tense, lucid, sensitive. Therefore, every event and every word of that night has remained imprinted in my memory, and I can describe it as if it were yesterday.

The daylight disappeared extremely slowly, first rosy, then purple, then gray; the silvery splendor of a warm full moon followed. Next to us, as we smoked and talked animatedly, were two very young girls dressed in black, sitting on a wooden chest. They were speaking to each other: not in Russian but in Yiddish.

"Do you understand what they're saying?" Cesare asked.

"A few words."

"Come on, then: start up. See if they'll go along."

That night everything seemed easy to me, even understanding Yiddish. With unusual boldness, I turned to the girls, greeted them, and, making an effort to imitate their pronunciation, asked in German if they were Jewish, and I said that we four were, too. The girls (they were perhaps sixteen or eighteen years old) burst into laughter. "*Ihr sprecht keyn Jiddisch, ihr seyd ja keyne Jiden!*" "You don't speak Yiddish: so you aren't Jews!" In their language, the statement had a strict logic.

And yet we really were Jews, I explained. Italian Jews: Jews in Italy and all of Western Europe don't speak Yiddish.

This, for them, was a great novelty, a comically odd thing, as if someone were to declare that there exist Frenchmen who don't speak French. I tried to recite to them the beginning of the *Shema*, the basic

Jewish prayer: their incredulity diminished but their merriment increased: who had ever heard Hebrew pronounced in such a ridiculous way?

The older was named Sore: she had a small, keen, mischievous face, full of curves and asymmetrical dimples; our limping and laborious conversation seemed to give her an intense enjoyment, and stimulated her like tickling.

But then, if we were Jews, were all the others, too? she asked, indicating with a circular gesture the eight hundred Italians who filled the room. What difference was there between us and them? The same language, the same faces, the same clothes. No, I explained to her, they were Christians, they came from Genoa, Naples, Sicily; some of them might have Arab blood in their veins. Sore looked around in bewilderment, this was confusing. In her country things were very clear: a Jew is a Jew, and a Russian a Russian, there are no doubts or ambiguities.

They were evacuees, she told me. They were from Minsk, in Belorussia; when the Germans were approaching, their family had asked to be transferred to the interior of the Soviet Union, to escape the massacres of Eichmann's Einsatzkommandos. The request had been taken literally: they had been sent four thousand kilometers away from their city, to Samarkand, in Uzbekistan, to the gates of the Roof of the World, in view of mountains seven thousand meters high. She and her sister were still children; then their mother died and their father was mobilized for some job or other on the border. The two of them had learned Uzbek, and many other basic things: to take life day by day, to travel over continents with one suitcase for two, to live, in short, like birds of the air, who do not spin or weave or care about tomorrow.

Such they were, Sore and her silent sister. Like us, they were on the road of return. They had left Samarkand in March, setting off as a feather abandons itself to the wind. Partly in a truck, partly on foot, they had crossed the Karakum, the Desert of Black Sand; they had arrived by train in Krasnovodsk, on the Caspian Sea, and there had waited until a fisherman ferried them to Baku. From Baku they had continued by any available means, since they had no money, but in exchange a boundless faith in the future and in their neighbor, and an innate and intact love of life.

Everyone around us was sleeping; Cesare restlessly witnessed the conversation, asking me every so often if the preliminaries were over and

we had got to the point; then, disappointed, he went outside in search of more solid adventures.

The peacefulness of the waiting room and the story of the two sisters were abruptly interrupted around midnight. A door that by a short corridor connected the waiting room with a smaller one, reserved for soldiers in transit, was brutally flung open, as if by a gust of wind. On the threshold a very young, drunk Russian soldier appeared. He looked around with unfocused eyes, then he set off forward, head down, with frightening tacking maneuvers, as if the floor had suddenly sloped sharply under him. Three Soviet officers were standing in the corridor, engrossed in discussion. The soldier, reaching them, braked, stiffened to attention, saluted militarily, and the three responded decorously to his salute. Then he took off again in semicircles, like a skater, passed precisely through the door to the outside, and we could hear him vomiting and hiccuping noisily on the platform. He came back inside with a slightly less shaky step, again saluted the three impassive officers, and disappeared. After a quarter of an hour, the scene was repeated, identically, as in a nightmare: dramatic entrance, pause, salute, rapid journey obliquely among the legs of the sleepers toward the open air, discharge, return, salute; and so on, an infinite number of times, at regular intervals, without the three ever devoting to him anything but a distracted glance and a correct salute, hand to cap.

So that memorable night passed until the fever overwhelmed me; then I lay on the floor, shivering. Gottlieb came, bringing with him an unusual drug: half a liter of raw vodka, a clandestine distillate that he had bought from some peasants in the neighborhood. It smelled of mold, vinegar, and fire. “Drink,” he said, “drink it all. It will do you good, and besides we don’t have anything else here for your illness.”

I drank the infernal potion, not without effort, burning my jaws and throat, and soon fell into nothingness. When I woke the next morning, I felt oppressed by a great weight, but it wasn’t the fever or a bad dream. I lay buried under a layer of other sleepers, in a kind of human incubator: people who had arrived during the night and had found no other place except on top of those who were already sleeping on the floor.

I was thirsty: thanks to the combined action of the vodka and the animal warmth, I must have lost many liters of sweat. The singular treatment was completely successful; the fever and the pain disappeared for good, and did not return.

The train left again, and in a few hours we reached Zhmerynka, a railroad hub 350 kilometers from Odessa. Here a great surprise and a fierce disappointment awaited us. Gottlieb, who had conferred with the military commander of the place, made his way through the train, car by car, and told us that we all had to get out: the train would not continue.

Wouldn't continue why? And how and when would we arrive at Odessa? "I don't know," Gottlieb answered, embarrassed. "No one knows. All I know is we have to get out of the train, arrange ourselves somehow on the platforms, and wait for orders." He was very pale and obviously disturbed.

We got out, and spent the night in the station; Gottlieb's defeat, his first, seemed to us a bad sign. The next morning, our guide, along with his inseparable brother and brother-in-law, had disappeared. They had vanished into thin air, with all their considerable baggage; someone said he had seen them whispering with the Russian railway workers, and during the night get on a military train traveling from Odessa to the Polish border.

We remained in Zhmerynka for three days, oppressed by worry, frustration, or fear, according to our temperaments and the scraps of information we managed to extort from the Russians in the place. These showed no surprise about our fate and our forced sojourn, and answered our questions in the most disconcerting ways. One Russian told us that yes, several ships had left from Odessa with English and American soldiers who were going home, and we, too, sooner or later, would be embarked: we had food, Hitler was gone, why complain? Another told us that the week before a convoy of Frenchmen, traveling to Odessa, had been stopped at Zhmerynka and rerouted to the north "because the tracks were cut off." A third informed us that he had seen with his own eyes a transport of German prisoners heading to the Far East; according to him, the situation was clear, were we not allies of the Germans? Well, they would send us, too, to dig trenches on the Japanese front.

To complicate things, on the third day another convoy of Italians arrived in Zhmerynka, from Romania. These had an appearance very different from ours: there were some six hundred men and women, well dressed, with suitcases and trunks, some with cameras around their necks: like tourists. They looked down at us, as if we were poor relations; they had traveled here on a regular train, with passenger cars, paying their fare, and were in order—with passports, money, travel documents, timetable, and collective

travel permit—for Italy by way of Odessa. If we could only get the Russians to include us with them, then we, too, would reach Odessa.

With much condescension, they gave us to understand that they, in fact, were important people: they were civilian and military officials from the Italian legation in Bucharest, and also various people who, after the Armir[5] was disbanded, had remained in Romania with diverse duties, or to fish in the troubled waters. There were among them entire families, husbands with genuine Romanian wives, and numerous children.

But, unlike the Germans, the Russians do not possess the slightest talent for distinctions and classifications. A few days later, we were all traveling north, toward an imprecise goal that was, in any case, a new exile. Italian-Romanians and Italian-Italians, all in the same freight cars, all with a heavy heart, all at the mercy of the indecipherable Soviet bureaucracy, an obscure and gigantic power, not malevolent toward us but suspicious, careless, ignorant, contradictory, and in its effects as blind as a force of nature.

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5. The Armir, or Armata Italiana in Russia, was the unit of the Italian Army that fought in Russia during the Second World War.

Heading North

In the few days we spent in Zhmerynka we were reduced to begging, which, in those conditions, had nothing particularly tragic about it, compared with the much more serious prospect of an imminent departure for an unknown destination. Deprived as we were of Gottlieb's talent for improvisation, we had immediately felt the full impact of the superior economic power of the "Romanians": they could pay five or ten times as much as we could for any goods, and they did so, because they, too, had exhausted their food supplies, and they, too, guessed that we were leaving for a place where money would count for little, and it would be difficult to save it.

We were camped at the station, and we often went into the inhabited area. Low, lopsided houses, constructed with a curious and amusing indifference to geometry and standards: façades almost aligned, walls almost vertical, angles almost straight; but here and there a pilaster that looked like a column, with a showy scrolled capital. Thick roofs of straw, dark smoky interiors, where you glimpsed the enormous central stove and on it the straw pallets for sleeping, the black icons in a corner. At one intersection a storyteller was singing, a white-haired, barefoot giant; he stared at the sky with unseeing eyes, and at intervals bent his head and made the sign of the cross with his thumb on his forehead.

On the main street, nailed to two stakes stuck in the muddy ground, was a wooden tablet with Europe painted on it, and now faded by the suns and rains of many summers. It must have been used for following bulletins from the war, but it had been painted from memory, as if seen from an extreme distance: France was definitely a coffeepot, the Iberian peninsula a head in

profile, with the nose sticking out from Portugal, and Italy an authentic boot, on a very slight angle, with the sole and the heel smooth and aligned. In Italy only four cities had been marked: Rome, Venice, Naples, and Dronero.

Zhmerynka was a large agricultural village, in former times a marketplace, as one could deduce from the vast central square, of beaten earth, with numerous parallel rows of iron bars for tying up the beasts by the halter. Now it was absolutely empty: only, in one corner, in the shadow of an oak, a tribe of nomads was camped, a vision arising from long-ago millennia.

Men and women, they were covered by goatskins, tied to their limbs by leather straps; on their feet they wore sandals of birch bark. There were several families, twenty people, and their house was an enormous cart, massive as a tank, made of roughly squared interlocking beams, resting on powerful solid wooden wheels; the four large shaggy horses that could be seen grazing a little beyond must have had a hard time hauling it. Who were they, where had they come from, and where were they going? We didn’t know; but at the time we felt them singularly close, like us tossed by the wind, like us entrusted to the changeability of a distant and unknown arbiter, who was symbolized by the wheels that transported us and them, in the stupid perfection of a circle without beginning and without end.

Not far from the square, along the railroad tracks, we ran into another fateful apparition. A stockpile of tree trunks, heavy and rough like everything in that country where the subtle and the refined have no place: among the trunks, lying facedown in the sun, burned by the sun, were a dozen stray German prisoners, in a feral state. No one watched them, no one commanded them or took care of them; from every appearance, they had been forgotten, simply abandoned to their lot.

They were dressed in faded rags, in which the proud uniforms of the Wehrmacht could still be recognized. Their faces were gaunt, bewildered, savage; accustomed to live, to work, to fight within the rigid framework of Authority, their support and their nourishment, when that authority ceased they became impotent, weak, lifeless. Those good subjects, good executors of all orders, good instruments of power, possessed in themselves not a parcel of power. They were emptied and inert, like dead leaves piled by the wind in hidden corners; they hadn’t sought safety in flight.

They saw us, and some moved toward us with uncertain steps, like automatons. They asked for bread: not in their language but, rather, in Russian. We refused, since our bread was precious. But Daniele didn't refuse: Daniele, whose strong wife, whose brother, parents, and no fewer than thirty relatives the Germans had killed; Daniele, who was the sole survivor of the raid on the ghetto of Venice, and who since the day of the liberation had fed on his grief, took out some bread, and showed it to those specters, and placed it on the ground. But he demanded that they come to get it, crawling on the earth: which they did docilely.

That groups of former Allied prisoners had embarked at Odessa months earlier, as some Russians had told us, must have been true, since the station in Zhmerynka, our temporary and hardly intimate residence, still bore signs of them: a triumphal arch made of branches, now withered, that bore the slogan "Long live the United Nations"; and enormous horrible portraits of Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, with quotations celebrating the victory against the common enemy. But the short season of harmony among the three great allies must now be reaching its end, since the portraits were faded and washed out by the bad weather, and were taken down during our stay. A painter arrived; he put up a scaffolding along the façade of the station, and canceled out under a layer of plaster the slogan "Workers of all the world, unite!" in place of which we saw, with a faint chill, another, very different one appear, letter by letter: "*Vperèd na zapàd*," "On toward the west."

The repatriation of the Allied soldiers was now over, but other convoys arrived and departed southward right before our eyes. They were also Russian transports, but very distinct from the glorious homely military transports that we had seen passing through Katowice. These were the transports of Ukrainian women who were returning from Germany: women only, since the men had gone as soldiers or partisans, or the Germans had killed them.

Their exile had been different from ours, and from that of the prisoners of war. Not all, but in large part, they had abandoned their country "willingly." A coerced, blackmailed willingness, distorted by lies and by subtle, heavy Nazi propaganda, which threatened and blandished through manifestos, newspapers, radio: yet a willingness, an assent. Hundreds of thousands of women, from sixteen to forty, peasants, students, workers, had left the ruined fields, the closed schools, the ravaged workshops, for the

bread of the invaders. Not a few were mothers, and for bread they had left their children. In Germany they had found bread, barbed wire, hard labor, German order, slavery, and shame; and bearing the weight of the shame they were now coming home, without joy and without hope.

Russia the conqueror had no indulgence for them. They returned home in freight cars, often open, and divided horizontally by a wooden partition so that the space could be better employed: sixty, eighty women in a car. They had no baggage: only the threadbare, faded dresses they wore. Youthful bodies, still strong and healthy, but closed and bitter faces, furtive eyes, a disturbing, animal-like humiliation and resignation; no voice came from those tangles of limbs, which unknotted lazily when the convoys stopped in the station. No one was waiting for them, no one seemed aware of them. Their inertia, their isolation, their painful lack of modesty were those of humiliated and tamed animals. We alone watched with pity and sadness their passing, new testimony and a new aspect of the pestilence that had devastated Europe.

We left Zhmerynka at the end of June, oppressed by a heavy anguish arising from disappointment and from the uncertainty of our fate, and finding an obscure resonance and confirmation in the scenes we had witnessed there.

Including the “Romanians,” we were fourteen hundred Italians. We were loaded into some thirty freight cars, which were attached to a train heading north. No one in Zhmerynka knew or wished to explain our destination; but we went north, away from the sea, away from Italy, toward prison, solitude, darkness, winter. In spite of everything, we considered it a good sign that provisions hadn’t been distributed for the journey: maybe it wouldn’t be long.

We traveled in fact only for two days and a night, with very few stops, through a majestic and monotonous landscape of desert steppes, forests, remote villages, slow, wide rivers. Crammed into the freight cars, we were uncomfortable: the first night, taking advantage of a stop, Cesare and I got out to stretch our legs and look for a better arrangement. We noted that at the front of the train were various passenger cars and an infirmary car: it appeared empty. “Why not get in?” Cesare proposed. “It’s prohibited,” I

said foolishly. Why in fact should it be prohibited, and by whom? Besides, we had already observed on various occasions that the Western (and in particular German) religion of the differentiating ban does not have deep roots in Russia.

The infirmary car was not only empty but offered sybaritic refinements. Functioning washrooms, with water and soap; a very gentle suspension that muffled the jolting of the wheels; marvelous little beds hung on adjustable springs, complete with white sheets and warm blankets. At the head of the bed I had chosen, I found an extra gift of fate, a book in Italian: *The Boys of Via Paal*, which I had never read as a child. While our companions had declared us lost, we spent a dreamlike night.

The train crossed the Berezina at the end of the second day of the journey, while the sun—as red as a pomegranate, sinking obliquely amid the trees in an enchanted slow motion—clothed in bloody light the waters, the woods, and the epic plain, still scattered with the remains of weapons and baggage wagons. The journey ended a few hours later, in the middle of the night, at the peak of a violent storm. We were made to get out in the downpour, in absolute darkness, broken here and there by lamps. We walked for half an hour, Indian file, through the grass and the mud, each gripping like a blind man the man who preceded him, and I don’t know who was leading the leader; finally, soaked to the bone, we approached an enormous dark building, half destroyed by bombs. The rain continued, the floor was muddy and wet, and more water fell through the holes in the roof: we waited for day in a laborious, passive waking sleep.

A splendid day dawned. We went outside, and only then realized that we had spent the night in the orchestra seats of a theater, and that we were in an extensive complex of damaged and abandoned Soviet barracks. All the buildings had been ransacked and plundered in the meticulous German manner. The German armies in retreat had carried off everything that could be carried off: windows and doors, grates, railings, the entire systems of lighting and heating, water pipes, even the fence stakes. The walls had been stripped down to the last nail. From an adjacent railroad junction the rails and the ties had been torn up—with a machine just for the purpose, the Russians told us.

More than a sack, in other words: the genius of destruction, of counter-creation, here as at Auschwitz; the mystique of the void, beyond any requirement of war or impulse to plunder.

But they had not been able to carry off the unforgettable frescoes that covered the walls inside: the work of some anonymous poet-soldier, naïve, strong, and crude. Three giant horsemen, equipped with swords, helmets, and clubs, stopping on a height, and gazing over a boundless horizon of virgin lands to conquer. Stalin, Lenin, Molotov, reproduced with reverent affection in intent, with sacrilegious audacity in effect, and recognizable principally and respectively by the mustache, the little beard, and the eyeglasses. A foul spider, at the center of a spiderweb as big as the wall: it has a black tuft between the eyes, a swastika on its back, and underneath is written, “Death to Hitler’s invaders.” A tall, fair-haired Soviet soldier in chains raises a manacled hand to judge his judges; and these, hundreds of them, all against one, sitting on the benches of a courtroom-amphitheater, are disgusting man-insects, with pinched, crushed, gray and yellow faces, ghoulish as skulls, and they draw back, one against the other, like lemurs who flee the light, driven into the void by the prophetic gesture of the hero-prisoner.

In these spectral barracks, and under the open sky, in vast courtyards invaded by weeds, thousands of foreigners were camped, in transit like us, belonging to all the nations of Europe.

The kind warmth of the sun began to penetrate the damp earth, and everything around us was steamy. I walked a few hundred meters away from the theater, heading into the thick grass of a meadow where I intended to undress and dry in the sun: and right in the middle of the meadow, as if he were waiting for me, whom should I see but Mordo Nahum, my Greek, almost unrecognizable for his magnificent plumpness and the improvised Soviet uniform he wore. And he looked at me with pale owl’s eyes, lost in his rosy, round, red-bearded face.

He welcomed me with fraternal cordiality, ignoring a malicious question of mine about the United Nations that had managed things so badly for them, the Greeks. He asked how I was: Did I need anything? food? clothes? Yes, I couldn’t deny it, I needed many things. “It will be provided,” he answered, mysterious and magnanimous. “I count for something here.” He paused briefly, and added, “Do you need a woman?”

I looked at him dumbfounded; I was afraid I hadn’t understood. But the Greek, with a broad gesture, took in with his hand three-quarters of the horizon: and then I saw that in the tall grass, near and far, some twenty large girls lay stretched out in the sun, napping. They were blond, rosy creatures,

with powerful backs, big bones, and placid, bovine faces, and were dressed in various crude and incongruous outfits. “They come from Bessarabia,” the Greek explained. “They’re all my employees. The Russians like them this way, white and heavy. It was a big *pagaille* here before; but since I’ve taken charge, everything runs wonderfully—cleanliness, variety, discretion, and no question about the money. It’s a good business, too, and sometimes *moi aussi j’y prends mon plaisir*.”

There returned to mind, in a new light, the episode of the hard-boiled egg, and the Greek’s contemptuous challenge: “Come on, tell me some article I’ve never dealt in!” No, I didn’t need a woman, or at least not in that sense. We parted after a friendly conversation; and after that, since the whirlwind that had convulsed that old Europe, dragging it into a wild contra dance of separations and meetings, had come to rest, I never saw my Greek master again, or heard news of him.

A Little Hen

The transit camp where I had so fortuitously seen Mordo Nahum again was called Slutsk. Anyone who looked on a good map of the Soviet Union for the small town that bears this name could, with a little patience, find it, in White Russia, a hundred kilometers south of Minsk. But on no map is the village called Starye Doroghi, our final destination, marked.

In July 1945, ten thousand persons were staying in Slutsk; I say “persons” because any more restrictive term would be inaccurate. There were men, and also a good number of women and children. There were Catholics, Jews, Orthodox, and Muslims; there were whites and yellows and various blacks in American uniform; German, Poles, French, Greeks, Dutch, Italians, and others; and also Germans who claimed to be Austrians, Austrians who declared they were Swiss, Russians who called themselves Italians, a woman dressed as a man, and even, standing out amid the ragged crowd, a Magyar general in full uniform, quarrelsome and colorful and as stupid as a rooster.

We were comfortable in Slutsk. It was hot, even too hot; we slept on the ground, but there was no work and there was food for everyone. In fact, the food service was marvelous: it was assigned by the Russians, in rotation by the week, to each of the main nationalities represented in the camp. We ate in a vast, light, clean room; every table had eight places, all you had to do was arrive at the right time and sit down, without checks or shifts or lines, and immediately the procession of volunteer cooks arrived, with surprising dishes, along with bread and tea. During our brief stay the Hungarians were in charge: they made spicy stews, and enormous portions of spaghetti with parsley, overcooked and wildly sweetened. In addition, faithful to their

national idols, they had formed a Gypsy orchestra: six provincial musicians, in velvet trousers and doublets of embroidered leather, majestic and sweaty, who started with the Soviet national anthem, the Hungarian, and “Hatikva” (in honor of the large nucleus of Hungarian Jews), and then continued with frivolous, interminable czardas, until the last diner had laid down his fork.

The camp wasn’t fenced. It consisted of crumbling buildings, one or two stories high, aligned on the four sides of a vast, empty grassy space, probably the old parade ground. Under the burning sun of the Russian summer, this appeared dotted with people sleeping, or busy delousing themselves, mending their clothes, or cooking over makeshift fires, and was animated by more active groups, playing ball or ninepins. The center was dominated by an enormous low square wooden shed, with three entrances, all on the same side. Over the three doorways, in large Cyrillic letters traced in red lead by an uncertain hand, were written three words: “Muzhskaya,” “Zhenskaya,” “Ofitserskaya,” that is to say For Men, For Women, For Officials. It was the camp latrine, and its most prominent feature. Inside, there was only a floor of rough boards and a hundred square holes, ten by ten, like a gigantic Rabelaisian multiplication table. There were no subdivisions between the compartments intended for the three sexes; or if there had been they had disappeared.

The Russian administration paid absolutely no attention to the camp, so as to make one doubt that it existed: but it must have existed, since we ate every day. In other words, it was a good administration.

We spent ten days at Slutsk. They were empty days, without encounters, without events that you could anchor your memory to. One day we tried leaving the rectangle of the barracks, and going out into the plain to gather edible grasses: but after half an hour of walking we found ourselves as if in the middle of the sea, at the center of the horizon, without a tree, a height, a house to take as a goal. To us Italians, used to the background of mountains and hills, and the plain crowded with the signs of human presence, the immense, heroic Russian space was dizzying, and made our hearts heavy with painful memories. We tried to cook the grasses we had gathered, but got almost nothing useful.

I had found in an attic an obstetrics tract, in German, with a lot of colored illustrations, in two heavy volumes: and since printed paper is for me a vice, and for more than a year I had been starved for it, I spent my time reading randomly, or sleeping in the sun in the wild grass.

One morning, with mysterious, lightning-like speed, the news spread that we were to leave Slutsk, on foot, to be settled in Starye Doroghi, seventy kilometers away, in a camp for Italians alone. The Germans, in such circumstances, would have covered the walls with bilingual announcements, clearly printed, specifying the hour of departure, the approved baggage, the timetable, and the death penalty for the recalcitrant. The Russians, on the other hand, let the order spread on its own, and allowed the march to organize itself.

The news provoked a certain turmoil. In ten days, we had settled ourselves in Slutsk, more or less comfortably, and in particular we were afraid of leaving the overwhelming abundance of the Slutsk kitchens for who knows what wretched situation. Besides, seventy kilometers is a lot; none of us were in shape for such a long march, and few had proper shoes. We tried in vain to get more precise information from the Russian Command: all we could find out was that we were to leave the morning of July 20, and that a real Russian Command did not appear to exist.

On the morning of July 20 we gathered in the central square, like an immense caravan of Gypsies. At the last minute we learned that there was a railroad line between Slutsk and Starye Doroghi, yet only the women and children were allowed to travel by train, along with the usual well-connected types, and the no less usual clever ones. On the other hand, to get around the tenuous bureaucracy that ruled our fates did not take exceptional astuteness; but not many of us realized it at the time.

The order to depart was given around ten, and immediately afterward a counterorder. Numerous other false departures followed this one, so that we got moving only around midday, without having eaten.

A major highway passes through Slutsk and Starye Doroghi, the one that connects Warsaw with Moscow. In those days it was in complete disrepair: it consisted of two side lanes, of bare earth, meant for horses, and one in the center, formerly paved but then torn up by explosions and the tracks of the armored tanks, and so not very different from the other two. The road traverses an endless plain, almost without inhabited places, and is therefore made up of long straight stretches: between Slutsk and Starye Doroghi there was a single, barely noticeable curve.

We left with a certain bravado: the weather was splendid, we were fairly well nourished, and the idea of a long walk in the heart of that legendary

country, the Pripet Marshes, had in itself a certain fascination. But our opinion very quickly changed.

In no other part of Europe, I believe, can you walk for ten hours and find yourself always in the same place, as in a nightmare: always ahead of you the road leads straight to the horizon, always on both sides is steppe and forest, and always behind you the road goes straight to the opposite horizon, like the wake of a ship; and there are no villages, no houses, no smoke, not a milestone that in some way might indicate that a little distance has been gained; and you do not meet a living soul, except flocks of crows, or a hawk cruising lazily in the wind.

After several hours of walking, our column, initially compact, meandered for two or three kilometers. At the tail end was a Russian military cart, drawn by two horses and driven by a sullen, monstrous noncommissioned officer: he had lost his lips in battle, and from the nose to the chin his face was a terrifying skull. I think he was supposed to pick up the exhausted; instead, he was busy diligently retrieving the baggage that was gradually abandoned on the road by people who were too tired to carry it farther. For a while we had the illusion that he would give it back upon our arrival, but the first person who tried to stop and wait for the cart was greeted by shouts, cracks of the whip, and inarticulate threats. This was the end of the two volumes of obstetrics, which constituted by far the weightiest part of my personal baggage.

At sunset, our group was proceeding by itself. Beside me walked the mild and patient Leonardo; Daniele, limping and enraged by thirst and tiredness; Signor Unverdorben, with a friend of his from Trieste; and Cesare, of course.

We stopped to rest at the single curve that interrupted the fierce monotony of the road; there was a roofless hut, perhaps the only visible remains of a village destroyed by the war. Behind it, we discovered a well, where we slaked our thirst with pleasure. We were tired and our feet were swollen and covered with sores. I had long ago lost my archbishop’s shoes, and had inherited from somewhere or other a pair of bicycle shoes, as light as feathers; but they were tight, and I was forced to take them off periodically and walk barefoot.

We held a short council: what if that fellow made us walk all night? It wouldn’t be surprising: once at Katowice the Russians had made us unload boots from a train for twenty-four hours straight, working alongside us

themselves. Why not hide in the woods? We would arrive at Starye Doroghi at our own pace the next day; the Russian certainly didn't have a roster for taking a roll call, the night was announcing itself as warm, there was water, and, among the six of us, we had not much but something for dinner. Though the hut was in ruins, there was still a bit of roof to shelter us from the dew.

"Excellent," said Cesare. "I'm for it. Tonight, I want to get a roast chicken."

So we hid in the woods until the cart with the skeleton had passed, waited until the last stragglers had left the well, and took possession of our campground. We spread out our blankets, opened our bags, lit a fire, and began to prepare dinner, with bread, millet kasha, and a can of peas.

"What a meal," said Cesare. "What peas. You didn't understand. I want to celebrate tonight, and I want to make a roast chicken."

Cesare is an indomitable man: going around the markets of Katowice with him had already convinced me of that. It was futile to insist that to find a chicken at night, in the Pripet Marshes, without knowing Russian and without money to pay for it, was a senseless proposition. It was pointless to offer him a double ration of kasha to quiet him. "You all stay here with your lousy little kasha: I'm going to look for a chicken by myself, but then you won't see me again. I say goodbye to you and the Russians and the hut—I'm off, and I'll get back to Italy by myself. Maybe even by way of Japan."

It was then that I offered to go with him. Not so much because of the chicken or because of the threats; but I love Cesare, and I like to see him at work.

"Bravo, Lapé," Cesare said to me. Lapé is me: Cesare named me long ago, and he still calls me that, for the following reason. It's well-known that in the Lager we had shaved heads; when we were liberated, our hair, and mine especially, after a year of being shaved, had grown back oddly soft and smooth. At that time mine was still very short, and Cesare claimed that it reminded him of the skin of a rabbit. Now, "rabbit," or rather "rabbit skin," in the mercantile jargon in which Cesare specializes, is *lapé*. Daniele, however, the bearded and bristly and frowning Daniele, thirsting for revenge and justice like an ancient prophet, was called Corallí, because, Cesare said, if *coralline*—glass beads—rained down you would thread them all.

“Bravo, Lapé,” he said to me, and explained his plan. Cesare is in fact a man with crazy ideas, but then he pursues them with great practical sense. He hadn’t dreamed the chicken: from the hut, to the north, he had glimpsed a path that was well trodden, and thus recent. It was likely that it led to a village; now, if there was a village, there were also chickens. We went outside: it was almost dark by now, and Cesare was right. On the brow of a barely perceptible undulation in the earth, perhaps two kilometers away, between the trees, we could see a light shining. So we set off, stumbling through the stubble, followed by swarms of voracious mosquitoes. We carried with us the only goods for barter that our group was willing to part with: our six plates, common earthenware plates that the Russians had at one point distributed as part of our barracks equipment.

We walked in the dark, careful not to lose the path, and we periodically shouted. From the village no one answered. When we were a hundred meters away, Cesare stopped, took a deep breath, and cried, “Hey, you Russians. We’re friends. Italianski. Do you have a chicken to sell?” This time there was an answer: a flash in the darkness, a sharp crack, and the whine of a bullet, a few meters above our heads. I lay down on the ground, gently, so as not to break the plates, but Cesare was furious, and remained standing: “Damn you! We’re friends, I told you. Sons of a bitch, give us a chance. We want a chicken. We’re not thieves, we’re not Deutschi, we’re Italianski!”

There were no more gunshots, and already human outlines could be glimpsed on the edge of the height. We approached cautiously, Cesare in front, continuing his persuasive speech, and I behind, ready to throw myself to the ground again.

Finally we reached the village. There were no more than five or six houses around a tiny square, and there, waiting for us, was the entire population, some thirty people, the majority old peasant women, plus children and dogs, all obviously alarmed. A large bearded old man emerged from the small crowd, the one who had fired the shot; he was still pointing the gun at us.

Cesare now considered that he had performed his role, which was the strategic one, and called me to my duties. “It’s your turn now. What are you waiting for? Come on, explain to them that we’re Italians, that we don’t want to hurt anyone, and that we want to buy a chicken to roast.”

Those people looked at us with suspicious curiosity. They seemed to have decided that, although dressed like escaped prisoners, we weren't dangerous. The old ladies had stopped chattering, and even the dogs were quiet. The old man with the gun asked us some questions that we didn't understand; I know only a hundred words of Russian, and none of them suited the situation, with the exception of "Italianski." So I repeated "Italianski" several times, until the old man began in turn to say "Italianski" for the benefit of the bystanders.

Meanwhile Cesare, more concrete, had taken the plates out of the bag, displayed five of them in full view, on the ground, as if at the market, and held the sixth in his hand, tapping the edge with his nail to let them hear that it had the right sound. The peasant women watched, amused and intrigued. "*Tarelki*," said one. "*Tarelki, da!*" I answered, happy to have learned the name of the goods we were offering, at which one of them extended a hesitant hand toward the plate that Cesare was demonstrating.

"Hey, what are you thinking?" he said, pulling it back alertly. "We're not giving them away." And he turned to me angrily. So what was I waiting for, why wasn't I asking for a chicken in exchange? What was the use of my studies?

I was embarrassed. Russian, they say, is an Indo-European language, and chickens must have been known to our common ancestors in an epoch long before their subdivision into the various modern ethnic families. *His fretus*, that is to say, on that fine logic, I tried to say "chicken" and "bird" in all the ways known to me, but obtained no evident results.

Cesare was also perplexed. Cesare, in his heart of hearts, had never been fully convinced that the Germans spoke German, and the Russians Russian, except out of a peculiar spitefulness; he was further persuaded, deep down, that only out of a refinement of that spitefulness did they claim not to understand Italian. Spite, or extreme and outrageous ignorance: open barbarity. There were no other possibilities. So his bewilderment was rapidly turning into rage.

He muttered and cursed. Was it possible that it was so difficult to understand what a chicken is, and that we wished to exchange six plates for one? A chicken, the kind that go around pecking, scratching, and saying "*cockaday*." Without much faith, grim and scowling, he performed a terrible imitation of the habits of chickens, squatting on the ground, scraping with one foot then the other, and pecking here and there with his

hand in a wedge shape. Between curses, he also went "*cockaday*"; but, of course, that interpretation of the chicken's sound is highly artificial; it exists exclusively in Italy and has not spread elsewhere.

So we got no results. They looked at us in astonishment, and certainly took us for madmen. Why, for what purpose, had we come from the ends of the Earth to do this mysterious clowning in their square? Now furious, Cesare even tried to produce an egg, and meanwhile insulted them in fantastic ways, making still more obscure the meaning of his performance. At this indecorous show, the chatter of the old ladies rose an octave and became the sound of an agitated wasps' nest.

When I saw one of them approach the bearded fellow, and speak to him nervously, looking in our direction, I realized that the situation was in jeopardy. I made Cesare get up from his unnatural postures, calmed him, and with him went over to the man. I said, "Please, sir," and led him near a window, from which the light of a lantern illuminated a rectangle of earth fairly well. Here, painfully conscious of many suspicious looks, I drew a chicken in the dirt, complete with all its attributes, including—out of an excessive zeal for specifics—an egg behind. Then I got up and said, "You plates. We eat."

A brief consultation followed, then an old woman, her eyes sparkling with joy and acuity, emerged from the group: she took two steps forward and in a shrill voice uttered, "*Kura! Kuritsa!*"

She was very proud and pleased that she was the one who had solved the puzzle. From all directions laughter and applause broke out, and voices: "*Kuritsa, kuritsa!*" And we, too, clapped our hands, captivated by the game and by the general enthusiasm. The old woman bowed, like an actress at the end of the performance; she disappeared and after a few minutes reappeared with a hen, already plucked. She swung it comically under Cesare's nose, as a double check; and when she saw that he reacted positively, she loosened her grip, picked up the plates, and carried them off.

Cesare, who knew because at one time he had had a stall at Porta Portese, assured me that the *curizetta* was fat enough and was worth our six plates; we carried it back to the hut, waked our companions, who were already asleep, lit the fire again, cooked the chicken, and ate it in our fingers, because we no longer had any plates.

Old Roads

The chicken, and the night spent in the open, did us good, like a medicine. After a solid sleep, which restored us, even though we had slept on the bare ground, we woke in the morning in excellent health and mood. We were happy because there was sun, because we felt free, because of the good smell that came from the earth, and also partly because two kilometers away were people who were not mean, in fact shrewd and inclined to laughter, who had indeed shot at us but then had welcomed us kindly and had even sold us a chicken. We were happy because that day (we didn't know about tomorrow: but what may happen tomorrow isn't always important) we could do things that for too long we hadn't done: drink water from a well, lie in the sun in the tall, vigorous grass, smell the summer air, light a fire and cook, go into the woods for strawberries and mushrooms, smoke a cigarette looking at a high sky cleared by the wind.

We could do these things, and we did, with childish joy. But our reserves were reaching an end: one cannot live on strawberries and mushrooms, and none of us (not even Cesare, urbanized and a Roman citizen "since the time of Nero") were morally and technically equipped for a precarious life of vagabondage and agricultural thieving. The choice was clear: either immediate reentry into civilized society or starvation. From civilized society, and that is from the mysterious camp of Starye Doroghi, thirty kilometers of a dizzyingly straight road separated us, however. We would have to do it all at once, and then maybe we would arrive in time for the evening ration; or we could camp along the road again, in freedom, but with empty stomachs.

We made a rapid survey of our possessions. It wasn't much: eight rubles between us all. It was difficult to establish what their buying power was, at that time and in that place; our previous monetary experiences with the Russians had been erratic and absurd. Some of them accepted with no trouble money from any country, even German or Polish; others were suspicious, afraid of being swindled, and accepted only exchanges in kind or metal coins. Of the latter, the most unexpected types were in circulation, coins from tsarist times, emerging from atavistic family hiding places, British pounds, Scandinavian kroner, even old coins from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By contrast, in Zhmerynka the walls of one of the station latrines were studded with German marks, meticulously pasted to the wall, one by one, with an unmentionable material.

In any case, eight rubles wasn't much: worth one or two eggs. It was decided collegially that Cesare and I, now accredited as ambassadors, should go back to the village, and see there what could best be bought with eight rubles.

We set off, and along the way an idea occurred to us: not goods but services. The best investment would be to rent from our friends a horse and cart to Starye Doroghi. Maybe the money wasn't much, but we could try to offer some item of clothing, since it was very hot. So we showed up in the farmyard and were welcomed with affectionate greetings and complicit laughter from the old ladies and by a furious barking of dogs. When silence was restored, I said, fortified by my *Michael Strogoff* and other long-ago readings, "*Telega. Starye Doroghi*," and displayed the eight rubles.

There followed a confused murmur. Strange to say, no one had understood. Nevertheless, my task presented itself as less arduous than that of the night before; in a corner of the farmyard, under a shed, I had noticed a four-wheeled farm cart, long and narrow, with sides rising in a V shape—in other words, a *telega*. I touched it, a little impatient with the obtuseness of these people: was this not a *telega*?

"*Tyelyega!*" the bearded man corrected me, with paternal severity, outraged by my barbaric pronunciation.

"*Da. Tyelyega na Starye Doroghi*. We pay. Eight rubles."

The offer was laughable: the equivalent of two eggs for thirty plus thirty kilometers on the road, twelve hours of travel. But the bearded man put the rubles in his pocket, disappeared into the barn, returned with a mule, tied him between the shafts, made a sign to us to get in, loaded in some sacks,

still silently, and we departed toward the main road. Cesare called the others, and we didn't miss the chance to act important in front of them. We would have a comfortable journey in the *telega*, or rather in the *tyelyega*, and a triumphant entry into Starye Doroghi, all for eight rubles: that's what knowledge of languages and diplomatic ability meant.

We later realized (and, unfortunately, so did our companions) that, in reality, the eight rubles had been practically wasted: the bearded man had to go to Starye Doroghi anyway, on his own business, and maybe he would have taken us for nothing.

We got on the road around midday, lying on the sacks, which were not too soft. However, it was much better than walking; among other things, we could enjoy the countryside at our ease.

This was unusual for us, and wonderful. The plain, which the day before had oppressed us with its solemn emptiness, was no longer strictly flat. It was rippled by slight, barely perceptible undulations, perhaps ancient dunes, no more than a few meters high, but just enough to break the monotony, rest the eye, and create a rhythm, a measure. Between one undulation and the next lay ponds and marshes, large and small. The exposed earth was sandy, and bristling here and there with wild thickets of brush; elsewhere were tall trees, but rare and isolated. On both sides of the road lay shapeless rusty relics, artillery, carts, barbed wire, helmets, oil drums: the remains of the two armies that for so many months had confronted each other in those places. We had entered the region of the Pripet Marshes.

The road and the land were deserted, but just before sunset we noticed that someone was following us: a man who walked vigorously in our direction, black against the white dust. He was gaining ground slowly but continuously: soon he was in shouting distance, and we recognized in him the Moor, Avesani from Avesa, the big old man. He, too, had spent the night in some hiding place, and now was marching toward Starye Doroghi at a tempestuous pace, his white hair windblown, his bloodshot eyes staring straight ahead. He advanced as steady and powerful as a steam engine: tied to his back was the famous heavy pack, and, hanging from it, his ax flashed, like the scythe of Kronos.

He prepared to pass us as if he didn't see us or recognize us. Cesare called to him and invited him to get in. "The dishonor of the world. Nasty inhuman pigs," the Moor promptly replied, giving voice to the blasphemous

litany that constantly occupied his mind. He passed us, and continued his mythic march toward the horizon opposite the one he had arisen from.

Signor Unverdorben knew much more about the Moor than we did; we learned then that the Moor was not (or was not only) an old lunatic. The pack had a reason, and so, too, had the wandering life of the old man. A widower for many years, he had a daughter, only one, now nearly fifty, and she was in bed, paralyzed; she would never be cured. For this daughter the Moor lived. Every week he wrote her a letter destined not to arrive; for her alone he had worked all his life, and had become dark as the wood of the walnut and hard as stone. For her alone, the Moor, wandering the world, put in his sack whatever he happened on, any object that offered even the slightest possibility of being enjoyed or exchanged.

We met no other living beings until we reached Starye Doroghi.

Starye Doroghi was a surprise. It wasn't a village; rather, a tiny village did exist, in the middle of the woods, some distance from the road; but we learned that later, and then we also learned that the name means "Old Roads." Instead, the quarters meant for us, for all fourteen hundred Italians, was a single giant edifice, isolated on the edge of the road amid untilled fields and outgrowths of the forest. It was called Krasny Dom, the Red House, and in fact it was abundantly red, inside and out.

It was a truly singular construction, which had expanded at random in all directions like a lava flow; it was impossible to figure out if it was the work of many contradictory architects or of a single crazy one. The oldest part, now overpowered and suffocated by wings and rooms built later, haphazardly, consisted of a three-story block, subdivided into small rooms perhaps formerly given over to military or administrative offices. But around this block there were all sorts of things: a room for lectures or meetings, a series of school classrooms, kitchens, washrooms, a theater with at least a thousand seats, an infirmary, a gym; and, next to the main entrance, a storeroom with mysterious brackets, which we interpreted as a repository for skis. But in Starye Doroghi, too, as in Slutsk, nothing or almost nothing remained of the furniture and the fixtures; there was not only no water but even the pipes had been removed, as had the stoves in the

kitchens, the seats in the theater, the desks in the classrooms, the banisters of the stairs.

The stairs were the most obsessive element of the Red House. There was a profusion of them in the vast building: grand, lengthy staircases that led to absurd cubbyholes full of dust and rubbish; others that were narrow and uneven, interrupted halfway by a column erected quickly to prop up a dangerous ceiling; fragments of lopsided, forked, anomalous stairs connecting the floors of adjacent rooms that were on different levels. Memorable among all of them was a mammoth stairway along one of the façades whose steps, three meters wide, rose fifteen meters from a courtyard invaded by weeds, and led nowhere.

Around the Red House there was no fence, not even a symbolic one, as at Katowice. There was not even a real system of surveillance; often a Russian soldier, usually a very young one, was stationed at the entrance, but he had no duties regarding the Italians. His task was only to keep other Russians from coming at night to bother the Italian women in their dormitories.

The Russians, officers and soldiers, lived in a wooden barrack not far away, and others, passing through on the road, occasionally stayed there; but they seldom concerned themselves with us. Those who were concerned with us were a small group of Italian officers, former prisoners of war, rather arrogant and rude; they were deeply conscious of their status as military men, they displayed contempt and indifference toward us civilians, and, a thing that didn’t fail to amaze us, they maintained good relations with the Soviets of equal rank in the barrack nearby. In fact, they enjoyed a privileged situation not only with respect to us but also with respect to the Soviet troops: they ate at the Russian officers’ mess, wore new Soviet uniforms (without ranks) and good military boots, and slept in camp beds with sheets and blankets.

But there was no reason for complaint on our part, either. We were treated exactly like the Russian soldiers in terms of food and lodging, and were not subjected to any particular obedience or discipline. Only a few Italians worked, those who had volunteered spontaneously for kitchen or bathroom duty, or the electrical power unit, and Leonardo as a doctor, and I as a nurse; but by now, with the good weather, the sick were very few, and our job was a sinecure.

Anyone who wanted to could leave. Many did, some out of pure boredom or a spirit of adventure, others in an attempt to cross the borders and return to Italy; but they all came back, after a few weeks or months of wandering, for, if the camp was neither guarded nor gated, the distant frontiers were, and heavily.

No ideological pressure was brought to bear by the Russians, or, rather, no attempt to discriminate among us. Our community was too complicated. Former soldiers of the Armir, former partisans, former Häftlinge from Auschwitz, former workers in the Todt, former common criminals and prostitutes from San Vittore, whether we were Communists or monarchists or Fascists—toward us the Russians cultivated the most impartial indifference. We were Italians and that was enough: the rest was *vse ravno*, all the same.

We slept on wooden planks covered with sacks of straw: fifty centimeters per man. At first we protested, because it seemed very little: but the Russian commander politely pointed out that our claim was unfounded. At the head of each plank the names of the Soviet soldiers who had occupied these places before us could still be read, scribbled in pencil; we might judge for ourselves, there was a name every fifty centimeters.

The same could be said, and was said, of the food. We received a kilo of bread a day: rye bread, almost unleavened, moist and acid, but it was a lot, and it was their bread. And the daily "*kasha*" was their "*kasha*": a small dense block of lard, millet, beans, meat, and spices, nourishing but fiercely indigestible; after several days of experimenting we learned to make it edible by boiling it for several hours.

Then, three or four times a week, fish was distributed, *ryba*. It was a large raw, unsalted river fish, of dubious freshness and full of bones. What to do with it? Few of us could get used to eating it as it was (as many Russians did); as for cooking it, we lacked pans, condiments, salt, and skill. Soon we were convinced that the best thing to do was sell it back to the Russians themselves, to the peasants in the village or the soldiers passing through. This meant a new career for Cesare, who soon arrived at a high degree of technical perfection.

On the morning of the fish days, Cesare made the rounds of the rooms, equipped with a piece of wire. He collected the "*ribba*," strung them eye to eye on the wire, put the foul-smelling garland over his shoulder, and disappeared. He returned many hours later, sometimes in the evening, and

distributed equally among those who had commissioned him rubles, cheese, quarter chickens, and eggs, to everyone's advantage but principally his own.

With the first profits of his commerce he bought a steelyard scale, as a result of which his professional prestige increased notably. But to bring to completion a certain plan he had he needed another instrument, of less obvious usefulness: a syringe. There was no hope of finding one in the Russian village, and so he came to me in the infirmary, to ask if I could lend him one.

"What do you want to do with it?" I asked.

"What do you care. A syringe. You've got a lot here."

"What size?"

"The biggest you have. Even if it's a little beat up, it doesn't matter."

There was one, in fact, of twenty cubic centimeters, splintered and practically unusable. Cesare examined it carefully, and declared that it would do.

"But what do you need it for?" I asked again. Cesare looked at me grimly, irritated by my lack of tact. He told me that it was his business, an idea he had, an experiment, and that it might go well and might not, and who did I think I was, sticking my nose in his private affairs. He wrapped up the syringe carefully and went off like an insulted prince.

Yet the secret of the syringe didn't last long: life at Starye Doroghi was too idle for gossip and interference in other people's affairs not to proliferate. In the days that followed, Cesare was seen by Sora Litizia going for water with a bucket and carrying it into the woods; he was seen by the Stellina in the woods itself, sitting on the ground with the bucket in the middle of a circle of fish, which "he seemed to be feeding"; and finally he was met in the village by Rovati, his competitor: he was without the bucket and was selling fish, but they were very strange fish, fat, hard, and round, not flat and soft like the ones in our ration.

Like many scientific discoveries, the idea of the syringe had originated in a failure and a chance observation. A few days before, Cesare had traded fish in the village for a live chicken. He had returned to the Red House convinced that he had done some excellent business: for only two fish he had gotten a fine hen, no longer young and with a slightly melancholy look, but extraordinarily large and fat. But, after he had killed and plucked it, he realized that something was wrong; the hen was asymmetrical, her stomach

was all on one side, and offered to the touch something hard, mobile, and elastic. It wasn't an egg: it was a large watery cyst.

Cesare, naturally, had taken remedial action, and had managed to resell the animal right away to no less than accountant Rovi, earning still more: but then, like a Stendhalian hero, he had thought about it. Why not imitate nature? Why not try with fish?

At first he had tried to fill them with water using a straw, through the mouth, but it all came out. Then he had thought of the syringe. With the syringe he noticed some progress in many cases, but it depended on the point where he gave the injection: according to this, the water came out again, right away or soon afterward, or it stayed inside indefinitely. Then Cesare had dissected several fish with a knife, and had established that, to have a permanent effect, the injection had to be given in the air bladder.

In this way the fish, which Cesare sold by weight, earned from 20 to 30 percent more than the normal ones, and they also had a much more attractive appearance. Certainly, *ribba* so treated could not be sold twice to the same customer; but one could easily sell them to the demobilized Russian soldiers who passed along the road straight to the east, and who would realize the business of the water only when they were many kilometers away.

But one day he returned with a grim expression; he was without fish, without money, and without goods: "I got caught." For two days there was no way to speak a word to him, he was huddled on his bed, bristling like a porcupine, and he came down only for meals. He had had an adventure different from the usual kind.

He told me about it later, on a long warm evening, warning me not to tell anyone, since, if it became known, his business reputation would suffer. In fact, the fish hadn't been violently seized by a fierce Russian, as he had first tried to make us think: the truth was different. He had given the fish as a present, he confessed, filled with shame.

He had gone to the village and, to avoid customers who had previously been burned, he hadn't showed up on the main street but had taken a path that went into the woods. After a few hundred meters he had seen a small, isolated cottage, or rather, a hut built of unmortared bricks and sheet metal. Outside was a thin woman in black, and three pale children sitting on the doorstep. He had approached and offered her the fish; she had made him understand that she would like the fish but had nothing to give him in

exchange, and that she and the children hadn’t eaten for two days. She had invited him into the hut, and in the hut there was nothing, only beds of straw, as in a kennel.

At this point the children had looked at him with such eyes that Cesare had thrown down the fish and run away, like a thief.

The Forest and the Path

We stayed at Starye Doroghi, in that Red House full of mysteries and trapdoors, like a fairy castle, for two long months: from July 15 to September 15 of 1945.

They were months of idleness and relative well-being, and therefore full of a penetrating homesickness. Homesickness is a fragile, mild suffering, essentially different, more intimate, more human than the other pain we had endured up to that time: beatings, cold, hunger, terror, destitution, illness. It's a clear, pure suffering, but insistent: it pervades all the minutes of the day, allows no other thoughts, and urges escape.

Perhaps for this reason, the forest around the camp exercised a profound attraction on us. Perhaps because it offered, to anyone who sought it, the invaluable gift of solitude: and for how long had we been deprived of that! Perhaps because it reminded us of other woods, other solitudes of our previous existence; or perhaps, on the contrary, because it was solemn and austere and untouched, like no other scenery known to us.

North of the Red House, beyond the road, extended a mixed terrain, of brush, clearings, and pinewoods, interspersed with marshes and spits of fine white sand; you encountered a few winding, barely marked paths, which led to distant houses. But to the south, a few hundred steps from the Red House, every human trace disappeared. Also every trace of animal life, except for the occasional tawny flash of a squirrel, or the still, sinister eye of a water snake, wrapped around a rotting trunk. There were no paths, no traces of woodcutters, nothing: only silence, abandonment, and tree trunks in every direction, pale trunks of birches, reddish brown of conifers, soaring vertically toward the invisible sky. Equally invisible was the soil, covered

by a thick layer of dead leaves and needles and by clumps of wild underbrush up to your waist.

The first time I ventured into it I learned, to my cost, with surprise and fear, that the danger of “getting lost in the woods” isn’t found only in fairy tales. I had walked for about an hour, orienting myself as well as I could by the sun, visible here and there where the branches were less thick; but then the sky darkened, threatening rain, and when I wanted to return I realized I had lost north. Moss on the trunks? It was on every side. I set out in the direction that seemed to me most right: but after a long and painful walk among thornbushes and brambles I found myself at a point as unknown as the one I had started from.

I walked again for hours, increasingly tired and worried, almost until sunset: and already I was thinking that even if my companions came to look for me they wouldn’t find me, or only days later, when I was exhausted by hunger, perhaps already dead. When the daylight began to fade, swarms of fat hungry mosquitoes rose, and other insects I wouldn’t know what to call, as big and hard as bullets, which darted blindly among the trunks, hitting me in the face. Then I decided to go straight ahead, approximately north (that is, keeping on my left a stretch of sky slightly more luminous, which must correspond to the west), and to walk without stopping until I encountered the main road, or at least a path or track. I advanced like that in the long twilight of the northern summer, almost until total darkness, now in the grip of an orgasmic panic, the ancient fear of shadows, of the woods, and of emptiness. In spite of my weariness, I felt a violent impulse to start running, in any direction, and to run as long as I had strength and breath.

Suddenly I heard the whistle of a train. So I had the railroad on my right, while, according to the plan I had made, it should have been far to the left. I was therefore going in the wrong direction. Following the sound of the train, I reached the tracks before night, and following the shining rails in the direction of the Little Bear, which had reappeared among the clouds, I arrived safely first in Starye Doroghi, then at the Red House.

But there were some who moved to the forest and lived there. The first was Cantarella, one of the “Romanians,” who discovered the vocation of hermit. Cantarella was a taciturn and misanthropic Calabrian sailor who was very tall and of an ascetic thinness. He built a cabin of trunks and branches half an hour from the camp, and lived there in savage solitude,

dressed only in a loincloth. He was a contemplative, but not idle: he practiced a strange priestly activity.

He had a hammer and a kind of crude forge, which he had constructed out of war surplus and set in a stump; using these tools, and old tin cans, he fashioned pots and pans with great skill and religious diligence.

He made them on commission, for new families. When, in our variegated community, a man and woman decided to make a common life, and so felt the need for a minimum of equipment in setting up house, they went to Cantarella, hand in hand. Asking no questions, he got to work, and in little more than an hour, with expert hammer blows, he bent and beat pieces of metal into the shapes that the couple desired. He asked for no compensation, but accepted gifts in kind, bread, cheese, eggs; thus the marriage was celebrated, and thus Cantarella lived.

There were other inhabitants of the wood as well. I discovered it one day, following by chance a path I hadn't noticed before, which penetrated toward the west, straight and well marked. It led to a particularly thick area of the wood, entered an old trench, and ended at the door of a log blockhouse, almost completely underground: only the roof and a chimney stuck out of the ground. I pushed on the door, which yielded; there was no one inside, but the place was evidently inhabited. On the bare dirt floor (but swept and clean) there was a small stove, some plates, a military mess tin; in a corner, a bed of straw; hanging on the walls, women's clothes and photographs of men.

Returning to the camp I learned that I was the only one who didn't know about it: in the log house, notoriously, lived two German women. They were auxiliaries of the Wehrmacht, who hadn't managed to follow the Germans in retreat and had remained cut off in Russian territory. They were afraid of the Russians and hadn't surrendered; they had lived precariously for months, on petty thefts, grasses, occasional, stealthy prostitution with the English and French who had occupied the Red House before us, until the settlement of the Italians had brought them prosperity and security.

The women in our colony were few, no more than two hundred, and almost all had quickly found a stable arrangement: they were no longer available. Therefore, for an imprecise number of Italians, going "to the girls in the woods" had become a habit, and the only alternative to celibacy. An alternative filled with a complex fascination: because the matter was secret and vaguely dangerous (much more for the women than for them, in truth);

because the girls were foreign and half wild; because they were in a state of poverty, and so one had the uplifting impression of “protecting them”; and because of the fairy-tale-exotic scene of the encounters.

Not only Cantarella but also the Velletrano had ended up in the woods. The experiment of transplanting a “wild man” into civilization has been attempted many times, often with a good outcome, to demonstrate the fundamental unity of the human species. In the Velletrano the opposite experiment took place; he was a native of the overcrowded streets of Trastevere, who had been retransformed into a wild man with admirable ease.

In reality, he was probably never very civilized. The Velletrano was a Jew of thirty, a survivor of Auschwitz. He must have presented a problem for the Auschwitz official assigned to the tattooing, because both his muscular forearms were already thickly covered with tattoos: the names of his women, as Cesare, who had known him for a while, explained to me, and also explained that the Velletrano wasn’t named Velletrano, nor had he been born in Velletri, but had been put out to nurse there.

He almost never spent the night at the Red House: he lived in the forest, barefoot and half naked. He lived like our distant ancestors; he set traps for hares and foxes, he climbed trees for the nests, he killed turtledoves with stones, and didn’t disdain the chicken coops of the more distant farmhouses. He gathered mushrooms and berries generally considered inedible, and at night you’d often encounter him near the camp, squatting on his heels in front of a big fire, on which, singing hoarsely, he was roasting the day’s prey. He then slept on the bare earth, bedding down beside the coals. But, since he was still a son of man, he pursued in his way virtue and knowledge, and perfected day by day his skills and his tools; he made a knife, then an assegai and a hatchet, and if he had had time I don’t doubt that he would have rediscovered agriculture and sheep farming.

When the day had been good, he became sociable and friendly; through Cesare, who willingly offered to present him as a circus phenomenon and to recount his earlier, legendary adventures, he invited everyone to Homeric feasts of roasted meat, and if someone refused he turned mean and pulled out his knife.

After some days of rain, and some of sun and wind, the mushrooms and blueberries in the woods grew in such abundance that they became of interest no longer in the purely georgic and sporting guise but also the

utilitarian. All of us, having taken the proper precautions not to get lost on the way home, spent entire days harvesting. The blueberries, on bushes much taller than ours, were almost as big as walnuts, and flavorful; we brought them to the camp by the kilo, and even tried (but in vain) to ferment the juice into wine. As for the mushrooms, there were two varieties: some were normal porcini, tasty and certainly edible; the others were similar in shape and smell but larger and woody and of slightly different colors.

None of us were sure that these were edible; on the other hand, could one leave them to rot in the woods? One could not: we were all malnourished, and, besides, the memory of hunger in Auschwitz was still too recent, and had become a violent mental stimulus, which obliged us to fill our stomachs as full as possible, and imperiously prevented us from giving up any occasion to eat. Cesare gathered a good quantity and boiled them following prescriptions and precautions unknown to me, adding to the mixture vodka and garlic bought in the village, which “kill all poisons.” Then he himself ate some, but only a little, and he offered a little to many people, so as to limit the risk and have an abundance of case histories available the next day. The next day he made the rounds of the dormitories, and had never been so polite and solicitous: “How are you, Sora Elvira? How’s it going, Don Vincenzo? Did you sleep well? Did you have a good night?” and meanwhile he looked them in the face with a clinical eye. They were all fine, the strange mushrooms could be eaten.

For the laziest and the wealthiest, it wasn’t necessary to go into the woods to find “extra” food. The commercial dealings between the village of Starye Doroghi and us guests of the Red House soon became intense. Every morning peasant women arrived with baskets and buckets; they sat on the ground, without moving, for hours as they waited for customers. If a rain shower came, they didn’t move from their spot but only folded their skirts over their heads. The Russians made two or three attempts to expel them, putting up two or three bilingual signs that threatened the parties with punishments of senseless severity; then, as usual, they lost interest in the matter, and the trading continued undisturbed.

There were old women and young: the former dressed in the traditional way, with embroidered and quilted jackets and a kerchief tied over their heads; the latter in light cotton dresses, most of them barefoot, free, bold, and ready to laugh, but not impudent. Besides mushrooms, blueberries, and

raspberries, they sold milk, cheese, eggs, chickens, vegetables, and fruit, and accepted in exchange fish, bread, tobacco, and any item of clothing or piece of fabric, even the most torn and threadbare, and also rubles, naturally, from those who still had some.

Cesare soon knew them all, especially the young ones. I often went with him to the Russian women, to help with their interesting negotiations. I don't mean to deny the usefulness of speaking the same language in a business matter, but, from experience, I can state that it is not strictly necessary. Each of the two parties knows perfectly well what the other wants; initially he doesn't know the intensity of the desire, to buy and to sell, respectively, but he deduces it with excellent approximation from the other's facial expression, from his gestures, and from the number of his replies.

Here's Cesare, showing up early at the market with a fish. He looks for Irina and finds her; she's his contemporary and friend, whose liking he won some time ago by baptizing her Greta Garbo and giving her a pencil; Irina has a cow and sells milk, *moloko,* and in fact often, in the evening, returning from the fields, she stops at the Red House and milks directly into the containers of her customers. This morning it's a matter of agreeing how much milk Cesare's fish is worth. Cesare displays a two-liter pot (it's one of Cantarella's, and Cesare got it from a "ménage" that dissolved because of incompatibility) and makes a sign with outstretched hand, palm down, which means full. Irina laughs, and answers with lively, harmonious words, probably insults; she pushes Cesare's hand away with a slap, and with two fingers points halfway up the side of the pot.

Now it's Cesare's turn to be indignant. He waves the fish (not tampered with), holding it in the air by the tail with enormous effort, as if it weighed twenty kilos, and says, "This is a *ribbona*!" then runs it under Irina's nose for its full length, closing his eyes and breathing in deeply as he does so, as if intoxicated by its fragrance. Taking advantage of the instant when Cesare has his eyes closed, Irina, quick as a cat, grabs the fish, cleanly detaches the head with her white teeth, and throws the flaccid mutilated body in Cesare's face, with all of her remarkable strength. Then, in order not to ruin friendship and negotiation, she touches the pot three-quarters of the way up: a liter and a half. Cesare, partly stunned by the blow, mumbles in a hollow voice, "Yeees, and you'd like to get by with so little?" and other obscene

gallantries suitable for restoring his manly honor; then, however, he accepts Irina's last offer, and leaves her the fish, which she devours on the spot.

We were to find the voracious Irina later, on several occasions, in a context that was rather embarrassing for us Latins, if completely normal for her.

In a clearing in the woods, halfway between the village and the camp, were the public baths, which every Russian village has, and which at Starye Doroghi functioned on alternate days for the Russians and for us. A big wooden shed, with two long stone benches inside, had zinc tubs of various sizes scattered around. On the wall were faucets with hot and cold water, as much as you wanted. Soap, however, was not as much as you wanted, but was distributed very sparingly in the dressing room. The bureaucrat assigned to dispensing the soap was Irina.

She sat at a table with a small block of stinking grayish soap on it, and held a knife in her hand. You took off your clothes, handing them over to be disinfected, and got in line, completely naked, in front of Irina's table. In these duties as a public official, the girl was serious and incorruptible: her forehead wrinkled in concentration and her tongue childishly caught between her teeth, she cut a slice of soap for anyone aspiring to a bath: a little thinner for the thin, a little thicker for the fat, I don't know if she was ordered to or if she was moved by an unconscious requirement of distributive justice. Not a muscle of her face twitched at the impertinent remarks of the more vulgar clients.

After the bath, you had to retrieve your own clothes in the disinfection room: and here was another surprise of the regime of Starye Doroghi. The room was heated to 120° Celsius; the first time they told us that we had to go in ourselves to get our clothes, we looked at one another in bewilderment. The Russians are made of bronze, we had seen it on many occasions, but we weren't, and would have been roasted. Then someone tried, and saw that the undertaking wasn't as terrible as it seemed, provided the following precautions were adopted: enter very wet; know in advance the number of your own hook; take a deep breath before going through the door and then don't breathe again; don't touch any metal object; and above all do it rapidly.

The disinfected clothes presented interesting phenomena: corpses of exploded lice, strangely deformed; ebonite fountain pens, forgotten in the pocket of some well-off person, twisted and with the head fused; candle

stubs melted and soaked into the fabric; an egg, left in a pocket for experimental purposes, cracked and dried into a horny mass, yet still edible. The two Russian attendants went in and out of the furnace indifferently, like the salamanders of legend.

The days in Starye Doroghi passed like that, in an interminable, sleepy, beneficial indolence, like a long vacation, broken at intervals only by painful thoughts of our distant home, and by the enchantment of nature rediscovered. It was pointless to ask the Russians of the Command to find out why we weren't going home, when we would go, by what route, what future awaited us; they didn't know any more than we did, or, with polite candor, they bestowed on us fantastic or terrifying or absurd answers. That there were no trains; or that war was about to break out with America; or that they were soon sending us to work on collective farms; or that they were waiting to exchange us with Russian prisoners in Italy. They announced these or other enormities without hatred or mockery, in fact with an almost affectionate solicitude, as one speaks to children who ask too many questions, to quiet them. In truth, they didn't understand our hurry to get home: didn't we have food and a place to sleep? What was missing, at Starye Doroghi? We didn't even have to work; and were they, soldiers of the Red Army, who had fought four years of war, and had won, complaining that they hadn't yet returned home?

They were in fact returning home, a few at a time, slowly, and, to judge by appearances, in extreme disarray. The spectacle of the Russian demobilization, which we had earlier admired at the station in Katowice, continued now in another form before our eyes, day by day; not by train but along the road in front of the Red House, shreds of the conquering army passed, from west to east, in tight-knit or scattered groups, at all hours of the day and night. Men passed walking, often barefoot, carrying their shoes over their shoulders to save the soles, because the road was long; in uniform or not, armed or disarmed, some singing lustily, others ashen-faced and exhausted. Some carried sacks or suitcases on their back; others, the most disparate objects—an upholstered chair, a standing lamp, copper pots, a radio, a grandfather clock.

Others passed in carts, or on horseback; still others on motorcycles, in droves, drunk on speed, with an infernal noise. American-made Dodge trucks passed, crammed with men even on the hood and the bumpers; some hauled a trailer, just as full. We saw one of these trailers traveling on three wheels; in place of the fourth a pine tree had been fastened as securely as possible, on an angle, so that one end rested on the ground, dragging along it. As this was worn down by the friction, the trunk was pushed lower, thus keeping the vehicle balanced. Almost in front of the Red House, one of the three surviving tires went flat; the occupants, twenty or so, climbed out, tipped the trailer over on the side of the road, and got on the already crowded truck, which took off in a cloud of dust as they all shouted, "Hurray!"

Other unusual vehicles also passed by, all overloaded: farm tractors, mail trucks, German buses formerly used on city routes, which still had the signs with the terminus names in Berlin, and some of which, already broken down, were hauled by other vehicles or by horses.

Around the beginning of August, the nature of this many-faceted migration began to change, almost imperceptibly. Little by little, horses began to dominate over vehicles; after a week, one saw nothing but horses, the road belonged to them. They must have been all the horses in occupied Germany, tens of thousands a day. They passed interminably, in a blur of flies and horseflies and a sharp animal odor, tired, sweaty, hungry, driven and goaded by girls, one every hundred or more animals, with shouts and lashes of the whip; they, too, were on horseback, without saddles, bare-legged, hot, and disheveled. At night, they drove the horses into the fields and woods on the side of the road to feed in freedom and rest until dawn. There were draft horses, racehorses, mules, mares suckling foals, old arthritic nags, asses; we soon realized that not only were they not counted but that the herders didn't care at all about the beasts that went off the road because they were tired or sick or lame, or about those which wandered off during the night. The horses were so many: what importance could it have if one more or less reached its destination?

But for us, nearly starved of meat for eighteen months, a horse more or less had an enormous importance. The one who opened the hunt was, naturally, the Velletrano: he came to wake us one morning, bloody from head to foot, still holding in his hand the primitive weapon he had used, the

fragment of a grenade attached with leather thongs to the top of a forked cudgel.

From the inspection we made (since the Velletrano wasn't very good at explaining in words) it seemed that he had given the deathblow to a horse that was probably already dying: the poor animal had a highly equivocal look, a swollen stomach that sounded like a drum, foam at its mouth; and it must have been kicking all night, suffering who knows what torments, since, lying on its side, it had dug two deep semicircles of brown earth in the grass with its hoofs. But we ate it anyway.

Later, several pairs of specialized hunter-butchers established themselves, who, no longer content with killing sick or lost horses, chose the fattest, drove them purposely out of the herd, and killed them in the woods. They preferred to act at the first light of dawn; one covered the animal's eyes with a rag, and the other delivered the mortal (but not always) blow to the neck.

It was a period of absurd abundance: there was unlimited horse meat for all, free; at most, the hunters asked, for a dead horse, two or three rations of tobacco. All over the woods, and, when it rained, even in the corridors and the stairwells of the Red House, you saw men and women busy cooking enormous steaks of horse meat with mushrooms, without which it would have taken us survivors of Auschwitz many more months to regain our strength.

Not even to this pillaging did the Russians of the Command devote the least thought. There was only one Russian intervention and a single punishment: toward the end of the passing of the horses, when horse meat was growing scarce and the price began to rise, someone from the San Vittore group had the impudence to open a real butcher shop, in one of the many crannies of the Red House. This initiative the Russians didn't like—it wasn't clear if for hygienic or moral reasons. The guilty man was publicly reprimanded, declared "*chort* (devil), *parazit*, *spekulyant*," and put in a cell.

It wasn't a very severe punishment: for obscure reasons, perhaps out of a long-ago bureaucratic atavism holding that prisoners had to be three in number, the cell was entitled to three food rations a day. Whether the detainees were nine, or one, or none, it didn't matter: there were always three rations. So, after ten days of overeating, the illegal butcher came out of the cell at the end of his punishment as fat as a pig and filled with joie de vivre.

Vacation

As always happens, the end of hunger exposed and made perceptible in us a more profound hunger. Not only the yearning for home, which in a certain sense was taken for granted and projected into the future, but a more immediate and urgent need for human contact, for mental and physical work, for novelty and variety.

The life of Starye Doroghi, which would have been little less than perfect if understood as a break for vacation in a busy existence, began to weigh on us because of the very idleness that it imposed. In those conditions, many left, to seek life and adventures elsewhere. It wouldn't be right to speak of flight, since the camp was neither enclosed nor guarded, and the Russians didn't count us, or didn't count us carefully; simply, they said goodbye to their friends and headed off into the fields. They got what they sought: they saw towns and people, they ventured far away, some as far as Odessa and Moscow, others as far as the borders; they encountered the jail cells of remote villages, the Biblical hospitality of the peasants, vague loves, dutifully senseless interrogations by the police, new hunger and solitude. They almost all returned to Starye Doroghi, since, if there was not a trace of barbed wire around the Red House, they found the legendary border to the west that they were trying to break open shut tight.

They returned, and resigned themselves to that regime of limbo. The days of the northern summer were extremely long: it was already dawn at three in the morning, and the sunset dragged on tirelessly, until nine or ten in the evening. Excursions into the woods, meals, sleep, risky swims in the swamp, the endlessly repeated conversations, plans for the future were not

enough to shorten the time of that wait, or to lighten the burden of it that day by day increased.

We tried to approach the Russians, with scant success. Toward us, the more sophisticated (who spoke German or English) appeared courteous but distrustful, and often abruptly broke off a conversation, as if they felt guilty or were being watched. With the simpler Russians, the seventeen-year-old soldiers of the Command and the local peasants, the difficulties of language obliged us to truncated and primitive relationships.

It's six in the morning, but the light of day has some time ago put sleep to flight. With a pan of potatoes organized by Cesare, I'm heading toward a grove of trees where a brook flows. Since there is water and wood here, it's our favorite place for cooking operations, and today I have the job of washing the dishes and the cooking that follows. I light a fire among three rocks; and, look, there's a Russian a little ways off, small but muscular, with broad Asiatic features, busy with preparations similar to mine. He doesn't have matches; he approaches, and seems to be asking for a light. He is bare-chested, wearing only a pair of military trousers, and he doesn't inspire confidence. He carries a bayonet at his waist.

I offer him a lighted twig; the Russian takes it, stands there looking at me with suspicious curiosity. Does he think my potatoes are stolen? Or is he thinking of taking them away from me? Or has he mistaken me for someone he doesn't like?

No: what disturbs him is something else. He has realized that I don't speak Russian, and this irritates him. The fact that a man, adult and normal, doesn't speak Russian—that is, doesn't speak—seems to him an attitude of insolent aggression, as if I had openly refused to answer him. His intentions are not bad; rather, he would like to give me a hand, to lift me out of my guilty condition of ignorance. Russian is so easy, everyone speaks it, even children who can't walk yet. He sits beside me; I continue to fear for the potatoes, and keep an eye on him, but he, from all appearances, is determined only to help me regain lost time. He doesn't understand, he doesn't accept my position of refusal; he wants to teach me his language.

Unfortunately, he is not much of a teacher; he lacks both method and patience, and in addition he is relying on the mistaken assumption that I can follow his explanations and his comments. As long as it's a matter of vocabulary, it goes well enough, and basically I don't dislike the game. He points to a potato and says, "*Kartofel'*," then he grabs me by the shoulder

with his powerful paw, sticks his index finger under my nose, cocks an ear, and waits. I repeat, "*Kartofel'*." He makes a face of disgust: my pronunciation isn't right—not even pronunciation! He tries again two or three times, then he gets tired of it and changes the word. "*Ogon'*," he says, pointing to the fire; here things go better, my repetition seems to satisfy him. He looks around in search of other pedagogic objects, then stares at me intently, slowly stands up, still staring at me, as if he wanted to hypnotize me, and suddenly, instantaneously, he draws the bayonet out of the sheath and waves it in the air.

I jump to my feet and run away, toward the Red House: so much for the potatoes. But after a few steps I here an ogre-like laugh resounding behind me; the joke was a success.

"*Britva*," he says to me, flashing the blade in the sun; and I repeat it, not feeling very comfortable. He, slashing like a paladin, cuts off a branch from a tree; he shows it to me and says, "*Derevo*." I repeat, "*Derevo*."

"*Ya russkiy soldat*." I repeat as well as I can, "*Ya russkiy soldat*." Another laugh, which sounds contemptuous: *he* is a Russian soldier, I'm not, and that's a big difference. He explains in a confused way, with a sea of words, pointing now to my chest, now his, and going yes and no with his head. He must think me a terrible student, a hopelessly obtuse case; to my relief, he returns to his fire and leaves me to my barbarity.

Another day, but at the same time and in the same place, I come upon an unusual sight. There is a little knot of Italians gathered around a very young, tall Russian sailor, whose movements are rapid and eager. He is "telling" a war story; and since he knows that his language is not understood, he expresses himself as he can, in a way that to him is evidently as instinctive or more so than words. He expresses himself with all his muscles, with the precocious wrinkles that mark his face, with the flash of eyes and teeth, with leaps and gestures, and from it emerges a fascinating, powerful solo dance.

It's night, *noch'*: he slowly spins his hands in a circle with the palms facing down. All is silence: he utters a long "*sst*" with his index finger next to his nose. He narrows his eyes and points to the horizon: there, far far away, are the Germans, *nemtsy*. How many? Five, he signals with his fingers; "*Finf*," he adds, in Yiddish, to clarify further. With his hand he digs a small round hole in the sand, and places five sticks in it, lying down, these are the Germans; and then he adds a sixth stick, on a slant, it's the *mashina*,

the machine gun. What are the Germans doing? Here his eyes light up with wild delight: *spat'*, they're sleeping (and he snores quietly for a moment); they are sleeping, the fools, and they don't know what's in store for them.

What did he do? Here's what he did: he approached, cautiously, downwind, like a leopard. Then, suddenly, he jumped into the nest, drawing his knife; and he repeats, now completely absorbed in his staged rapture, his actions at the time. The ambush, and the quick, atrocious fight, here he is, re-creating it before our eyes. The man, his face transfigured by a tense and sinister laugh, becomes a whirlwind; he jumps forward and back, he strikes in front, to the sides, high, low, in an explosion of death-bearing energy. But it's a lucid fury, his weapon (which exists, a long knife that he has pulled out of his boot) pierces, slices, rips fiercely and yet with tremendous skill, practically in front of our faces.

All of a sudden the sailor stops, slowly straightens up, the knife falls from his hand; his chest is heaving, his gaze is spent. He looks at the ground, as if amazed not to see corpses and blood; he looks around bewildered, vacant; he notices us, and gives us a timid, childlike smile. "*Koncheno*," he says: it's over. And he slowly walks away.

Very different, and mysterious then, as now, was the case of the Lieutenant. The Lieutenant (we never, and perhaps not coincidentally, learned his name) was a slim olive-skinned young Russian, who wore a constant frown. He spoke Italian perfectly, with a Russian accent so slight that it could have been mistaken for some Italian dialect intonation; but, unlike all the other Russians of the Command, he demonstrated little cordiality and kindness toward us. He was the only one we could question: How in the world had he come to speak Italian? Why was he here? Why were they keeping us in Russia four months after the end of the war? Were we hostages? Had we been forgotten? Why couldn't we write to Italy? When would we return? . . . But the Lieutenant responded to all these questions, which were as heavy as lead, in a cutting and elusive way, with a confidence and authority that did not fit his rather low rank. We noted that even his superiors treated him with odd deference, as if they feared him.

He maintained a surly detachment both from the Russians and from us. He never laughed, he didn't drink, he didn't accept invitations, or even cigarettes; he spoke little, and seemed to weigh his words, cautiously, one by one. When he first appeared, it seemed natural for us to think of him as our interpreter and delegate to the Russian Command, but it was soon clear

that his responsibilities (if he really had any, and if his behavior was not merely a complicated way of making himself appear important) must be different, and we preferred to be silent in his presence. From some of his reticent remarks we discovered that he was well acquainted with the topography of Turin and of Milan. Had he been to Italy? “No,” he answered dryly, and gave no other explanations.

The public health was excellent, and the clients of the infirmary were few and always the same: someone with boils, the usual hypochondriacs, some skin diseases, some colitis. One day a woman showed up with various vague complaints: nausea, backache, dizziness, hot flashes. Leonardo examined her; she had bruises everywhere, but she said not to pay attention to that, she had fallen down the stairs. With the means at our disposal it wasn’t easy to make a very in-depth diagnosis, but, by ruling things out, and also given the numerous precedents among our women, Leonardo declared to the patient that very likely it was a pregnancy, in the third month. The woman displayed neither joy nor anguish nor surprise nor indignation; she accepted the news, and thanked him, but didn’t leave. She went back and sat down on the bench in the hallway, quiet and tranquil, as if she were expecting someone.

She was a small dark girl, about twenty-five, with a homely, withdrawn, dreamy look; her face, which wasn’t very attractive or very expressive, didn’t seem new to me, nor did her speech, with its slight Tuscan inflections.

Certainly I must have met her, but not at Starye Doroghi. I felt a fleeting sensation of dislocation, a transposition, an important inversion of relations, but I couldn’t define it. Vaguely yet insistently, I associated with that female image a knot of intense feelings: humble and distant admiration, recognition, frustration, fear, even abstract desire, but mainly a deep and indefinable anguish.

Since she continued to sit on the bench, quiet and still, without any sign of impatience, I asked if she needed something, if she still wanted us; the clinic was over, there were no other patients, it was time to close. “No, no,” she answered. “I don’t need anything. I’ll go now.”

Flora! The dim memory abruptly took shape, coagulated into a precise, well-defined picture, rich in details of time and place, colors, retrospective states of mind, atmosphere, smells. She was Flora: the Italian woman in the cellars of Buna, the woman of the Lager, object of my dreams and Alberto's for more than a month, unconscious symbol of lost freedom, no longer hoped for. Flora, whom I had met a year earlier, and it seemed a hundred.

Flora was a provincial prostitute, who had ended up in Germany with the Todt Organization. She didn't know German and she had no skills, so she had been assigned to sweep the floor at the Buna factory. She swept all day, wearily, without exchanging a word with anyone, without raising her eyes from the broom or from her endless task. No one seemed to pay any attention to her, and she, as if she feared the light of day, went as seldom as possible to the upper floors; she swept the cellars interminably, from one end to the other, and then she started again like a sleepwalker.

She was the only woman we had seen for months, and she spoke our language, but we Häftlinge were forbidden to talk to her. To Alberto and me she seemed beautiful, mysterious, ethereal. In spite of the prohibition, which in some way increased the enchantment of our encounters, adding to them the sharp taste of the illicit, we exchanged some furtive words with Flora; we made ourselves known as Italians, and asked her for bread. We asked a little reluctantly, conscious of debasing ourselves and the quality of that delicate human contact; but hunger, with which it's difficult to compromise, impelled us not to waste the opportunity.

Flora brought us bread several times, and delivered it with a distracted air, in the dark corners of the cellar, sniffling and tearful. She felt pity for us, and would have liked to help us in other ways, but she didn't know how and was afraid. Afraid of everything, like a defenseless animal: maybe even of us, not directly but as inhabitants of that foreign and incomprehensible world that had torn her from her country, thrust a broom in her hand, and banished her underground, to sweep floors already swept a hundred times.

We two were overwhelmed, grateful, and filled with shame. We had become suddenly aware of our wretched appearance, and suffered for it. Alberto, who knew how to find the strangest things because he went around all day with his eyes on the ground, like a bloodhound, found a comb somewhere, and we gave it solemnly to Flora, who had hair; after that we felt tied to her by a sweet, clean tie, and we dreamed of her at night. So we felt an acute uneasiness, an absurd and impotent mixture of jealousy and

deception, when the evidence forced us to discover, to admit to ourselves, that Flora had meetings with other men. Where and how, and with whom? In the least elaborate place and in the least elaborate ways: nearby, in the hay, in a secret rabbit hutch organized in a closet under the stairs by a cooperative of German and Polish Kapos. It took almost nothing: a wink of the eye, an imperious nod of the head, and Flora put down the broom and obediently followed the man of the moment. She returned alone, after a few minutes; she readjusted her clothes and began sweeping again without looking at us. After that squalid discovery, Flora's bread tasted to us like salt; but not for that reason did we stop accepting it and eating it.

I didn't make myself known to Flora, out of compassion toward her and toward myself. Compared with those ghosts, my self of Buna, the woman of memory and her reincarnation, I felt changed, intensely "other," like a butterfly before a caterpillar. In the limbo of Starye Doroghi I felt dirty, ragged, tired, heavy, worn out by waiting, and yet young and full of power and facing toward the future; Flora, on the other hand, hadn't changed. She now lived with a Bergamask shoemaker, not as a spouse but as a slave. She washed and cooked for him, and followed him with humble and submissive eyes; the man, bullish and apelike, watched her every step, and beat her savagely at any suspicious sign. This was the source of the bruises that covered her; she had come secretly to the infirmary, and now she hesitated to leave and confront the anger of her master.

At Starye Doroghi no one required anything of us, nothing pressured us, no force acted on us, we didn't have to defend ourselves against anything; we felt inert and settled, like the sediment of a flood. In this sluggish and eventless life, the arrival of the Soviet military cinema van signaled a memorable date. It must have been a traveling unit, already in service with the troops at the front or behind the lines, and now it, too, was on the way home; it included a projector, a generator unit, a supply of films, and the staff. It stopped at Starye Doroghi for three days, and showed a film every night.

The projections took place in the theater. It was very spacious, and the chairs removed by the Germans had been replaced by rustic benches, balanced unsteadily on the floor, which sloped upward from the screen

toward the balcony. The balcony, also on a slant, was reduced to a narrow strip; the upper part, thanks to a brilliant invention on the part of the mysterious and fanciful architects of the Red House, had been partitioned and subdivided into a series of little rooms, without air or light, whose doors opened toward the stage. There lived the single women of our colony.

The first evening an old Austrian film was shown, in itself mediocre, and of little interest to the Russians, but full of emotion for us Italians. It was a silent film of war and espionage, with titles in German, that recounted an episode on the Italian front during the First World War. It displayed the same candor and the same rhetorical paraphernalia of similar films produced by the Allies: military honor, sacred borders, heroic fighters ready to weep like virgins, bayonet attacks carried out with improbable enthusiasm. Only, it was all upside down: the Austro-Hungarians, both officers and ordinary soldiers, were noble, vigorous characters, brave and gallant; they had the sensitive, spiritual faces of stoic warriors, or the rude, honest faces of peasants, inspiring sympathy at first glance. The Italians, all of them, were a crowd of vulgar scoundrels, all marked by obvious and laughable physical defects: cross-eyed, obese, round-shouldered, knock-kneed, with low, receding foreheads. They were cowardly and ferocious, brutal and shifty-looking. The officers, with faces like depraved weaklings, were crushed under the incongruous mass of the pot-shaped cap familiar to us in portraits of Cadorna and Diaz; the soldiers had piggish or monkey-like scowls, accentuated by the helmet of our fathers, worn on a slant or pulled over the eyes in sinister fashion to hide their gaze.

The traitor of traitors, an Italian spy in Vienna, was a weird chimera, half D’Annunzio and half Vittorio Emanuele: ridiculously small in stature, so that he was forced to look upward at everyone, he wore a monocle and a bow tie, and he moved up and down the screen hopping arrogantly, like a young cock. Returning to the Italian lines, he supervised with horrifying coolness the shooting of ten innocent Tyrolese citizens.

We Italians, unaccustomed to seeing ourselves in the role of the “enemy,” odious by definition, and dismayed by the idea of being hated by anyone, got from the film a complex pleasure that was distressing, and yet a source of useful reflections.

On the second evening, a Soviet film was announced, and the place began to heat up: among us Italians, because it was the first we had seen; among the Russians, because the title promised a war story, full of action

and shooting. The rumor spread; unexpectedly, Russian soldiers arrived from garrisons near and far, crowding in front of the theater doors. When the doors opened, they burst inside like a river in flood, noisily climbing over the benches, pushing and shoving as they thronged in.

The film was simple and straightforward. A Soviet military plane was forced to land, because of a mechanical failure, in an unspecified mountainous frontier territory; it was a small two-seater, with only the pilot on board. When the malfunction had been repaired, and he was on the point of taking off, a local notable came toward him, a turbaned sheikh with an extremely suspicious look, and with unctuous bows and Turkish-style genuflections begged to be taken on board. Even an idiot would have figured out that he was a dangerous character, probably a smuggler, a dissident leader, or a foreign agent; but anyway the pilot, with foolish tolerance, gave in to his long-winded prayers and settled him in the backseat of the plane.

We saw the takeoff, and some good aerial shots of mountain chains sparkling with glaciers (I think it was the Caucasus). Then the sheikh, with devious, sneaky, venomous moves, drew a revolver out of the folds of his robe, pointed it at the pilot's back, and ordered him to change course. The pilot, without even turning around, reacted instantaneously and decisively: he pointed the plane's nose upward, and executed an abrupt loop. The sheikh crumpled up on the seat, in the grip of fear and nausea; the pilot, instead of putting him out of action, continued tranquilly on his way to his intended destination. After a few minutes, and more wonderful scenes of the mountains, the bandit recovered; he crept toward the pilot, again raised the gun, and repeated the attempt. This time the plane did a nosedive, dropping thousands of meters, toward an inferno of steep peaks and abysses; the sheikh fainted and the plane regained altitude. So the flight went on for more than an hour, with repeated attacks by the sheikh and new acrobatics by the pilot; until, after a last order from the sheikh, who seemed to have nine lives, like a cat, the plane went into a spin, clouds, mountains, and ice caps whirled fiercely, and finally it descended, coming in safely on the planned landing field. The lifeless sheikh was handcuffed; the pilot, fresh as a daisy, instead of being questioned, received handshakes from stern superiors, promotion in the field, and a modest kiss from a girl who seemed to have been waiting a long time for him.

The Russian soldiers in the audience had followed the clumsy adventure with clamorous enthusiasm, applauding the hero and insulting the traitor. But it was nothing compared with what happened the third night.

The third night, the show announced was *Hurricane,* a pretty good American movie of the thirties. A Polynesian sailor, a modern version of the "noble savage," a simple, strong and gentle man, is coarsely provoked by a group of drunken white men, and he wounds one of them slightly. Right is obviously on his side, but no one testifies in his favor; he is arrested, put on trial, and, pitifully uncomprehending, condemned to a month in jail. He can stand it only for a few days, not just because of his almost animal-like need for freedom and his intolerance of chains but mainly because he feels, he knows, that not he but the white men have violated justice; if this is the law of the whites, then the law is unjust. He knocks down a guard and escapes in a hail of bullets.

Now the gentle sailor has become a real criminal. He is hunted throughout the whole archipelago, but there's no need to look far; he has returned peacefully to his village. He is captured, and sent to a remote island, to a prison: hard labor and lashes. He flees again, jumping off a high cliff into the sea, steals a canoe, and sails for days toward his land, without eating or drinking; he is approaching, exhausted, just as the promised hurricane of the title looms. Suddenly the hurricane erupts in a fury, and the man, like a good American hero, struggles alone against the elements, and saves not only his wife but the church, the minister, and the faithful who had vainly sought shelter there. Thus rehabilitated, he sets off toward a happy future, with the girl at his side, as the sun appears amid the last, vanishing clouds.

This story, typically individualistic, elemental, and well told, unleashed among the Russians a seismic excitement. An hour before it started, a tumultuous crowd (attracted by the poster, which bore an image of the magnificent, scantily clothed Polynesian girl) was beating on the doors; it was made up almost entirely of very young, armed soldiers. It was obvious that in the "sloping hall," big as it was, there wouldn't be room for everyone, even standing room; precisely for that reason they fought stubbornly, elbowing their way in. One fell, was trampled, and came the next day to the infirmary. We thought we would find something broken, but he had only a few bruises: these were people with strong bones. In short order, the doors were bashed in, shattered, and the pieces were seized like

clubs: the crowd that swarmed into the theater was highly excited and bellicose.

For them it was as if the characters in the film were not shadows but flesh-and-blood friends or enemies, within reach of their hands. The sailor was cheered at every undertaking, greeted with noisy hurrahs, with machine guns brandished dangerously over the spectators' heads. The police and the prison guards were grossly insulted, met with cries of "Get out," "Die," "Down with you," "Leave him alone." When, after the first escape, the fugitive, exhausted and wounded, is again in chains, mocked and derided by the sardonic and asymmetrical features of John Carradine, pandemonium broke out. The audience rose up shouting, in generous defense of the innocent man; a threatening wave of avengers moved toward the screen, in turn insulted and restrained by those who were less inflamed or more eager to see how it would end. Rocks flew at the screen, clods of earth, fragments of the demolished doors, even a regulation boot, hurled with furious precision between the odious eyes of the great enemy, dominating an enormous foreground.

When the film arrived at the long, powerful hurricane sequence, the tumult became a witches' sabbath. Sharp cries were heard from the few women who remained trapped in the crush; a stake appeared, then another, passed from hand to hand over the heads, amid deafening shouts. At first it was hard to understand what the stakes were to be used for, then the plan became clear: a plan probably thought up by those who had been excluded and were clamoring outside. They were trying to climb up to the balcony women's rooms.

The stakes were positioned upright and leaned against the balcony, and several of the thugs, pulling off their boots, began to climb, the way one might climb a greased pole at a village fair. Immediately, the spectacle of the ascent supplanted all interest in the spectacle that was continuing on the screen. As soon as one of the contenders succeeded in getting above the sea of heads, he was grabbed by the feet and brought back to earth by ten or twenty hands. Groups of supporters and adversaries formed; a bold climber was able to get free of the crowd and pull himself up with strong arm strokes, another followed on the same pole. Almost at the level of the balcony they struggled for a few minutes, the one below grabbing the heels of the other, the latter kicking blindly to defend himself. At the same time, the heads of a group of Italians, looking out from the balcony, were visible;

they had rushed up the winding stairs of the Red House to protect the besieged women. The pole, pushed back by the defenders, wavered, hovered for a long instant in a vertical position, then crashed into the crowd like a pine felled by woodcutters, with the two men clinging to it. At this point, I don’t know if accidentally or thanks to some wise intervention by the authorities, the lamp of the projector went out, everything was plunged into darkness, the noise of the audience reached a frightening intensity, and everyone cleared out into the moonlight, amid shouts, curses, and cheers.

To the regret of all, the cinema caravan left the next morning. The following night, a renewed and daring Russian attempt to invade the women’s quarters took place, this time by means of the roofs and eaves, following which a system of night guards was instituted, supervised by Italian volunteers. Later, out of greater prudence, the women of the balcony moved out, and joined the bulk of the female population, in a collective room: a less private but more secure arrangement.

Theater

Toward the middle of August, however, common ground with the Russians was found. Despite trade secrecy, the whole camp learned that the “Romanians,” with the consent and support of the authorities, were organizing a revue; the rehearsals took place in the sloping hall, whose doors had been repaired as well as possible, and were guarded by pickets who kept all outsiders from entering. Among the numbers in the revue was a heel-and-toe dance; the performer, a very conscientious sailor, practiced every night, with a small circle of experts and consultants. Now, this exercise is by nature noisy: the Lieutenant passed that way, heard the rhythmic din, forced his way through the blockade with a clear abuse of power, and entered. He watched two or three sessions, to the discomfort of the bystanders, without emerging from his habitual reserve and without softening his cryptic scowl; then, unexpectedly, he made known to the organizing committee that in his free time he was a passionate dance fan, that in fact he had long wanted to learn heel-and-toe dancing, and that the dancer was therefore invited, or rather ordered, to give him a series of lessons.

The spectacle of these lessons interested me so much that I found a way of watching them, slipping through the strange labyrinths of the Red House and flattening myself in a dark corner. The Lieutenant was the best student that can be imagined: serious, eager, tenacious, and physically well endowed. He danced in his uniform, with his boots, for exactly an hour a day, without granting a moment’s rest to the teacher or to himself. He made rapid progress.

When the revue was performed, a week later, the heel-and-toe number was a surprise for everyone. Teacher and student danced, faultlessly, in perfect step and perfect time: the teacher, winking and smiling, wearing a fantastic Gypsy costume fashioned by the women; the Lieutenant, his nose in the air and his eyes fixed on the ground, gloomily, as if he were performing a sacrificial rite. In uniform, naturally, and with the medals on his chest and the holster at his side dancing with him.

They were applauded; various other, not very original numbers were likewise applauded (some Neapolitan songs from the classic repertory; "The Firemen of Viggiù"; a sketch in which a lover wins the heart of the girl with a bouquet not of flowers but of *ryba*, our stinking daily fish; the "Montanara" sung by a chorus, with Signor Unverdorben the chorus master). But two less ordinary numbers had enthusiastic, and well-deserved, success.

A large fat character, masked, padded, and bundled, like Michelin tires' famous Bibendum, stumbled onto the stage, legs wide apart. He greeted the audience like an athlete, hands clasped above his head; meanwhile, with great effort, two stagehands rolled in next to him an enormous piece of equipment consisting of a bar and two wheels, like those used by weight lifters.

He bent over and grabbed the bar, straining all his muscles: nothing, the bar didn't move. Then he took off his coat, folded it carefully, placed it on the ground, and prepared for a new attempt. Since the weight didn't leave the ground this time, either, he took off a second coat, placing it beside the first; and so on through various coats, civilian and military, raincoats, cassocks, overcoats. The athlete diminished in volume before your eyes, the stage filled with garments, and the weight seemed to have put down roots.

When the coats were gone, he began to take off jackets of all kinds (among them a striped Häftling jacket, in homage to our minority), then an abundance of shirts, and every time, after every item that he put down, he tried with punctilious solemnity to lift the contraption, and gave it up without the least sign of impatience or surprise. Then, while he was taking off the fourth or fifth shirt, he stopped suddenly. He examined the shirt attentively, first at arm's length, then more closely; he searched in the collar and the seams with agile apelike movements and, lo and behold, extracted with thumb and index finger an imaginary louse. He looked at it with eyes dilated in horror, placed it delicately on the floor, drew a chalk circle around

it, with one hand snatched the bar, which for the occasion had become light as a reed, off the floor, and squashed the louse with a sharp, precise blow.

Then, after this very rapid digression, he returned to taking off shirts, pants, socks, and girdles with gravity and composure, trying in vain to lift the weight. At the end, he stood in his underwear amid a mountain of items of clothing: he took off the mask, and the audience recognized in him the likable and very popular cook Gridacucco, small, thin, hopping, and busy, and fittingly nicknamed Scannagrillo (Cricket Killer) by Cesare. The applause was deafening: Scannagrillo looked around bewildered, then, as if suddenly overcome by stage fright, he picked up the weight, which probably was made of cardboard, stuck it under his arm, and raced off.

The other great success was the song “The Three-Cornered Hat.” This is a song absolutely without sense, which consists of a single quatrain repeated over and over (“My hat has three corners / My hat it has three corners / If it didn’t have three corners / It wouldn’t be my hat”) and sung to a tune so trite and worn by tradition that its origin is unknown. It is characterized by the fact that, at every repetition, one word of the quatrain is silent, replaced by a gesture: the hand concave over the head for “hat,” the fist pounding the chest for “my,” the fingers raised upward to form a cone shape, for “corners,” and so on, until, with all the words eliminated, the stanza is reduced to a mutilated stutter of articles and conjunctions that can’t be expressed by signs, or, in another version, to total silence punctuated by rhythmic gestures.

In the heterogeneous group of “Romanians” there must have been someone who had theater in his blood; in their interpretation, this childish oddity became a sinister, obscurely allegorical pantomime, full of symbolic and disquieting resonance.

A small orchestra, whose instruments had been provided by the Russians, started the tired old tune on low, muted notes. Pitching slowly to the rhythm, three spectral characters came onstage: they were enveloped in black cloaks, with black hoods, and from the hoods emerged faces of a decrepit and corpse-like pallor, marked by deep, livid wrinkles. They entered with unsteady dance steps, holding in their hands three long, spent wax tapers. Still following the rhythm, they reached the center of the stage and bowed to the audience with senile difficulty, bending slowly over arthritic hips, in short weary jerks; to bow and straighten again took two good minutes, which were anguishing for the spectators. Once they had

painfully regained an erect posture, the orchestra was silent, and the three phantoms began to sing the silly verses, in tremulous, hoarse voices. They sang, and at every repetition, as the silences accumulated, filled by their shaky gestures, it seemed that life, along with voice, was vanishing from them. Punctuated by the hypnotic pulse of a single, muted drum, the paralysis proceeded slowly and inevitably. The final repeat, with the orchestra, the singers, and the audience in absolute silence, was a harrowing death agony, a mortal spasm.

When the song was over, the orchestra started up again lugubriously: the three figures, with an extreme effort and trembling in every limb, repeated their bow. They managed, incredibly, to straighten up again, and, with the quivering tapers, with terrible, macabre hesitations, but always following the rhythm, disappeared forever into the wings.

The “Three-Cornered Hat” number took your breath away, and was greeted every night with a silence more eloquent than applause. Why? Perhaps because we could perceive, behind the grotesque display, the heavy breath of a collective dream, the dream that emanates from exile and idleness, when work and suffering cease, and nothing places a barrier between man and himself; perhaps because in it we could glimpse the impotence and nullity of our life and of life, and the crooked, hunchbacked profile of the monsters generated by the sleep of reason.

An allegorical play that was organized later was more innocuous, in fact childish and jumbled. It was obvious from the title, *The Shipwreck of the Inert*; the inert were us, the Italians who had got lost on the way home, and become accustomed to an existence of inertia and boredom; the desert island was Starye Doroghi; and the cannibals were obviously them, the good Russians of the Command. Cannibals down to the last detail: they appeared onstage naked and tattooed, they blathered in a primitive and unintelligible dialect, they fed on raw, bloody human flesh. Their chief lived in a grass hut, he had as a footstool a white slave permanently on all fours, and hanging on his chest was a large alarm clock, which he consulted not for the time but for signs to guide his decisions on governing. The Comrade Colonel in charge of our camp must have been a man of spirit, or extremely tolerant, or foolish, to have authorized such an acerbic caricature

of his person and his job: or perhaps it was yet again a matter of the benevolent age-old Russian carelessness, Oblomovian negligence, that emerged at all levels at that happy moment of their history.

In fact, we were struck at least once by the suspicion that the Russians of the Command had not fully digested the satire, or regretted it. After the première of *The Shipwreck*, an uproar broke out in the Red House in the middle of the night: shouts throughout the dormitories, doors kicked in, commands in Russian, Italian, and bad German. We who came from Katowice, and had witnessed a similar pandemonium, were only half frightened; the others lost their heads (especially the "Romanians," who were responsible for the script), the rumor of a Russian reprisal immediately spread, and the more apprehensive were already thinking of Siberia.

The Russians, through the intermediary of the Lieutenant, who in the circumstances seemed more wretched and contemptuous than usual, made us all get up and dress in a hurry, and lined us up in one of the mazelike corridors of the building. Half an hour passed, an hour, and nothing happened; the line, in which I occupied one of the last places, couldn't understand where the head was, and didn't advance a step. In addition to the rumor of reprisal for *The Shipwreck*, the wildest hypotheses ran from mouth to mouth: the Russians had decided to look for Fascists; they were looking for the two girls in the woods; they were going to examine us for gonorrhea; they were recruiting people to work on the collectives; they were looking for specialists, like the Germans. Then an Italian came by, all cheerful. He said, "They're giving us money!" and he waved a bunch of rubles. No one believed him; but a second passed, then a third, and they all confirmed the news. The affair was never well understood (but anyway, who ever understood fully why we were in Starye Doroghi, and what we were doing there?); according to the most knowledgeable interpretation, we were to be considered equivalent to prisoners of war, by at least some Soviet officers, and so were due some recompense for days devoted to work. But on what principle these days were calculated (almost none of us had ever worked for the Russians, in Starye Doroghi or before); why even the children should be remunerated; and, principally, why the ceremony should happen so tumultuously between two and six in the morning—all this is fated to remain obscure.

The Russians distributed compensation varying from thirty to eighty rubles a person, according to inscrutable or random criteria. The sum was not enormous, but it gave pleasure to everyone; it was equivalent to several days of extra food. We returned to bed at dawn, commenting variously on the event; and no one understood that it was a lucky omen, a prelude to returning home.

But from that day on, even without any official announcement, the signs multiplied. Tenuous, ill-defined, timid signs, but enough to promote the sensation that something was finally moving, something was about to happen. A platoon of young Russian soldiers arrived, beardless and out of place; they told us that they had come from Austria, and were supposed to leave again soon, escorting a convoy of foreigners; but they didn't know where. After our months of futile begging, the Command distributed shoes to all those who had need of them. Finally, the Lieutenant disappeared, as if taken up to heaven.

It was all extremely vague and not a little ambiguous. Even given that a departure was imminent, who could assure us that it would be to our own country, and not a new transfer somewhere or other? The long experience we had gained by now of the Russians' methods counseled us to temper our hope with a healthy quotient of doubt. The season, too, contributed to our anxiety: in the first ten days of September, the sun and the sky darkened, the air became cold and damp, and the first rains fell, reminding us of the precariousness of our situation.

Road, meadows, and fields turned into a desolate swamp. Water leaked copiously through the roof of the Red House, dripping pitilessly at night on our bunks; more water came in through the windows, which had no glass. None of us had warm clothing. In the village the peasants could be seen returning from the woods with cartloads of sticks and logs; others patched up their houses, repaired the straw roofs; all, even the women, wore boots. The wind carried from the houses a new, alarming odor: the bitter smoke of damp wood burning, the odor of the coming winter. Another winter, the third: and what a winter!

But the announcement came, finally: the announcement of return, of salvation, of the conclusion of our long wanderings. It came in two new and unusual ways, from two directions, and was convincing and open and dissipated every anxiety. It came in the theater and through the theater, and

it came along the muddy road, brought by a strange and distinguished messenger.

It was night, it was raining, and in the crowded sloping hall (what else could one do in the evening, before slipping under the damp blankets?) *The Shipwreck of the Inert* was playing, perhaps for the ninth or tenth time. This *Shipwreck* was a shapeless but inventive mishmash, vivid because of the witty, good-humored allusions to our everyday life; we had all been present at all its performances, and now we knew it mostly by heart, and at every repeat we laughed less at the scene in which a Cantarella even more savage than the original fashioned an enormous tin pot commissioned by the man-eating Russians, who intended to cook in it the chieftains of the inert; and the final scene, in which the ship arrived, was more and more heart-wrenching.

Because there was, as obviously there should be, a scene in which a sail appeared on the horizon, and all the shipwrecked men and women, laughing and crying, rushed to the inhospitable beach. Now, just as the oldest among them, white-haired and bent by the interminable wait, extended one finger toward the sea and shouted, “A ship!” and while all of us, with a lump in our throat, prepared for the happy ending of the last scene, then to retire yet again into our dens, we heard a sudden crash, and the cannibal chieftain, a true deus ex machina, plummeted upright onto the stage, as if he had fallen from the sky. He tore the alarm clock from his neck, the ring from his nose, the helmet of feathers from his head, and shouted in a thunderous voice, “Tomorrow we depart!”

We were taken by surprise, and at first we didn’t understand. Might it be a joke? But the savage pressed on: “I’m telling the truth, it’s not the play, this is it! The telegram arrived, tomorrow we’re all going home!” This time it was we Italians, actors, spectators, and extras, who instantly overwhelmed the frightened Russians—they understood nothing in that scene that wasn’t in the script. We came outside in a disorderly fashion, and at first there was a breathless overlapping of questions without answers; but then we saw the Colonel, amid a circle of Italians, nodding yes, and then we knew that the time had come. We lit fires in the woods and no one slept; we passed the rest of the night singing and dancing, telling one another our past adventures and recalling our lost companions: since mankind is not permitted to experience joys untarnished.

The next morning, while the Red House was buzzing and teeming, like a beehive preparing for the swarm, we saw a small automobile coming along the road. Very few cars passed, so the fact roused our interest, especially since it wasn't a military vehicle. It slowed in front of the camp, swerved, and turned in, jolting over the rough ground in front of the strange façade. Then we saw that it was a vehicle familiar to all of us, a Fiat 500A, a rusty, beat-up Topolino, with its suspension pitifully misshapen.

It stopped in front of the entrance and was immediately surrounded by a crowd of the curious. An extraordinary figure emerged from it, with great effort, as if he would never finish getting out. He was a very tall, corpulent, ruddy man, in a uniform we had never seen before: a Soviet general, a high-ranking general, a field marshal. When he was completely out of the door, the tiny auto body rose a good few inches, and the suspension seemed to breathe. The man was literally larger than the car, and it was incomprehensible how he could have got into it. His dimensions were further enlarged and accentuated; he took a black object out of the car and unfolded it. It was a cloak that hung to the ground from two long rigid epaulets, of wood; with a casual gesture, attesting to a great familiarity with that equipment, he whirled it around and unfolded it over his back, so that his outline, which had been rounded, became angular. Seen from behind, the man was a monumental black rectangle of one meter by two, who advanced toward the vault of the Red House with majestic symmetry, between two lines of puzzled people whom he towered over by an entire head. How would he get through the door, wide as he was? But he folded back the two epaulets, like wings, and entered.

That heavenly messenger, who traveled alone through the mud in an ancient, disintegrating small car, was Marshal Timoshenko in person, Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko, the hero of the Bolshevik Revolution, of Karelia and Stalingrad. After his welcome by the local Russians, which for that matter was singularly sober and lasted only a few minutes, he came out of the building again and chatted informally with us Italians, like the rough Kutuzov in *War and Peace*, on the field, amid the pots of fish cooking and laundry hung out to dry. He spoke Romanian fluently with the Romanians (since he was, rather is, originally from Bessarabia), and even knew a little Italian. The damp wind stirred his gray locks, which contrasted with his ruddy, tanned complexion, the complexion of a soldier, and of a hearty eater and drinker. He told us that yes, it was

really true: we would be leaving soon, very soon; “war over, everybody home”; the escort was ready, also the provisions for the journey, the papers were in order. In a few days the train would be waiting for us in the station in Starye Doroghi.

From Starye Doroghi to Iasi

That the departure was not to be expected “tomorrow” in the literal sense, as the savage had said in the theater, did not really surprise anyone. Already on several occasions we had been able to observe that the corresponding Russian term, through one of those semantic slippages that are never without explanation, has a much less definite and peremptory meaning than our “tomorrow,” and, in accord with Russian habits, has the value, rather, of “one of the next few days,” “at some time or another,” “in the not too distant future”: in other words, the precision of temporal calculation there is slightly moderated. It didn’t surprise us, and it didn’t upset us excessively. When departure was certain, we realized, with the same wonder, that that boundless land, those fields and woods that had seen the battle to which we owed our salvation, those untouched and primordial horizons, that vigorous and life-loving people, were in our hearts, had penetrated us, and would long remain there, glorious and vivid images of a unique period of our existence.

Not, therefore, “tomorrow” but a few days after the announcement, on September 15, 1945, we left the Red House in a caravan and arrived at the station in Starye Doroghi in a mood of celebration. The train was there, it was waiting for us, it wasn’t an illusion of our senses. There was coal, also water, and the locomotive, enormous and majestic as a monument in itself, was at the right end. We hurried to touch its side: alas, it was cold. There were sixty cars: freight cars, rather dilapidated, parked on a siding. We invaded them with jubilant fury, and without quarreling; we were fourteen hundred, that is to say twenty to twenty-five per car, which, in the light of

our many earlier railway experiences, meant a comfortable and relaxing journey.

The train did not leave right away; in fact it did not leave until the day after. It was pointless to ask questions of the stationmaster in the little station; he knew nothing. In that interval only two or three trains passed through, and none stopped; they didn't even slow down. When one of these trains approached, the stationmaster waited for it on the platform, holding high up a wreath made of branches, from which a small bag hung; the engineer leaned out of the moving locomotive, his right arm bent like a hook. He hooked the wreath as he went by and immediately afterward threw to the ground another one just like it, also with the sack attached: this was the postal service, the only contact between Starye Doroghi and the rest of the world.

All else was immobility and silence. Around the station, which was slightly elevated, stretched interminable plains, limited only to the west by the black line of the forest, and cut by the dizzying ribbon of the tracks. There were herds grazing, few and far apart, the only breaks in the monotony. In the long evening before departure, the songs of the shepherds could be heard, faint and measured; one began singing, a second answered from kilometers away, then another and yet another, from all the points of the horizon, and it was as if the earth itself were singing.

We got ready for the night. After so many months and moves, we were now an organized community, so we had not arranged ourselves randomly in the cars but, rather, in natural groups with common bonds. The "Romanians" occupied some ten cars; three fell to the thieves from San Vittore, who didn't want anyone and whom no one wanted; another three were for single women; four or five held the couples, legitimate or not; two, divided into two stories by a horizontal partition, and noticeable for the laundry hung out to dry, belonged to the families with children. Most impressive was the orchestra car, where the entire theater company of the sloping hall resided, with all their instruments (including a piano), graciously presented by the Russians at the moment of departure. Ours, through Leonardo's initiative, had been declared the infirmary car: a presumptuous and wishful denomination, since Leonardo had at his disposal only a syringe and a stethoscope, and the wooden floor was just as hard as that of the other cars; but then in the whole convoy there wasn't a sick person, nor did any client appear for the entire journey. About twenty

of us lived there, among whom were, naturally, Cesare and Daniele, and, less naturally, the Moor, Signor Unverdorben, Giacomantonio, and the Velletrano; in addition, there were some fifteen former military prisoners.

We spent the night dozing restlessly on the bare floor of the carriage. Day came: the engine was smoking, the engineer was in his place and waiting with Olympian calm for the pressure in the boiler to build up. In midmorning, the engine roared, with a marvelous deep metallic voice, shook, poured forth black smoke, the tie rods grew taut, and the wheels began to turn. We looked at one another, almost bewildered. We had endured, after all: we had won. After the year of suffering and patience in the Lager; after the wave of death that followed the liberation; after the cold and hunger and contempt and the ferocious company of the Greek; after the illnesses and misery of Katowice; after the senseless moves, because of which we felt condemned to orbit for eternity through the Russian spaces, like useless spent stars; after the idleness and bitter homesickness of Starye Doroghi, we were climbing back, therefore, traveling up, on the road home. Time, after two years of paralysis, had regained vigor and value, was working again for us, and this put an end to the lethargy of the long summer, to the threat of the coming winter, and made us impatient, greedy for days and miles.

But very soon, from the first hours of the journey, we had to realize that the hour for impatience had not yet arrived; that happy route loomed long and laborious and not without surprises, a small railway odyssey within our greater odyssey. We still needed patience, in unexpected amounts: more patience.

Our train was more than half a kilometer long; the cars were in poor condition, as were the tracks, the speed was laughable, no more than forty or fifty kilometers an hour. The line had a single track; the stations that had available a siding long enough to allow a stop were few, and often the train had to be broken into two or three pieces, and pushed onto sidings by means of complicated and extremely slow maneuvers, in order to allow other trains to pass.

There were no authorities on board, with the exception of the engineer and the escort, consisting of the seven eighteen-year-old soldiers who had

come from Austria to get us. These, although armed to the teeth, were ingenuous, kind creatures, with meek and innocent hearts, as lively and carefree as schoolboys on vacation, and utterly without authority or common sense. Whenever the train stopped, we saw them walking up and down the platform, with guns slung over their shoulders and proud, officious looks. They made a show of importance, as if they were escorting a transport of dangerous criminals, but it was all show; we soon realized that their inspections were increasingly focused on the two family cars, in the middle of the convoy. They were attracted not by the young wives but by the vaguely domestic atmosphere that emanated from those traveling Gypsy-like dwellings, and perhaps reminded them of their distant homes and their own childhood, which had scarcely ended; but mainly they were fascinated by the children, so much so that, after the first stops, they fixed their daily residence in the family cars, and withdrew to the one reserved for them only to spend the night. They were polite and useful; they helped the mothers willingly, they fetched water and split wood for the stoves. With the Italian boys they struck up a curious and unsymmetrical friendship. They learned various games from them, including the one in which you shoot marbles along a complicated course. In Italy, it's understood as an allegorical representation of the Tour of Italy: thus the young Russians' enthusiasm seemed odd to us, for in their land bicycles are rare, and cycling competitions nonexistent. In any case, it was a discovery for them: at the first stop in the morning, it wasn't rare to see the seven Russians get out of their sleeping car, hurry to the family cars, open the doors with authority, and lift the still sleepy children onto the ground. Then they got busy digging the course in the dirt with their bayonets, and were rapidly immersed in the game, crouching on the ground on all fours, the guns on their backs, eager not to waste even a minute before the engine whistled departure.

On the evening of the 16th we reached Bobruysk, the evening of the 17th Ovruch; and we realized that we were repeating backward the stations of our last journey north, which had taken us from Zhmerynka to Slutsk and Starye Doroghi. We spent the endless days sleeping, chatting, or watching the majestic, deserted steppe unfold. Right away, our optimism lost a little of its brightness; this journey of ours, which to all appearances seemed likely to be the last, had been organized by the Russians in the vaguest and most muddled way imaginable. Rather, it seemed not to have been

organized at all, but decided by who knows who, who knows where, with a simple stroke of the pen. In the whole convoy there existed only two or three maps, relentlessly argued over, on which we had trouble following our problematic progress: we were unquestionably traveling south, but exasperatingly slowly and fitfully, with incomprehensible detours and stops, sometimes covering only a few dozen kilometers in twenty-four hours. We often went to question the engineer (as for the escort, they seemed happy just to be traveling by train, and it didn't matter to them at all to know where we were and where we were going); but the engineer, who emerged like a lower-world god from his burning-hot cab, spread his arms, shrugged his shoulders, swept his hand in a semicircle from east to west, and answered every time, "Where are we going tomorrow? I don't know, my dears, I don't know. We're going wherever we find tracks."

The least tolerant of uncertainty and forced idleness was Cesare. He sat in a corner of the car, hypochondriac and bristling, like a sick animal, and didn't so much as look at the country outside or at us inside. But it was an apparent inertia: those who have need of activity find the opportunity everywhere. As we were passing through an area scattered with small villages, between Ovruch and Zhitomir, his attention was attracted by a small brass ring on the finger of Giacomantonio, his unreliable former ally in the market square in Katowice.

"Will you sell it to me?" he asked.

"No," Giacomantonio answered plainly, to all intents.

"I'll give you two rubles."

"I want eight."

The negotiation continued for a long time; it seemed clear that both found in it a diversion and a pleasant mental exercise, and that the ring was only a pretext, a starting point for a sort of friendly game, for a practice negotiation, in order not to get out of shape. But that wasn't the case: Cesare, as usual, had conceived a precise plan.

To the amazement of us all, he gave in quite soon, and acquired the ring, which he seemed very attached to, for four rubles, a sum grossly disproportionate to the value of the object. Then he withdrew into his corner, and for the whole afternoon devoted himself to mysterious activities, chasing off with angry growls anyone who asked him questions (the most insistent being Giacomantonio). He had taken out of his pockets scraps of cloth of different quality, and he polished the ring carefully, inside

and out, every so often breathing on it. Then he took out a packet of cigarette papers, and, using those, continued the work painstakingly, with extreme delicacy, no longer touching the metal with his fingers. Occasionally, he held the ring up to the light of the window, and observed it, turning it slowly as if it were a diamond.

Finally the moment that Cesare was waiting for arrived: the train slowed down and stopped at the station in a village, not too large and not too small; the stop promised to be short, because the train remained undivided on the main track. Cesare got out and began to walk up and down the platform. He held the ring half hidden against his chest, under his jacket; with a conspiratorial air, he approached one at a time the Russian peasants who were waiting, stuck it out partway, and whispered nervously, "*Tovarishch, zoloto, zoloto!*" ("Gold").

At first the Russians paid no attention. Then an old man observed the ring close up and asked for a price. Cesare, with no hesitation, said, "*Sto*" ("A hundred"): a quite modest price for a gold ring, criminal for a brass one. The old man made a counteroffer of forty, Cesare acted indignant and turned to someone else. He tried this with several customers, taking his time, and looking for the one who would offer the most. Meanwhile, he listened intently for the whistle of the engine, so as to conclude the business and jump on the moving train right afterward.

While Cesare was showing the ring to this one and that one, others could be seen whispering together in little groups, suspicious and excited. Just then, the locomotive whistled; Cesare gave up the ring to the latest offer, pocketed fifty rubles, and quickly got on the train, which was already moving. It traveled one meter, two, ten meters; then it slowed again, and stopped, with a great screeching of brakes.

Cesare had closed the sliding doors, and he peeked out through the crack, at first triumphant, then worried, finally terrified. The man with the ring was showing the acquisition to his fellow villagers, who passed it from hand to hand, turned it in every direction, and shook their heads with an air of doubt and disapproval. Then we saw the incautious buyer, evidently repenting, raise his head and set off resolutely alongside the convoy, in search of Cesare's hiding place: an easy search, since ours was the only car with the doors closed.

The business took a bad turn: the Russian, who couldn't have been too bright, might not have succeeded in identifying the car by himself, but

already two or three of his comrades were energetically pointing out to him the right direction. Cesare jumped back from the peephole, and resorted to extreme measures: he squatted in a corner of the car, and rapidly had himself covered with all the available blankets. In a moment he had disappeared under an enormous mass of blankets, quilts, sacks, jackets; listening intently, I seemed to hear words of prayer wafting from it, weak and muffled, and blasphemous in the context.

The Russians were shouting outside the car, and beating with their fists on the wall, when the train started off with a violent jerk. Cesare reemerged, pale as death, but he cheered up immediately: “Now they can come and look for me!”

The next morning, under a radiant sun, the train stopped in Kazatin. That name sounded familiar to me: where had I read or heard it? Maybe in the war news? And yet I had the impression of a closer and more present memory, as if someone had talked about it recently, and at length—after, and not before, the caesura of Auschwitz, which broke in two the chain of my memories.

And there, standing on the platform, just outside our car, was the embodiment of the memory: Galina, the girl from Katowice, the translator-dancer-typist of the Kommandantur, Galina of Kazatin. I got out to greet her, filled with joy and wonder at the unlikely meeting: to find my only Russian friend in that endless land!

She didn’t seem much changed; she was a little better dressed, and was sheltered from the sun by an ostentatious parasol. Nor was I much changed, at least on the outside: a little less undernourished and weak, and just as ragged. But I was newly rich: with the train behind me, the slow but sure engine, Italy closer every day. She wished me a good journey; we exchanged a few hurried and awkward remarks, in a language neither hers nor mine, in the cold language of the invader, and parted immediately, for the train was starting up. As the car bumped along toward the border, I sat sniffing on my hand her cheap perfume, happy to have seen her again, sad at the memory of the hours passed with her, the things not said, the opportunities not taken.

We passed through Zhmerynka again, suspicious, mindful of the days of anguish we had spent there a few months earlier; but the train continued without hindrance, and on the evening of September 19, having crossed Bessarabia quickly, we were at the Prut River, the border. In the thick

darkness, by way of farewell, the Soviet border police carried out a tumultuous and disorganized inspection of the train, in search (they told us) of rubles, which it was illegal to export; in any case, we had spent them all. We crossed the bridge and slept on the other side, in the stopped train, eager for the light of day to reveal the Romanian landscape.

It was in fact a dramatic revelation. When we opened the doors in the early morning, a surprisingly domestic scene appeared before our eyes: no longer the deserted, geological steppe but the green hills of Moldavia, with farmhouses, haystacks, rows of vines; no longer enigmatic Cyrillic inscriptions but, right in front of our car, a small, tumbledown cottage, the pale blue of verdigris, and written clearly on it the words “Paine, Lapte, Vin, Carnaciuri de Purcel” (Bread, Milk, Wine, Pork Sausages). And in front of the cottage stood a woman, and she was pulling a long sausage out of a basket at her feet, measuring it by the arm’s length as one measures string.

There were farmers like the ones at home, with sunburned faces and pale foreheads, dressed in black, with jacket and vest and watch chain across the stomach; girls on foot or on bicycles, dressed almost like the girls at home, who could have been taken for girls from the Veneto or Abruzzo. Goats, sheep, cows, pigs, hens. But then we saw, stopped at a grade crossing, a camel—a brake on every precocious illusion of home—which drove us back into the elsewhere: a worn-out, gray, woolly camel, loaded with sacks, exhaling arrogance and foolish solemnity from its prehistoric leporine snout. The language of the place sounded equally double-edged to our ears; there were known roots and endings, but millennia of intermingling had entangled and corrupted them with others of a strange, savage sound: a speech familiar in its music, hermetic in meaning.

At the border the painful, complex ceremony of transfer from the broken-down Soviet-gauge cars to equally broken-down Western-gauge cars took place; and soon afterward we entered the station in Iasi, where the convoy was laboriously separated into three pieces: a sign that we would be stopped there for hours.

In Iasi two notable things happened: the two German women of the woods reappeared out of nowhere, and all the married “Romanians” disappeared. The smuggling of the two German women across the Soviet border must have been organized with great daring and skill by a group of Italian soldiers. The details were never known precisely, but the rumor was

that the women had spent the critical night of the border crossing hidden under the floor of the car, flattened between the tie rods and the springs. We saw them walking on the platform the next morning, carefree and insolent, bundled up in Soviet military outfits and grimy with mud and grease. At last they felt safe.

At the same time, we saw violent family quarrels explode in the cars of the "Romanians." Many of these, who had formerly belonged to the diplomatic corps and had been demobilized or self-demobilized by the Armir, had settled in Romania and married Romanian women. At the end of the war, almost all had chosen repatriation, and the Russians had organized a train that was supposed to take them to Odessa, to be put on ships; but at Zhmerynka they had been added to our wretched convoy, and had followed our fate; no one ever knew if that had happened by plan or by confusion. The Romanian wives were furious at their Italian husbands; they had had enough of surprises and adventures and convoys and camps. Now they had returned to Romanian territory, they were home, they wished to stay there and wouldn't listen to reason. Some argued and wept, others tried to drag their husbands off the train, the most unrestrained hurled baggage and household goods out of the cars, while the children, frightened, ran around shrieking. The Russians of the escort hurried over, but they didn't understand and stood watching, inert and indecisive.

Since the halt at Iasi threatened to extend for the whole day, we left the station and wandered through the deserted streets, among low mud-colored houses. A single tiny, archaic tram went back and forth from one end of the city to the other; at one terminus was the ticket seller, who spoke Yiddish, and was Jewish. With some effort we managed to understand each other. He told me that other convoys of veterans had already passed through Iasi, people of all races, French, English, Greeks, Italians, Dutch, Americans. There were also among them many Jews in need of help, and so the local Jewish community had established a center for assistance. If we had an hour or two, he advised us to go as a delegation to that center; we would get advice and help. In fact, since his tram was about to leave, we should get on, he would tell us where to get out, and he would take care of the ticket.

Leonardo, Signor Unverdorben, and I went: passing through the worn-out city we reached a dirty, crumbling building, its doors and windows replaced by temporary boards. In a dark, dusty office we were welcomed by two old patriarchs, whose appearance was scarcely more prosperous and

healthy than ours; but they were full of affectionate solicitude and good intentions, they had us sit on the only three available chairs, they overwhelmed us with kindness, and in a rush recounted, in Yiddish and French, the tremendous ordeals that they, and few others, had survived. They were quick to tears and to laughter; at the moment of farewell, they invited us peremptorily to drink a toast of terrible rectified alcohol, and handed us a basket of grapes to distribute among the Jews of our convoy. Emptying all the drawers and their own pockets, they also scraped together a sum in *lei* that on the spot appeared to us astronomical; but, once we had divided it, and taken into account inflation, we realized that its value was mainly symbolic.

From Iasi to the Line

Through a countryside still in summer, through cities and villages with barbaric-sounding names (Cirea, Scantea, Vaslui, Piscu, Braila, Pogoanele), we continued south for several days, by tiny stages: on the night of September 23 we saw the fires of the oil wells of Ploieşti blazing. After that, our mysterious pilot turned west, and the next day, from the position of the sun, we realized that our route was reversed: we were again traveling north. We admired, without recognizing it, the castle of Sinaia, a royal residence.

In our car we had by now used up our liquid cash, and had sold or traded everything that might have any commercial value, even the slightest. Therefore, except for occasional strokes of luck or outlaw actions, we ate only what the Russians gave us; the situation wasn't terrible, but it was confused and nerve-racking.

It was never clear who was seeing to our provisions: very likely the Russian guards, who randomly collected, from every military or civilian storehouse they happened on, the most disparate foodstuffs, or maybe the only ones available. When the train stopped and was divided, each car sent two delegates to the Russians' car, which had been gradually transformed into a chaotic traveling bazaar, and the Russians, following no rule, distributed food to the respective cars. It was a daily game of chance: as for quantity, the rations were sometimes scant, sometimes cyclopean, sometimes none; and as for quality they were unpredictable, like everything Russian. We got carrots, and more carrots, and still more carrots, for days in a row; then the carrots disappeared and beans appeared. They were dried beans, as hard as gravel: to cook them, we had to soak them for hours in

makeshift containers, mess tins, cans, pots hanging from the ceiling of the car: at night, when the train braked abruptly, that suspended forest shook violently, water and beans rained onto the sleepers, causing quarrels, laughter, and chaos in the darkness. Potatoes arrived, then kasha, then cucumbers, but without oil; then oil, half a tin per person, when the cucumbers were finished; then sunflower seeds, an exercise in patience. One day we received an abundance of bread and sausage, and we all breathed easier; then there was grain for a whole week in a row, as if we were chickens.

Only the family cars had stoves: in all the others, we managed by cooking on the ground, over campfires, lit in a hurry as soon as the train stopped, and dismantled midway through the cooking, amid arguments and curses, when the train started up again. We cooked frantically, furiously, ears cocked for the train whistle, one eye on the starving tramps who immediately swarmed on us from the countryside, attracted by the smoke like bloodhounds by the scent. We cooked like our ancestors, on three rocks; since there often weren't any, each car ended up having its own hoard. Spits and ingenious supports appeared; Cantarella's pots resurfaced.

The problem of wood and water was urgent. Necessity simplifies: private woodpiles were ransacked in an instant; the anti-snow barriers, which in those towns were piled up along the tracks in the summer months, were stolen; fences were demolished, railroad ties, and once (for lack of anything else) an entire damaged freight car. Providential, in our car, was the presence of the Moor and his famous ax. For water, in the first place suitable containers were needed, and every car had to get a bucket, through trade, theft, or purchase. We found at the first trial that our bucket, bought legitimately, had a hole in it: we repaired it with a bandage from the infirmary, and it stood up to the cooking miraculously as far as the Brenner, where it fell apart.

It was generally impossible to stock up on water at the stations. At the fountain (when there was one) an endless line formed within seconds, and only a few pails could be filled. Some people crept stealthily up to the tender, which contained the supply meant for the locomotive; but if the engineer noticed, he flew into a rage and bombarded the daredevils with curses and glowing coals. Nevertheless, sometimes we managed to draw hot water from the belly of the engine itself; it was slimy, rusty water, unsuitable for cooking but adequate for washing.

The best resource was country wells. The train often stopped in the midst of fields, at a red signal, for a few seconds or for hours—it was impossible to predict. Then we all rapidly took off our belts, which, tied together, made a long rope; after that the fastest in the car took off at a run, with the rope and the bucket, in search of a well. The fastest in my car was me, and I was frequently successful in the enterprise; but once I seriously risked missing the train. I had already lowered the bucket and was laboriously raising it, when I heard the engine whistle. If I had abandoned bucket and belts, precious community property, I would be dishonored forever, so I pulled with as much strength as I had, grabbed the bucket, dumped out the water, and ran, impeded by the knotted belts, toward the train, which was already moving. A second's delay could be a month's delay; I ran flat out, for my life, I climbed over two hedges and the fence, and hurled myself onto the tremulous gravel of the roadbed while the train rolled by in front of me. My car had already passed; merciful hands reached toward me from others, grabbed the belts and the bucket, other hands clutched me by the hair, the shoulders, the clothes, and hoisted me bodily onto the floor of the last car, where I lay, nearly fainting, for half an hour.

The train continued to proceed northward; it advanced along a valley that became increasingly narrow, crossed the Transylvanian Alps through the pass of Predeal on September 24, amid harsh, bare mountains, in piercing cold, and descended to Braşov. Here the engine was detached, the guarantee of a halt, and the usual ceremony began to unfold: people with a furtive and fierce look, hatchets in hand, roaming through the station and outside; others with buckets, fighting over the scant water; still others stealing straw from haystacks, or making deals with the locals; children scattered around in search of trouble or minor thefts; women washing or washing themselves in public, exchanging visits and news from car to car, rekindling the quarrels brooded on during the trip and inciting new ones. Fires were immediately lit, and cooking began.

Beside our convoy a Soviet military transport was stationed, loaded with small trucks, armored vehicles, and fuel tanks. It was guarded by two robust female soldiers, in boots and helmets, muskets over their shoulders and bayonets fixed; they were of an indefinable age and had a hard, unfriendly look. When they saw the fires being lit right under the fuel tanks, they became justly indignant at our carelessness, and, shouting "*Nelzya, nelzya*," ordered us to put them out immediately.

Everyone obeyed, cursing, with the exception of a small group of Alpinists, tough veterans of the Russian campaign, who had organized a goose and were roasting it. They discussed it soberly, while the two women raged behind them; then two of them, designated by the majority, rose to their feet, with the severe and resolute look of someone who is consciously sacrificing for the common good. They confronted the soldiers and spoke to them in a whisper. The negotiations were surprisingly brief; the women put down their helmets and weapons, and the four of them, serious and dignified, left the station, made their way into an alley, and disappeared from view. They returned a quarter of an hour later, the women in front, a little less hard and slightly flushed, the men behind, proud and serene. The cooking was done: the four squatted on the ground with the others, the goose was carved and divided peaceably, then, after a short respite, the Russians took up their weapons and their duties.

From Braşov the route turned west again, toward the Hungarian border. Rain arrived, to make the situation worse; it was hard to light the fires, we had a single wet garment to wear, there was mud everywhere. The roof of our car wasn't watertight, and only a few square meters of the floor remained habitable; everywhere else water dripped mercilessly. Interminable fights and altercations arose the moment we lay down to sleep.

It's an old observation that every human group contains a predestined victim: one who is always picked on, whom everyone mocks, about whom stupid, malicious gossip is spread, upon whom all the others, by mysterious agreement, unload their bad moods and their wish to do harm. The victim in our car was the Carabiniere. It would be arduous to establish why, if a why even existed; the Carabiniere was a young carabiniere from Abruzzo, polite, meek, helpful, and good-looking. He wasn't even especially obtuse; rather, he was quite touchy and sensitive, and so he suffered acutely from the persecution he was subjected to by the other soldiers in the car. But he was a carabiniere: and it's well-known that between the carabinieri and the other armed forces there's a certain amount of bad blood. The carabinieri are rebuked, perversely, for their excessive discipline, seriousness, chastity, honesty; their lack of humor; their uncritical obedience; their customs; their uniform. Fantastic, grotesque, and foolish legends circulate about them, handed down in the barracks from generation to generation: the legend of the hammer, the legend of the oath. I will not mention the first, which is too well-known and vile; according to the other, as I learned, the young recruit

is obliged to take a secret, monstrous, diabolical oath, under which, among other things, he pledges solemnly “to kill his father and his mother”; and every carabiniere either has killed them or will kill them, otherwise he doesn’t get past corporal. The unhappy young man couldn’t open his mouth: “Shut up, you, you killed papa and mama.” But he never rebelled; he absorbed this and a hundred other insults with the adamantine patience of a saint. One day he took me aside, as neutral, and assured me “that the business of the oath wasn’t true.”

We traveled through the rain, which made us angry and sad, almost without stopping, for three days, halting only for a few hours in a mudfilled town with the glorious name of Alba Iulia. On the night of September 26, having traveled more than eight hundred kilometers in the land of Romania, we were at the Hungarian border, near Arad, in a village called Curtici.

I’m sure that the inhabitants of Curtici still remember the scourge of our passage; it’s credible in fact that it entered into the local traditions, and will be spoken of for generations, around the fire, as elsewhere they still speak of Attila and Tamerlane. Even this detail of our journey is fated to remain obscure; according to the evidence, the Romanian military or railway authorities didn’t want us anymore, or had already “dumped” us, while the Hungarian authorities didn’t want to accept us, and hadn’t “taken responsibility” for us. In effect, we remained stuck in Curtici, we and the train and the guards, for seven exhausting days, and we devastated the town.

Curtici was an agricultural village of perhaps a thousand inhabitants, and it had very little; we were fourteen hundred, and we needed everything. In seven days, we drained all the wells; exhausted the stock of wood, and caused serious damage to everything combustible that the station held; as for the latrines it’s best not to mention them. We caused a frightening rise in the price of milk, bread, corn, poultry; after that, with our buying power reduced to zero, there was thieving at night and then even in the daytime. The geese, which appeared to constitute the principal local resource, and initially wandered free through the muddy alleys in solemn orderly squads, completely disappeared, in part captured, in part shut up in pens.

Every morning we opened the doors, in the absurd hope that the train had moved without our noticing, while we slept. But nothing had changed, the sky was always dark and rainy, we were still looking at the mud houses, the train was inert and powerless, like a ship that has run aground; and the

wheels, those wheels that should be carrying us home, we bent over to examine them—no, they hadn't moved a millimeter, they were as if soldered to the tracks, and rusting in the rain. We were cold and hungry, and we felt abandoned and forgotten.

On the sixth day, Cesare, more exhausted and enraged than anyone, deserted us. He declared that he had had enough of Curtici, of the Russians, of the train, and of us; that he didn't want to go mad, or die of hunger, or be knocked off by the Curticesi; that a smart fellow can manage better by himself. He said that if we were disposed to we could also follow him: but, let's be clear, he was tired of living in misery, he was ready to run some risks, but he wanted to get it over, make some money quickly, and return to Rome in an airplane. None of us felt like following him, and so Cesare left: he took a train to Bucharest, had many adventures, and succeeded in his goal, that is, he returned to Rome in an airplane, although later than us; but that is another story, a story *de haulte graisse*, which I will not relate, or will relate in another place, and only if and when Cesare gives me permission.

If in Romania I had felt a delicate philological pleasure in tasting names like Galaţi, Alba Iulia, Turnu Severin, on first entering Hungary we encountered instead Békéscsaba, followed by Hódmezövásárhely and Kiskunfélegyháza. The Magyar plain was soaked with water, the sky was leaden, but what saddened us most of all was the absence of Cesare. He had left a painful void; in his absence no one knew what to talk about, no one could overcome the boredom of the interminable journey, the nineteen-day ordeal of train travel that now weighed on our shoulders. We looked at one another with a vague sense of guilt: why had we let him go? Yet in Hungary, in spite of the impossible names, we felt we were now in Europe, under the wing of a civilization that was ours, safe from alarming apparitions like the camel in Moldavia. The train was heading toward Budapest, but did not enter the city: it halted several times in Ujpest and other points on the periphery on October 6, offering spectral visions of ruins, of temporary barracks and deserted streets; then it advanced again across the plain, amid rain showers and veils of autumn fog.

It stopped at Szob, where it was market day; we all got out, to stretch our legs and spend the little money we had. I had nothing more, but I was hungry, and I traded my Auschwitz jacket, which I had jealously preserved until then, for a noble meal of fermented cheese and onions, whose sharp

aroma had entranced me. When the engine whistled, and we got back in the car, we counted, and we were two more.

One was Vincenzo, and no one was surprised. Vincenzo was a difficult boy, a Calabrian shepherd of sixteen; who could say how he had ended up in Germany. He was as wild as the Velletrano, but in a different way: timid, closed, and contemplative as the other was violent and fiery. He had wonderful blue eyes, almost feminine, and a delicate, mobile, ethereal face; he almost never spoke. He was a nomad in his soul, restless, drawn by the forest in Starye Doroghi as if by invisible demons; and on the train, too, he had no fixed residence, but wandered through all the cars. We immediately understood the reason for his instability; as soon as the train left Szob, Vincenzo fell to the floor, his eyes white and his jaw locked, like a rock. He roared like a beast and thrashed about, stronger than the four Alpinists who restrained him: an epileptic fit. Certainly he had had others, at Starye Doroghi and before; but each time, when he noticed the warning signs, Vincenzo, driven by a savage pride, had taken refuge in the forest so that no one would know about his illness; or maybe he fled before the evil, like birds before a storm. On the long journey, since he couldn’t stay on the ground, he changed cars when he felt an attack coming. He stayed with us for a few days, then disappeared. We found him perched on the roof of another car. Why? He answered that up there he could see the countryside better.

The other guest, too, for different reasons, turned out to be a hard case. No one knew him; he was a strong barefoot boy, wearing the jacket and pants of the Red Army. He spoke only Hungarian, and none of us could understand him. The Carabiniere told us that while he was sitting on the ground eating bread, the boy had come up to him and held out his hand; he had given him half his food, and from then on had been unable to get rid of him; as we hurried to get into the car he must have followed us without anyone’s noticing.

He was welcomed kindly; another mouth to feed was not a concern. He was cheerful and intelligent: as soon as the train started moving, he introduced himself with great dignity. His name was Pista and he was fourteen. Father and mother? Here it was harder to understand: I found a stub of pencil and a scrap of paper and drew a man, a woman, and a child in the middle; I pointed to the child, saying “Pista,” then waited. Pista turned serious, then he drew a picture of terrible evidence: a house, an airplane, a

falling bomb. Then he crossed out the house and next to it drew a large smoking mass.

But he wasn't in the mood for sad things; he crumpled up that piece of paper, asked for another, and drew a cask, with singular precision. The bottom, in perspective, and all the staves visible, one by one; then the hoops, and the hole with the plug. We looked at one another in bewilderment: what was the meaning of the message? Pista laughed, happily: then he drew himself next to it, with a hammer in one hand and a saw in the other. We still didn't get it? It was his trade, he was a cooper.

Everyone immediately became fond of him; besides, he was eager to make himself useful, he swept the floor every morning, he washed the pots enthusiastically, he fetched water, and he was happy when we sent him to "do the shopping" among his compatriots at the various stops. At the Brenner, he could already speak comprehensible Italian. He sang lovely songs of his country, which no one understood, then sought to explain them with gestures, making everyone laugh and laughing heartily himself first of all. He was fond of the Carabiniere like a younger brother, and little by little washed away the original sin: the Carabiniere had indeed killed father and mother, but basically he must have been a good son, given that Pista had followed him. He filled the void left by Cesare. We asked him why he had come with us, what he was looking for in Italy, but we never found out, in part because of the difficulty of understanding but principally because he himself seemed not to know. For months he had been wandering from station to station like a wild dog; he had followed the first human creature who looked at him with compassion.

We hoped to cross from Hungary to Austria without trouble at the border, but it wasn't to be: on the morning of October 7, the twenty-second day of the train journey, we were in Bratislava, in Slovakia, in view of the Beskids, the very mountains that obstructed the grim horizon of Auschwitz. Another language, another currency, another path: would we close the circle? Katowice was two hundred kilometers away; would we begin another vain, exhausting circuit through Europe? But in the evening we entered German territory; on the day of the 8th we were stuck in the freight yard of Leopoldau, a station on the outskirts of Vienna, and we felt almost home.

The outskirts of Vienna were ugly and had grown up haphazardly, like those of Milan and Turin, familiar to us, and, like those, in the last views

that we remembered of them, pummelled and devastated by bombs. The passersby were few: women, children, old people, no men. Paradoxically, their language, too, sounded familiar to me; some even understood Italian. We exchanged at random the money we had for the local money, but it was in vain; as in Kraków in March, all the stores were closed, or sold only rationed goods. “What can one buy in Vienna without a ration card?” I asked a girl, no more than twelve. She was dressed in rags, but wore shoes with high heels and was gaudily made up. “*Überhaupt nichts*,” she answered derisively.

We returned to the train for the night; during that night, with much jolting and screeching, we traveled a few kilometers and found that we had moved to another depot, Vienna-Jedlersdorf. Beside us another train emerged from the fog, or, rather, the tortured corpse of a train: the engine was vertical, absurd, its nose pointed to the sky as if it wanted to climb up; all the cars were burned. We approached, driven by the instinct for plunder and by a mocking curiosity; we expected a malicious satisfaction in putting our hands on the ruins of those German things. But mockery was answered by mockery: one car contained shapeless metal debris that must have been parts of burned musical instruments, and a hundred clay ocarinas, the sole survivors; another, service guns molten and rusted; a third, a tangle of curved sabers, which the fire and the rain had welded in their sheathes for all the centuries to come—vanity of vanities, and the cold taste of perdition.

We went on and, wandering aimlessly, found ourselves on the banks of the Danube. The river was in flood, muddy, yellow, and swollen with threat; at that point its course is almost straight, and we could see, one behind the other, in a misty perspective like a nightmare, seven bridges, all broken exactly in the center, all with their stumps submerged in the swirling water. As we returned to our traveling home, we were startled by the rattle of a tram, the only living thing. It was running madly on its battered tracks, along the deserted streets, without stopping at the stops. We glimpsed the driver in his place, pale as a ghost; behind him, delirious with excitement, were the seven Russians of our escort, and no other passenger: it was the first tram of their lives. While some were hanging out the windows, shouting “Hurrah, hurrah!” others were urging and threatening the driver to go faster.

On a big square a market was being held; yet again a spontaneous and illegal market, but much more wretched and stealthy than the Polish ones

that I had gone to with the Greek and with Cesare; from close up it reminded me, instead, of another scene, the Market of the Lager, indelible in memory. There were no stalls, but only people standing, cold, restless, in small groups, ready to flee, with purses and suitcases in hand and bulging pockets; they exchanged tiny bits of junk, potatoes, slices of bread, loose cigarettes, ordinary, used household rubbish.

We returned to the train with heavy hearts. We had felt no joy in seeing Vienna destroyed and the Germans defeated: pity, rather; not compassion but a broader pity, which mingled with our own wretchedness, with the heavy, looming sensation of an irreparable and ultimate evil, present everywhere, hidden like a cancer in the bowels of Europe and the world, the seed of future harm.

The train seemed unable to detach itself from Vienna; after three days of halts and maneuvers, on October 10 we were still in Nussdorf, another suburb, hungry, wet, and sad. But on the morning of the 11th the train headed decisively westward, as if it had suddenly found the lost path: with unusual speed it went through St. Pölten, Loosdorf, and Amstetten, and that evening, along the road that ran parallel to the railroad tracks, appeared a sign, portentous in our eyes like the birds that announce the approach of land to sailors. It was a vehicle new to us: a stocky, clumsy military vehicle, flat as a box, that bore painted on its side a white star, not red—a Jeep, in other words. A black man was driving; one of the occupants waved at us and shouted in Neapolitan, “We’re going home, guys!”

The line of demarcation was therefore close; we reached it at St. Valentin, a few kilometers from Linz. Here we got out, we said goodbye to the young barbarians of the escort and the well-deserving engineer, and passed all together into the hands of the Americans.

The shorter the average duration of a stay at a transit camp, the less well organized it is; at St. Valentin people stopped only for a few hours, a day at most, so it was a very dirty and primitive camp. There was neither light nor heat nor beds; you slept on the bare wooden floor, in extremely temporary barracks, surrounded by several inches of mud. The only efficient facilities were those for baths and disinfection; under that guise, of purification and exorcism, the West took possession of us.

Several giant and silent GIs were assigned to the priestly task; they were unarmed but adorned with myriad devices whose meaning and use escaped us. For the bath, everything went smoothly; there were maybe twenty

wooden cabins, with a warm shower and bathrobes, a luxury never seen before. After the bath, they led us into a vast brick hall, divided by a cable from which hung ten odd pieces of equipment, vaguely resembling pneumatic hammers; you could hear a compressor pulsing outside. All fourteen hundred, as many as we were, were crowded to one side of the partition, men and women together. Here ten officials with an unearthly aspect entered the scene, enveloped in white overalls, with helmets and gas masks. They grabbed the first of the herd, and without ceremony inserted the hoses of the hanging contrivances gradually into all the openings of their clothes: the collar, the waist, the pockets, up into the pants, under skirts. The machines were a kind of pneumatic bellows, which blew in insecticide: and the insecticide was DDT, an absolute novelty for us, like Jeeps, penicillin, and the atomic bomb, of which we heard soon afterward.

Cursing or laughing because of the tickling sensation, everyone adjusted to the treatment, until it came the turn of a Navy officer and his beautiful fiancée. When the hooded people put their hands, which were chaste but rude, on her, the officer energetically intervened. He was a robust and determined youth; anyone who tried to touch his woman was in trouble.

The perfect mechanism stopped short; the uniformed men consulted briefly among themselves, with inarticulate nasal sounds, then one of them took off mask and overalls and planted himself in front of the officer with fists clenched, like a guard. The others made a neat circle around them, and a boxing match began. After a few minutes of silent, gallant fighting, the officer fell down with a bloody nose; the girl, pale and upset, was dusted all over according to the prescriptions, but without anger or a wish for reprisal, and everything returned to American orderliness.

The Reawakening

Austria has a border with Italy, and St. Valentin is no more than three hundred kilometers from Tarvísio; and yet on October 15, the thirty-first day of our journey, we crossed a new border and entered Munich, suffering from an inconsolable railroad weariness, an utter nausea for tracks, for sleeping precariously on wooden boards, for jolting movement, for stations; and so the familiar smells, common to all the railroads in the world—the piercing odors of wet ties, of hot brakes, of burning coal—afflicted us with a profound disgust. We were tired of everything, tired especially of crossing useless borders.

But, in another way, the fact of feeling for the first time, beneath our feet, an edge of Germany—not of Upper Silesia or Austria but of Germany itself—superimposed on our weariness a complex state of mind made up of impatience, frustration, and tension. It seemed to us that we had something to say, enormous things to say, to every single German, and that every German should have something to say to us. We felt an urgency to sum up, ask, explain, and comment, like chess players at the end of a match. Did "they" know about Auschwitz, about the silent, daily slaughter, a step from their doors? If yes, how could they go along, return home, and look at their children, cross the threshold of a church? If not, they had to listen, they had a sacred duty to listen, to learn from us, from me, everything, immediately. I felt the number tattooed on my arm burning like a wound.

As I wandered through the rubble-filled streets of Munich, around the station where yet again our train was stranded, it seemed to me that I was walking among swarms of insolvent debtors, as if each one owed me something and refused to pay. I was among them, in Agramante's camp,

among the master race, but the men were few, many were mutilated, many dressed in rags like us. It seemed to me that each one should interrogate us, read in our faces who we were, and listen humbly to our tale. But no one looked us in the eye, no one accepted the challenge; they were deaf, blind, and mute, locked in their ruins as in a fortress of deliberate ignorance, still strong, still capable of hatred and contempt, still prisoners of the ancient knot of pride and fault.

I caught myself seeking among them, in that anonymous crowd of sealed faces, other faces, well defined, many provided with a name: of those who could not not know, not remember, not respond; of those who had ordered and obeyed, killed, humiliated, corrupted. A vain and foolish attempt—because not they, but others, the few righteous men, would answer in their stead.

If in Szob we had taken on a guest, after Munich we realized that we had taken on an entire litter; we were no longer sixty cars but, rather, sixty-one. At the tail end of the train, traveling with us toward Italy, was a new car, crowded with young Jews, boys and girls from all the countries of Eastern Europe. None of them looked more than twenty, but they were extremely determined and confident; they were young Zionists, they were going to Israel, taking any route they could and by any means they could. A ship awaited them in Bari. They had bought the train car and to hook it up to our train had been the simplest thing in the world, they hadn’t asked permission from anyone—they had simply hooked it up. I was amazed, but they laughed at my amazement. “Is Hitler not dead?” their leader asked me, with the intense gaze of a hawk. They felt immensely free and strong, masters of the world and of their destiny.

By way of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, we arrived that evening, in incredible disarray, at the transit camp of Mittenwald, in the mountains on the Austrian border. There we spent the night, and it was our last cold night. The following day the train descended to Innsbruck, and here it filled up with Italian smugglers, who, in the absence of proper authorities, welcomed us on behalf of our homeland, and generously distributed chocolate, grappa, and tobacco.

In the ascent toward the Italian border the train, wearier than we were, broke in two like a rope stretched too far; several people were injured, and that was the last adventure. After dark we passed the Brenner, which we had crossed into exile twenty months before—our less tested comrades in cheerful tumult, Leonardo and I in a silence charged with memory. Of six hundred and fifty, the number who had left, three of us were returning. And what had we lost, in those twenty months? What would we find at home? How much of ourselves had been eroded, extinguished? Did we return richer or poorer, stronger or weaker? We didn't know; but we knew that on the thresholds of our homes, for good or for ill, a trial awaited us, and we anticipated it with fear. Flowing through our veins, with the weary blood, we felt the poison of Auschwitz. Where would we draw the strength to resume living, to knock down the barriers, the hedges that grow up on their own during all absences, around every abandoned house, every empty den? Soon, even tomorrow, we would have to join battle, against still unknown enemies, within and outside us. With what weapons, what energy, what will? We felt centuries old, oppressed by a year of ferocious memories, emptied and defenseless. Although the months just passed, of wandering at the edge of civilization, were harsh, they now seemed to us a truce, an interlude of unlimited openness, a providential gift of destiny, never to be repeated.

We spent the first night in Italy pondering these thoughts, which kept us from sleeping, as the train slowly descended the deserted, dark valley of the Adige. On October 17 the camp of Pescantina, near Verona, took us in, and there we were released, each to his own fate, but not until the evening of the following day did a train depart in the direction of Turin. In the frenzied confusion of thousands of refugees and veterans we saw Pista, who had already found his way: he wore the white-and-yellow armband of the Pontificia Opera di Assistenza, the Vatican relief organization, and was contributing eagerly and happily to the life of the camp. And then a figure came toward us, rising a full head above the crowd: a known face, the Moor of Verona. He came to greet us, Leonardo and me; he had reached home first of all, since Avesa, his town, was a few kilometers away. And he blessed us, the old blasphemer; he raised two enormous gnarled fingers, and blessed us with the solemn gesture of popes, wishing us a safe return and all good things. We were grateful for the good wishes, since we felt the need of them.

I reached Turin on October 19, after thirty-five days of travel; the house was standing, all the family alive, no one expected me. I was swollen, bearded, and ragged, and had difficulty in making myself recognized. I found friends full of life, the warmth of secure meals, the concreteness of daily work, the liberating joy of recounting. I found a wide, clean bed, which at night (an instant of terror) yielded softly beneath my weight. But only after many months did I lose the habit of walking with my gaze fixed on the ground, as if to look for something to eat or put in my pocket quickly and sell for bread; and a dream filled with fear has not ceased to visit me, at intervals now close, now rare.

It's a dream within another dream, varying in its details, unique in its substance. I am at the table with my family, or friends, or at work, or in a verdant countryside—in a serene, relaxed setting, in other words, apparently without tension and pain—and yet I feel a subtle, profound anguish, the definite sensation of a looming threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, little by little or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and is destroyed around me, the scene, the walls, the people, and the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Everything has now turned into chaos; I am alone at the center of a gray and murky void, and, yes, I *know* what this means, and I also know that I have always known it. I am again in the Lager, and nothing outside the Lager was true. The rest was a brief holiday, or a trick of the senses, a dream: the family, nature in flower, the house. Now this internal dream, the dream of peace, is over, and in the external dream, which continues coldly, I hear the sound of a well-known voice: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, "*Wstawać*."

Turin, December 1961–November 1962

Natural Histories

Translated by Jenny McPhee

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. . . Si ne le croyez, je ne m'en soucie, mais un homme de bien, un homme de bon sens croit tousjours ce qu'on luy dit, et qu'il trouve par escrit. Ne dit Salomon, Proverbiorum XIV*: "Innocens credit omni verbo, etc."?*

. . . De ma part, je ne trouve rien escrit es Bibles sainctes qui soit contre cela. Mais, si le vouloir de Dieu tel eust esté, diriez vous qu'il ne l'eust pu faire? Ha, pour grâce, n'embure-lucoquez jamais vos esprits de ces vaines pensées. Car je vous dis que à Dieu rien n'est impossible. Et, s'il vouloit, les femmes auroient dorenavant ainsi leurs enfants par l'oreille. Bacchus ne fut il pas engendré par la cuisse de Jupiter?

. . . Minerve nasquit elle pas du cerveau par l'oreille de Jupiter?

. . . Castor et Pollux, de la coque d'un oeuf pont et esclos par Leda?

Mais vous seriez bien davantaige esbahis et estonnés si je vous exposois presentement tout le chapitre de Pline, auquel parle des enfantements estranges et contre nature. Et toutesfois je ne suis point menteur tant asseuré comme il a esté. Lisez le septiesme de sa Naturelle Histoire, *chap. III, et ne m'en tabustez plus l'entendement.*

—RABELAIS, *GARGANTUA*, I–VI

. . . I don’t care if you believe it, but an honest man, a man of good sense, always believes what he is told, and what he finds written down. Does not Solomon say, in *Proverbs XIV*, “The simple believeth every word, etc.”?

. . . For my part I find nothing written in the Holy Bible which contradicts it. If this had been the will of God, would you say that He could not have performed it? For goodness’ sake do not obfuscate our brains with such an idle thought. For I say to you that to God nothing is impossible. If it had been His will, women would have produced their children in that way, by ear, forever afterwards. Was not Bacchus begotten by Jupiter’s thigh?

. . . Was not Minerva born from Jupiter’s brain by way of his ear?

. . . Castor and Pollux from the shell of an egg laid and hatched by Leda?

But you would be even more flabbergasted if I were now to expound for you the whole chapter of Pliny in which he speaks of strange and unnatural births; and, anyhow, I am not such a barefaced liar as he was. Read chapter Three of the seventh book of his *Natural History*, and don’t tease my brain any more on the subject.

(TRANS. J. M. COHEN)

The Mnemagogs

Dr. Morandi (but he wasn't yet used to hearing himself called "Doctor") got off the bus intending to remain incognito for at least a couple of days, but he soon realized that this would be impossible. The owner of the Café Alpino gave him a neutral welcome (evidently she was either not curious enough or not keen enough); but from her smile, a combination of deferential, maternal, and slightly mocking, he understood that he had already been identified as "the new doctor" and had no chance of a reprieve. My degree must be written all over my face, he thought; *tu es medicus in aeternum*, and, what's worse, everyone will notice. Morandi found irrevocable things distasteful and, at least for the moment, he was disposed to see the entire matter as an enormous and perpetual nuisance. "Something akin to the trauma of birth," he concluded to himself, nonsensically.

. . . In the meantime, as the first consequence of his lost anonymity, he needed to go and find Montesanto without delay. He returned to the café in order to retrieve the letter of introduction from his suitcase, and then began, under the merciless sun, to search the deserted town for the nameplate on Montesanto's door.

He had a difficult time finding it, and succeeded only after much useless circling about; he hadn't wanted to ask anyone for directions, as he thought he detected an unfriendly inquisitiveness on the faces of the few people he did encounter.

He had expected the nameplate to be old, but he found it to be older than anything he had imagined, covered in verdigris, the name almost illegible. All the shutters on the house were closed, and the lower façade

was faded and peeling. Lizards darted away rapidly and silently as he approached.

Montesanto himself came down to open the door. He was a tall, portly old man, his eyes nearsighted yet lively amid the tired and heavy features of his face. He moved with the quiet solid confidence of a bear. He was in shirtsleeves, without a collar; the shirt was wrinkled and of dubious cleanliness.

It was cold and nearly pitch-dark on the stairs and then up in his office. Montesanto sat down, and offered Morandi a particularly uncomfortable chair. Twenty-two years in here, he thought with a mental shiver, while the other man lingered over the letter of introduction. He looked around, his eyes growing accustomed to the gloom.

On the desk, letters, magazines, prescriptions, and other pieces of paper whose purpose was by now indiscernible had yellowed and accumulated to an impressive thickness. A long spider's thread, rendered visible by the dust clinging to it, hung down from the ceiling and swayed weakly in the imperceptible breath of the midday air. A glass-fronted cupboard held a few antiquated instruments and a few small bottles; the liquid inside had corroded the glass, marking the level at which the bottles had been preserved for too long. On the wall was a large and strangely familiar photograph of "Senior Medical Students, 1911." The photograph was, in fact, well-known to him: he identified the square forehead and strong chin of his father, Morandi Senior; and right next to him (ah, how difficult to recognize!) was the same man here before him, Ignazio Montesanto, thin, neat, and frightfully young, with the aura of an intellectual hero and martyr, so fashionable among senior undergraduates of the time.

When he had finished reading, Montesanto put the letter on the mass of papers on his desk, where it disappeared without a trace.

"Well," he said finally; "I am very happy that fate, fortune . . ." and he finished the sentence with an indistinct mumble followed by a long silence. The old doctor leaned his chair back on its two rear legs and turned his eyes toward the ceiling. Morandi decided to wait for the other man to continue the conversation; the silence was beginning to weigh on him when Montesanto suddenly started to speak.

He spoke at length, first with many pauses, then more rapidly; his countenance became animated, his bright eyes lively and intelligent in his weary face. Morandi, to his surprise, realized that he was feeling a definite

sympathy for the old man. This soliloquy was a grand holiday that Montesanto was permitting himself. Occasions to speak (and he clearly knew how to speak, knew its importance) must have been rare for him, brief returns to an old vitality of thought by now, perhaps, lost.

Montesanto told stories: about his brutal professional initiation on the battlefields and in the trenches of the other war; about his attempt at a university career, which embarked on with enthusiasm, endured with apathy, and abandoned amid the indifference of his colleagues, had sapped all his initiatives; about his voluntary exile as a family doctor in a remote location, in search of something too unknowable ever to find; then about his solitary daily life, as a stranger in the middle of a community of simple, carefree people, both good and evil, but for him so distant as to be unreachable. He spoke of the past's definitive dominance over the present, and of the final suffocation of his every passion, apart from his faith in the dignity of thought and in the supremacy of spiritual things.

Strange old fellow, thought Morandi: he noticed that the other man had been talking for almost an hour without once looking him in the eye. Initially, he had tried at various points in the conversation to lead Montesanto to more concrete subjects, to ask him about the sanitary conditions of the community he served, about the outdated equipment, about the availability of pharmaceutical supplies, and perhaps also about his personal arrangements; but, owing to his own timidity as well as to a more considered reticence, he hadn't succeeded.

Montesanto was now silent, his face turned to the ceiling, his stare fixed on infinity. Evidently, the soliloquy was continuing inside his head. Morandi was embarrassed: he wondered if a reply was expected of him, if so what reply, and if the doctor was aware that he was not alone in his office.

He was aware. He suddenly let his chair fall onto all four of its legs and, in an oddly strained voice, said:

"Morandi, you are very young. I know that you're a good doctor, or, rather, will become one. I believe you're also a good man. In case you are not good enough to understand what I've told you and what I'm about to tell you now, I hope that you are at least good enough not to laugh. And even if you do laugh, it won't be so bad: as you know, it's unlikely that we'll meet again. Besides, it's normal for the young to laugh at the old. Only I beg you not to forget that you are the first to learn these things about

me. I won’t flatter you by telling you that you seemed particularly worthy of my trust. I’m being honest when I say that you’re the first opportunity that has presented itself to me in many years and probably the last.”

“Go on,” Morandi said simply.

“Morandi, have you ever noticed the power certain smells have for evoking certain memories?”

The blow came unexpectedly. Morandi swallowed hard; he said that he had noticed, and had even devised a tentative theory to explain it.

The change in subject was inexplicable. He privately determined it must be some kind of “mania” that all doctors succumbed to after reaching a certain age. Like Andriani: sixty-five, rich in fame, cash, and patients, he had still managed to bury in ridicule what remained of his career over the subject of neural reflexology.

With both hands, the other man clutched the corners of the desk and stared into the void, frowning. He continued:

“I will show you something unusual. During the years I was an assistant lecturer in pharmacology, I studied in some depth the action of stimulants when absorbed through the nose. I didn’t obtain anything useful to humanity, but I did obtain one rather indirect result, as you will see.

“I dedicated much of my time later on as well to the question of olfactory sensations and their relationship to molecular structure. In my opinion, it’s a very fertile field of study, and open to researchers who don’t have a great deal of funding. Recently, I’ve had the pleasure of learning of others’ work on the subject, and I’m familiar with your electronic theories, but the only aspect of the subject that interests me anymore is another. I am in possession of something that I don’t believe anyone else in the world possesses.

“There are those who don’t care about the past, who let the dead bury the dead. There are those who, instead, are galvanized by the past, and saddened by its continual disappearance. There are still others who have the diligence to keep a diary, day after day, so that everything of theirs is saved from oblivion, and who preserve in their houses and on their persons material memories: a dedication in a book, a dried flower, a tuft of hair, photographs, old letters.

“As for myself, it horrifies me to think that even one of my memories might be erased, and I practice all of these methods myself, but I have also created another.

“No, it’s not a matter of a scientific discovery: I just took advantage of my pharmacological experience to reconstruct, with precision and in a preservable form, a certain number of sensations that mean something to me.

“I call these sensations (I repeat, don’t get the impression that I talk about them often) mnemagogs, or ‘memory evokers.’ Will you come with me?”

He got up and headed down the hall. Halfway along, he turned and added: “As you can imagine, they have to be used sparingly, if we don’t want to diminish their evocative powers; furthermore, there’s no need for me to tell you that they are inevitably personal. Strictly so. One might even say they *are* me, since I, at least in part, consist of them.”

He opened a cupboard. Inside were fifty or so small numbered bottles with ground-glass stoppers.

“Please, choose one.”

Morandi looked at him, perplexed. Hesitantly he extended a hand and selected a bottle.

“Open it and sniff. What do you smell?”

Morandi breathed in deeply many times, at first with his eyes on Montesanto, then lifting his head and tilting it as one does when searching one’s memory.

“This smells to me like a barrack.”

Montesanto sniffed the bottle himself. “Not exactly,” he responded. “Or, at least, not to me. It’s the smell of classrooms in an elementary school; in fact, of *my* classroom in *my* school. I won’t dwell on its composition. It contains unstable fatty acids and an unsaturated ketone. I understand that for you it means nothing. For me, it’s my childhood.

“I also still have the photograph of my thirty-seven first-grade classmates, but the scent in this bottle far more readily calls to mind the interminable hours of tedium spent on my spelling primer, and the particular state of mind of a child (I am that child!) who is waiting for his first spelling test. When I smell it (not now, it naturally requires a certain measure of concentration), when I smell it, my guts churn just as when I was seven years old and waiting for my turn to be examined by the teacher. Do you want to choose another?”

“I seem to remember . . . wait. . . . In my grandfather’s house in the country there was a small room where he used to put the fruit to ripen . . .”

“Very good,” Montesanto said with sincere satisfaction. “Exactly as the manuals describe it. I’m pleased that you’ve come across a professional smell: this is the smell of a diabetic’s breath in the acetonemic phase. With a few more years of practice, I’m sure you would have come to the same conclusion yourself. You know, of course, that the smell is an unfavorable sign, a prelude to coma.

“My father died of diabetes fifteen years ago. It wasn’t a quick or merciful death. My father meant a great deal to me. I sat up with him for endless nights, powerlessly witnessing the progressive obliteration of his personality. Those vigils weren’t wasted. Many of my beliefs were shaken, much of my world changed. So for me the smell is not about apples or diabetes but about that uniquely human struggle, solemn and purifying, of religious crisis.”

“But this is just phenic acid!” Morandi exclaimed, smelling a third bottle.

“So it is. I thought that this smell might mean something to you as well. But of course it’s not even a year since you stopped working shifts in a hospital, the memory hasn’t yet matured. Because you would have noticed, don’t you think? The evocative mechanism we’re discussing here requires that the stimuli, having been activated repeatedly and associated with a place or state of mind, must then be inactive for a period of time of rather long duration. Besides, it has been commonly observed that memories, in order to have an impact, must contain a flavor of the past.

“I, too, have worked in hospitals and breathed phenic acid deeply into my lungs. But this took place a quarter of a century ago and since then phenol has ceased to constitute the basis of antiseptics. But in my time that’s how it was, and so still today I can’t smell it (not the chemically pure substance but this concoction, to which I have added traces of other substances, making it specific to me) without a complex array of things coming to mind, including a popular song, my youthful enthusiasm for Blaise Pascal, a certain springtime torpor in my back and knees, and the face of a fellow student, who I recently learned has become a grandmother.”

This time he chose a bottle himself and handed it to Morandi. “I must confess that I still feel a certain pride in this one. Although I have never published the results, I consider this my true scientific achievement. I would like to hear your opinion.”

Morandi sniffed it with care. It was certainly not a new smell. He might call it burned, dry, hot . . .

“When you rub together two pieces of flint . . . ?”

“Yes, that, too. I congratulate you on your olfactory acuity. You smell this scent in the mountains when rock is heated by the sun, especially in the aftermath of a rockslide. I assure you that it wasn’t easy to reproduce these substances in a stabilized form in a test tube without altering the quality of the smell.

“I used to go to the mountains often, especially alone. When I reached the summit, I would lie down in the silent, still air and feel as if I had accomplished something significant. In those moments, and only if I thought about it, I would detect a faint smell rarely found anywhere else. As far as I’m concerned, it should be called the smell of peace achieved.”

Having overcome his initial discomfort, Morandi was now intrigued by the game. He randomly uncorked a fifth bottle and held it out to Montesanto. “And this one?”

It gave off a faint smell of clean skin, face powder, and summer. Montesanto smelled it, replaced the bottle, and said briefly: “This is not a place or a time. It’s a person.”

He closed the cupboard; his tone had been decisive. Morandi mentally prepared to make some observations expressing his interest and admiration, but he couldn’t get beyond a bizarre internal barrier and gave up on commenting aloud. He hastily took his leave with the vague promise of another visit and hurried down the stairs and out into the sun. He felt intensely embarrassed.

After five minutes he was among the pines, furiously climbing to the highest point, trampling the soft forest floor, far from any path. It was pleasant to feel his muscles, his lungs, and his heart functioning fully, naturally, without need of intervention. It was wonderful to be twenty-four years old.

He picked up his pace, climbing as fast as he could, until he felt the blood beating hard in his ears. Then he lay down on the grass with his eyes closed, contemplating the red glow made by the sun inside his eyelids. He felt newly cleansed.

That, then, was Montesanto. . . . No, he hadn’t needed to flee, he wouldn’t become like him, he wouldn’t let himself become like that. He wouldn’t tell anyone about it. Not even Lucia, or Giovanni. It wouldn’t be considerate.

Perhaps, in the end, only Giovanni . . . and in purely theoretical terms. . . . Was there anything he couldn’t discuss with Giovanni? Yes, he would write to Giovanni all about it. Tomorrow. No (he looked at the time), right away. Perhaps the letter would even go out with the evening mail. Right away.

Censorship in Bitinia

I have already mentioned elsewhere the drab cultural life of this country, which is based, to this day, on a system of patronage and entrusted to the interests of the wealthy or even just to professionals and artists, specialists and technicians, who are quite well paid.

Of particular interest is the solution that was proposed for—or, to be more precise, that spontaneously imposed itself upon—the problem of censorship. For various reasons, toward the end of the last decade there was a lively increase in the "need" for censorship in Bitinia; in just a few years, the existing central offices had to double their staff and establish local branches in almost all the provincial capitals. Difficulties were encountered, however, in recruiting the necessary personnel: first, because the work of a censor is, as is well-known, arduous and subtle, requiring specialized training that even otherwise highly qualified people lack; and, second, because, according to recent statistics, the actual practice of censorship can be dangerous.

I do not mean to allude here to the immediate risk of retaliation, which the efficient Bitinese police have reduced almost to nil. This is something different: careful medical studies conducted in the workplace have brought to light a specific type of professional hazard, irksome in nature and apparently irreversible, called by its discoverer "paroxysmal dysthymia," or Gowelius's disease. The initial clinical picture is vague and ill defined; then, as the years pass, various sensory system troubles appear (diplopia, olfactory and auditory disorders, exaggerated reactions to, for example, certain colors or flavors), which regularly develop, after remissions and relapses, into serious psychological anomalies and perversions.

Consequently, and despite offers of high wages, the number of applicants for these government jobs rapidly decreased, and the workload of the existing career functionaries increased accordingly, rising to unprecedented levels. In the censorship offices, work pending (screenplays, scores, manuscripts, illustrated works, advertising posters) accumulated to such a point that not only were the assigned storage spaces chockablock with documents but so were the lobbies, corridors, and bathrooms. One case was reported of a division manager who was buried by an avalanche of files and died of suffocation before help arrived.

At first, mechanization provided a solution. Each branch was equipped with modern electronic systems. Since I have only a basic knowledge of such things, I am unable to describe with any precision how they worked, but I was told that their magnetic memory contained three distinct lists of words—hints, plots, topics*—and frames of reference. Anything that corresponded to the first list was automatically deleted from the work under examination; anything on the second led to elimination of the entire work; anything on the third meant the immediate arrest and death by hanging of the author and the publisher.

With regard to processing the amount of work, the results were optimal (in a few days the storage spaces in the offices were cleared), but in terms of quality they proved inadequate. There were outrageous cases of oversight: *Diary of a Sparrow*, by Claire Efrem, was “approved” and published, and it sold with incredible success, and yet the book was of dubious literary merit and patently immoral, the author having used blatantly transparent techniques to disguise through allusion and paraphrase all the most offensive aspects of today’s ethics. Conversely, witness the sad case of Tuttle: Colonel Tuttle, the acclaimed critic and military historian, was forced to climb the gallows because in one of his volumes on the Caucasus campaign, owing to a simple mistake, the word “brigadier” appeared in altered form as brazier and was recognized by the office of mechanized censorship in Issarvan as an obscene reference. The author of a modest manual on animal husbandry miraculously escaped the same tragic fate because he had the means to flee abroad, whence he petitioned the Consulate before the court was able to pass sentence.

To these three episodes, which came to public attention, must be added numerous others, rumors of which spread by word of mouth but which were ignored by the officials because (as is obvious) any information about them

fell, in turn, under the censor's knife. A crisis situation erupted, resulting in a near-total defection of the country's cultural forces: a situation that, despite a few feeble attempts at reversal, persists today.

There is, however, recent news that gives rise to some hope. A physiologist, whose name is being withheld, concluded one of his in-depth studies by revealing in a much discussed paper some new facets of the psychology of domestic animals. If pets are subjected to particular conditioning, they can not only learn simple jobs involving transport and organization but also make actual decisions.

Without a doubt, this is a vast and fascinating field, offering practically unlimited possibilities: to summarize what has been published in the Bitinese press up to the time of this writing, the work of censorship, which is damaging to the human brain, and is performed in far too rigid a manner by machines, could be profitably entrusted to animals trained for the purpose. Seriously considered, this disconcerting idea is not in itself absurd; in the last analysis, it is only a matter of decisions.

Curiously, the mammals closest to humans were found to be least useful for the task. Dogs, monkeys, and horses who underwent the conditioning proved to be poor judges precisely because they were too intelligent and sensitive. According to our anonymous scholar, they act far too passionately; they respond in unpredictable ways to the slightest foreign stimuli, inevitable in every workplace; they exhibit strange preferences, perhaps congenital but still inexplicable, for certain mental categories; and their own memories are uncontrollable and excessive. In sum, they reveal in these circumstances an *esprit de finesse* that would be detrimental to the goals of censorship.

Surprising results, on the other hand, were obtained with the common barnyard chicken: this animal's success is such that, as is common knowledge, four experimental offices have already been entrusted to teams of hens, under the control and supervision, naturally, of experienced functionaries. The hens, besides being easily procured and costing little, both as an initial investment and for their subsequent maintenance, are capable of making rapid and definitive decisions. They stick scrupulously to the prescribed mental programs, and, given their cold, calm nature and their evanescent memory, they are not subject to distractions.

The general opinion around here is that in a few years the method will be extended to all the censorship offices in the country.

Approved by the censor:



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*Here and throughout *Natural Histories*, an asterisk indicates that a word or phrase is in English in the original Italian text.

The Versifier

Characters

THE POET

THE SECRETARY

MR. SIMPSON

THE VERSIFIER

GIOVANNI

PROLOGUE

A door opens and closes; enter the POET.

SECRETARY: Hello, Maestro.

POET: Hello, miss. What a beautiful day, huh? The first nice day after a month of rain. It's a shame to have to stay in the office! What's the schedule for today?

SECRETARY: There's not a lot: two convivial odes, a short poem for the young Countess Dimitròpulos's wedding, fourteen advertising ditties, and a canticle for Milan's victory last Sunday.

POET: A trifle. We'll finish it all this morning. Have you plugged in the Versifier?

SECRETARY: Yes, it's already warmed up. (*Soft drone*) We can begin right away.

POET: If it weren't for that machine. . . . And to think, you wanted nothing to do with it! Do you remember two years ago, how exhausting and nerve-racking the work was?
Drone

THE VERSIFIER

Loud fast click-clack of a typewriter can be heard in the foreground.

POET (*to himself, bored and rushed*): Oof! Here the work is never done. And how dull it is, too! Never a moment for spontaneous inspiration. Nuptial odes, advertising jingles, sacred hymns . . . nothing else, all day long. Have you finished the copies, miss?
SECRETARY (*continuing to type*): In a minute.
POET: Hurry up, for goodness' sake.
SECRETARY (*continues to type furiously for a few seconds, then pulls the sheets out of the typewriter*): Done. Just a minute, so I can read it over.
POET: Don't bother. I'll read it over myself later and make any corrections. Right now, put another piece of paper in the typewriter, two carbon copies, double-spaced. I'll dictate to you, that way we can speed things up: the funeral is the day after tomorrow and there's no time to waste. In fact, look, why don't you put the paper with the black borders directly into the typewriter, you know, the one we had printed for the death of the Archduke of Saxony. Try not to make any mistakes, that way we might avoid having to transcribe it.
SECRETARY (*does as she's told; gets up, looks in a drawer, puts the paper into the typewriter*): Ready. Go ahead and dictate.
POET (*lyrically, but still hurried*): "An elegy upon the death of the Marquis Sigmund von Ellenbogen, prematurely deceased." (*The* SECRETARY *types*) Oh, I forgot. They wanted it in *ottava rima*.
SECRETARY: In *ottava rima*?
POET (*disparagingly*): Yes, yes, rhyming octaves and everything. Change the margins. (*Pauses as he tries to find inspiration*) Hmm . . . okay. Write:

Black is the sky, dark the sun, arid the fields
Are, without you, dear Marquis Sigmund . . .

(*The* SECRETARY *types*) His name was Sigismondo, but I have to call him Sigmund, you understand, if not, goodbye rhyme. Damn these Ostrogothic names. Let's hope they'll approve. On the other hand, I have the genealogical tree, here —"Sigismundus," yes, we're in business. (*Pause*) Field, shield . . . hand me the rhyming dictionary, miss. (*Looking at the dictionary*) "Field: shield, wield, kneeled, heeled, creeled," what the devil is "creeled"?

SECRETARY (*efficient*): A part of the verb "to creel," I would think.

POET: Right; they know all the tricks. "Stealed" . . . no, too slangy. "Sealed." (*Lyrically)* "Oh, say can you sealed, by the dawn's early light"—but no, what am I doing! "Peeled." (*Pensively*)

. . . A man nearly ripe and ready to be peeled . . .

(*The* SECRETARY *strikes a few keys*) But no, wait, it was only a first try. Not even a try. It was an idiocy. How does one peel a marquis? Go on, cross it out. No, rather, change the paper. (*With sudden anger*) Enough! Throw it all out. I'm through with this dirty work. I am a poet with a degree in poetry, not a hack. I am not a dabbler, a poetaster. The marquis, the elegy, the epinicion, the ode, Sigismondo, they can all go to hell. I am not a minstrel. Here, write this: "To the heirs of von Ellenbogen, address, date, et cetera: In reference to your respectful request for a funeral ode, made on the date of et cetera, for which we sincerely thank you. Unfortunately, owing to intervening urgent business, we are obliged to decline the commission . . ."

SECRETARY (*interrupting*): I'm sorry, Maestro, but . . . you can't turn down the commission. The job confirmation and receipt of down payment are here in our files. There's also a penalty, don't you remember?

POET: Of course, the penalty. We're in trouble. Poetry! Ugh, what a prison this is. (*Pause, then brusquely decisive*) Get Mr. Simpson on the phone.

SECRETARY (*surprised and reluctant*): Simpson? The salesman for NATCA? The one who sells business machines?

POET (*brusquely*): Yes, him. There can't be any other.

SECRETARY (*dials a number on the telephone*): Mr. Simpson, please? . . . Yes, I'll wait.

POET: Tell him to come right over and to bring the Versifier brochures. No, wait, give me the phone. I want to talk to him.

SECRETARY (*in a low, reticent voice*): You want to buy that machine?

POET (*in a low voice, calmer*): Don't put on that pout, miss, and don't get the wrong idea. (*Persuasively*) You're well aware that we can't fall behind the times. We have to keep up. I don't like it, either, I assure you, but at a certain point one has to make up one's mind. As for you, don't worry, there'll always be plenty of work. Remember, three years ago, when we bought the invoicing machine?

SECRETARY (*into the phone*): Yes, miss. Is Mr. Simpson available, please? (*Pause*) Yes, it's urgent. Thank you.

POET (*continuing in a low voice*): Well, how do you feel about that now? Could you do without it? No, right? It's a business tool just like any other, like the telephone, like the cyclostyle. The human factor is and always will be indispensable to our work, but we have competitors, and so we must entrust to machines the most thankless and tiresome tasks. The mechanical tasks, in fact—

SECRETARY (*into the phone*): Is that you, Mr. Simpson? Hold on, please. (*To the* POET) It's Mr. Simpson on the phone.

POET (*into the phone*): Is that you, Simpson? Hello. Listen: you remember, right, that estimate you gave us . . . wait . . . sometime at the end of last year? . . . (*Pause*) Yes, exactly, the Versifier, the model for civilian use; you described it to me with such enthusiasm . . . would you see if we can still get our hands on it? (*Pause*) Ah, yes, I understand: but now maybe the time is ripe. (*Pause*) Great, yes, it's rather urgent. Ten minutes? You're very kind. I'll wait for you here, in the office. See you soon. (*He hangs up the phone; turns to the* SECRETARY) He's an extraordinary man, Simpson: a first-class sales rep with a rare efficiency. He's always at his customers' disposal, whatever time of day or night;

I don’t know how he does it. It’s too bad he doesn’t have much experience in our field, otherwise . . .

SECRETARY (*hesitant, becoming more and more emotional*): Maestro . . . I . . . I’ve been working with you for fifteen years . . . forgive me, but if I were you, I would never do the same . . . I’m not saying this for my sake, you know. But a poet, an artist like you . . . how can you agree to bring a machine in here . . . it can be as modern as you like, but it’s still a machine . . . how can it have your taste, your sensibility? We were doing so well, you and I, you dictating, me typing and not only typing, anyone can type, but attending to your words as if they were mine, putting them in order, cleaning up the punctuation, tense agreement (*confidentially*), even tiny errors of syntax, you know? Everyone gets distracted . . .

POET: Ah, don’t think I don’t understand what you’re saying. For me, too, this is a painful choice, and I’m not at all sure about it. There is a joy to our work, a profound happiness, unlike all other kinds of happiness, the happiness of creating, of extracting something from nothing, of watching right before our eyes, slowly or suddenly, as if by magic, the birth of something new, something alive that wasn’t there before. . . . (*Suddenly indifferent*) Take this down, miss: “as if by magic, something new, something alive that wasn’t there before, dot, dot, dot”—it’s all stuff we might be able to use.

SECRETARY (*very emotional*): Already done, Maestro. I always do it, even when you don’t tell me to. (*Crying*) I know my job. Let’s see if that other, that thing, will know how to do it as well as I do!

The doorbell rings.

POET: Come in!

MR. SIMPSON (*brisk and jovial; slight foreign accent*): Here I am: in record time, right? Here is the estimate, and here is the brochure, and here are the operating and maintenance instructions. But that’s not all; in fact, the essential item is missing. (*Theatrically*) One moment! *(He turns toward the door*) Come in, Giovanni. Push it in here. Watch the step. (*To the*

POET) Luckily we're on the ground floor! (*Sound of a wheeled cart approaching*) Here it is, for you: my own personal model. At the moment, I don't need it. We're here to work, right?

GIOVANNI: Where's an outlet?

POET: Here, behind the desk.

MR. SIMPSON (*in a single breath*): Two hundred and twenty volts, fifty cycles, right? Perfect. Here's the cable. Be careful, Giovanni: yes, over there on the rug will be fine, but it can go anywhere you want to put it; it doesn't vibrate, or overheat, and it makes no more noise than a washing machine. (*Slaps the metal side of the machine*) A big beautiful machine, and sturdy. Built without any economizing. (*To* GIOVANNI) Thanks, Giovanni, you can go now. Here are the keys, take the car and return to the office. I'll be staying here all afternoon. If anyone wants me, say to call here. (*To the* POET) With your permission, of course.

POET (*a little embarrassed*): Yes, of course. You . . . you were right to bring the device with you; I wouldn't have dared to ask you to go to so much trouble. I might have come to you. But . . . I haven't yet decided to actually make the purchase. You see, what I wanted above all was to get a solid idea of how the machine works, its performance, and also . . . to refresh my memory about the price—

MR. SIMPSON (*interrupting*): There's no obligation, no obligation, good heavens! You are not under even the smallest obligation. This is a free demonstration, in the name of friendship. We've known each other for many years, haven't we? And I haven't forgotten the help you've given us, that slogan for our first electronic calculator, the Lightning,* remember?

POET (*flattered*): Sure I do!

Our brains are not always strong
But the electron is never wrong

MR. SIMPSON: That's the one. How many years have gone by since then! You were right to charge us as much as you did: we earned ten times what it cost us. What's fair is fair. Ideas must be paid for. *(Pause: the drone of the* VERSIFIER *gets louder as the*

machine warms up) . . . There it goes, warming up. In a few minutes, when the warning light goes on, we can begin. In the meantime, if I may, I will tell you a bit about how it functions.

First of all, let's be perfectly clear: this is not a poet. If you are looking for a real mechanical poet, you'll have to wait another few months. The design is in its final stages at our headquarters in Fort Kiddiwanee, Oklahoma. It will be called the Troubadour:* a fantastic machine, a heavy-duty* mechanical poet capable of composing in all the European languages living or dead, capable of writing poetry without interruption for one thousand pages, at −100° to +200° centigrade in any climate, even underwater and in high vacuum. *(In a low voice*) It's scheduled to take part in the Apollo project: it will be the first to sing of lunar solitude.

POET: No, I don't think that's for me. It sounds too complicated, and besides I rarely travel for work. I'm almost always here in my office.

MR. SIMPSON: Sure, sure. I was only telling you for curiosity's sake. This one here, you see, is just a Versifier and, as such, has less freedom: it has less imagination, so to speak. But it's all you need for routine jobs, and actually, with just a little effort from the operator, it's capable of true wonders. Here's the tape, see? Normally, the machine speaks its compositions while simultaneously transcribing them.

POET: Like a teleprinter?

MR. SIMPSON: Exactly. But, if needed, say, in the case of an emergency, the voice aspect can be eliminated; the composition then occurs very rapidly. Here's the keyboard: it's similar to the ones found on organs and Linotype machines. Up here (*click*) you put in the subject—from three to five words are enough. These black keys are the selectors: they determine the tone, the style, and the "literary genre," as we used to say. These other keys define the metrical form. (*To the* SECRETARY) Come here, miss, it's better if you have a look, too. I believe it will be you who operates the machine, right?

SECRETARY: I'll never learn. It's too complicated.

MR. SIMPSON: Sure, all the new machines give that impression. But it's only an impression, you'll see. In a month you'll be using

it just the way you drive a car, thinking of other things, maybe even singing.

SECRETARY: I never sing while I'm working. (*The telephone rings*) Hello? Yes. (*Pause*) Yes, he's here: I'll put him on right away. (*To* MR. SIMPSON) It's for you, Mr. Simpson.

MR. SIMPSON: Thank you. (*Into the telephone*) Yes, this is he. (*Pause*) Ah, it's you, professor. (*Pause*) What? It's jamming? Overheating? Very unfortunate. It's never happened before. Have you checked the control panel? (*Pause)* Certainly, don't touch a thing, you're absolutely right: but it's a terrible shame, just now all my workmen are out on jobs. Could you possibly wait until tomorrow? (*Pause*) Oh yes, of course. (*Pause*) Sure it's under warranty, but even if it weren't. . . . (*Pause)* Listen, I happen to be nearby at the moment. I'll jump into a taxi and be there in a minute. (*Hangs up the phone. To the* POET, *nervous and hurried*) Excuse me, but I have to go.

POET: Nothing serious, I hope?

MR. SIMPSON: Oh, no, it's nothing: a calculator, child's play. But, as you know, the customer is always right. (*Sighs*) Even when he's a darn fusspot who makes you run over ten times for no reason. Listen, let's do this: I'll leave the machine here, entirely at your disposal. You have a look at the instructions, and then give it a whirl, try it out.

POET: And if I break it?

MR. SIMPSON: Don't worry about that. It's very sturdy, *foolproof*,* says the original American brochure: "Even an imbecile" (*embarrassed, realizing his gaffe*), no offense intended, you understand. There is also a lockdown device in case of a wrong operation. But you'll see, you'll see how easy it is. I'll be back in an hour or two; bye for now. (*Exits*)

Pause: distinct drone from the VERSIFIER.

POET (*mutters while reading from the brochure*): Voltage and frequency . . . yes, we've got that right. Inputting the subject . . . lockdown device . . . it's all clear. Lubrication . . . changing the tape . . . extended periods of inactivity . . . all things we can look

at later. Selectors—ah, yes, this is interesting, essential really. See, miss? There are forty of them. Here's the key for abbreviations: EP, EL (elegy, I would guess, yes, indeed, elegy), SAT, MYT, JOC (what's this JOC? Ah, yes, jocular), DID . . .

SECRETARY: DID?

POET: Didactic: very important. PORN . . . (*The* SECRETARY *jumps*) "Turning it on"—it may not appear to be the case, but it's really very simple. Even a child could use it. (*With increasing enthusiasm*) Look, all you have to do is set the "commands": there are four entries. The first is for the subject, the second is for the genre, the third is for the metrical form, the fourth (which is optional) determines the era of composition. The machine does the rest; it's marvelous!

SECRETARY (*challenging*): Why don't you try it?

POET (*hastily*): Sure, I'll try it. Here: LYR, PHIL (*two clicks*); *terza rima*, hendecasyllable (*click*); seventeenth century (*click; with every click, the drone of the machine becomes louder and changes tone*). Go!

A buzzing sound: three short signals and a long one. Discharges, jamming, then the machine begins to run in rhythmical bursts, similar to those of an electric calculator when doing division.

VERSIFIER (*very distorted metallic voice*):

Bru	bru	bru	bru	bru	bru	bru	bru	ow
>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	or
>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	ow
Bla	bla	bla	bla	bla	bla	bla	bla	or
>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	edge
>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	>>	or

Loud burst; silence, only the background drone.

SECRETARY: A fine result! It only makes rhymes; the rest you have to do yourself. What did I tell you?

POET: Well, it's only the first try. Maybe I did something wrong. Just a minute. (*Skims the brochure*) Let me have a look. Ah, here, what an idiot! I forgot the most important thing: I set everything except the subject. But I'll fix that straightaway. "Subject"—what subject should we give it? "The limits of human intelligence."

Click, buzz: three short signals and a long one.

VERSIFIER (*metallic voice, less distorted than earlier*):

Lunatic brain, what is the aim of your great show?
To what end do you expend such great labor
Consuming long hours day and night to know?
He lies, he lies, who claims this to be your saviour
The desire to ingest vast knowledge,
A nectar of sorts, but bitter to its tastor.

Loud click; silence.

POET: That's better, isn't it? Let's have a look at the tape. (*Reading*) ". . . do you expend such great labor" . . . "The desire to ingest vast knowledge" . . . Not bad, believe me: I know quite a few colleagues who couldn't do any better. Oblique, but not too much so, syntax and prosody in order, a bit affected, yes, but no more than you would find in a decent seventeenth-century poet.

SECRETARY: Please don't tell me you're trying to claim this stuff is genius.

POET: Genius, no, but marketable. More than good enough for any practical purpose.

SECRETARY: May I have a look? "Who claims this to be your saviour" . . . hmm . . . "A nectar of sorts, but bitter to its tastor." "Bitter to its tastor." Tastor. Never heard of it: that's not right. The word is "taster."

POET: It's a case of poetic license. And why shouldn't it take a little? Actually, hold on, there's a section, here it is, right on the last page. Here, listen to what it says: "License. The Versifier contains the entire official vocabulary of the language for which it was designed, and for each word it employs the accepted

definitions. When the machine is asked to compose in rhyme, or in any other binding form . . .”

SECRETARY: What does that mean, “binding form”?

POET: Well, for example, assonance, alliteration, et cetera . . . “or in any other binding form, it will automatically search among the words listed in its dictionary and will choose first the words that are best suited in terms of meaning, and around these it will construct the appropriate verses. If none of these words fit, the machine resorts to license, which means it will adjust the words available, or coin new ones. The user can determine the degree of ‘licentiousness’ of the composition by adjusting the red knob located inside the casing to the left.” Let’s see . . .

SECRETARY: Here it is, behind here, it’s a bit hidden. The dial is marked from one to ten.

POET (*continues to read*): “This” . . . This what? I lost track of where I was. Oh yes, “the degree of ‘licentiousness.’” The word sounds a bit foreign. “This is normally limited to between two and three on the dial. Turning the knob to its maximum level will result in notable poetics, but they will be useful only for special effects.” Fascinating, don’t you think?

SECRETARY: Hmm . . . one wonders where all this will lead, a poem made up entirely of poetic license!

POET: A poem made up entirely of poetic license. . . . (*With childlike curiosity*) Listen: you can think what you want, but I’d like to try this. That’s what we’re here for, right? To understand what the machine is capable of, to see how well it performs. Anyone can do well with an easy theme. Let’s see: intuition . . . fruition, suspicion; no, too easy. Incubus: omnibus, succubus. Alabaster: no, no, disaster, broadcaster, et cetera. Ah, here . . . (*to the machine with sinister amusement*) “The Toad” (*click*); *ottava rima*, octosyllabic verse (*click*); genre: DID, yes, let’s do DID.

SECRETARY: But the theme . . . well, to me, it’s a bit dry.

POET: Not as much as it might seem—Victor Hugo, for example, did very well with it. The red knob at maximum . . . there, done. Go!

Buzz: three short signals and a long one.

VERSIFIER (*shrill metallic voice; slower than usual*):

Behold the toad among the batrachian,
Ugly to look at but useful amphibian.

(*Pause, jamming, distorted voice: "amphibian, obsidian, Indian, minion, pinion, onion, bunion, runyon, grunion, union, banyan . . ." Fades while wheezing. Silence, then it starts up again with great effort*)

He hides himself far in the brackian,
Seeing him, I become pale and tremblian.
His belly and back are wart-covered in,
But he eats worms, no fibbian!

(*Pause; then, with evident relief*)

With filth he stays ridden—
How often virtue lies hidden.

SECRETARY: There—you got what you wanted. It's frankly despicable and makes me want to vomit. It's pure vilification. Are you happy now?

POET: Vilification, yes, but ingenious, incredibly interesting. Did you notice how it picked up steam again when it got to the final couplet, when it felt it was out of the woods? It was positively human. But let's return to the regular settings: limited license. Shall we try mythology? Not just for fun but to see if the machine's level of general cultural knowledge is as extensive as the brochure boasts. Which reminds me, what's taking Simpson so long? . . . Let's see . . . here: "Seven Against Thebes" (*click*); MYT (*click*); free verse (*click*); nineteenth century. Go!

Buzz: three short signals and a long one.

VERSIFIER (*cavernous voice*):

It was hard, that rock, like the hearts
Of the swarming crowd.
Never was there more strife.
and the first
to cut short the wait:
The earth thunders beneath their feet,
As the sea trembles and the sky rumbles.

POET: What do you think?
SECRETARY: A bit generic, I'd say. And what about those two blank spaces it left?
POET: Sorry, but do you know the names of the Seven against Thebes? No, right? And yet you have a degree in literature, not to mention fifteen years of work experience. Not even I know their names. It's more than normal that the machine left those two blanks. But did you notice that the two spaces are sufficient to hold two names with four syllables, or one with five and another with three, as is the case with the majority of Greek names? Would you get the *Dictionary of Mythology*, please?
SECRETARY: Here it is.
POET (*searching*): Rhadamanthus, Semele, Thisbe . . . here it is, "Thebes, Seven Against": do you want to see which two names fit? Look: "Hippomedon and Capaneus the first"; Hippomedon and Amphiaraus the first"; "Polynices and Adrastus the first"; and I could go on. The choice is ours.
SECRETARY (*unconvinced*): Right. (*Pause*) Could I ask you a favor?
POET: Sure. What is it?
SECRETARY: I'd like to give the machine a theme, too.
POET: Why, of course. Please, give it a try: actually, I'd like that very much. Here, sit here, in my place; you already know how to use it.

They switch chairs.

SECRETARY: "Open theme."

Click.

POET: Open theme? And no other information?
SECRETARY: Nope. I want to see what happens. Go!

Buzz. Three brief signals followed by a long one.

VERSIFIER (*resounding voice, like the voice-over for coming attractions at the movies*):
A girl worth taking to bed . . .

The SECRETARY *lets out a yelp, as if she had seen a mouse, and turns off the switch; loud click, the machine is quiet.*

POET (*angry*): What's wrong with you? Plug it back in immediately. Do you want to wreck the whole machine!
SECRETARY: It offended me! It was alluding to me, that . . . thing!
POET: Come on! What the hell is it making you think?
SECRETARY: There are no other women here. It's talking about me. It's rude and lecherous.
POET: Calm down, don't go hysterical on me. Let it speak. It's a machine, remember? I don't think you should be afraid of anything that comes out of a machine, at least not in these circumstances. Be reasonable now: take your hands off the switch. I thought it got off to a good start! Oh, there's a good girl.

Click; again the buzz: three brief signals and a long one.

VERSIFIER (*in the same voice as above*):

A girl worth taking to bed:
There's nothing better, it's said.
I wouldn't mind trying it, too,
For me it would be something new:
But for her, poor thing, what torture!
My frame is rock hard, that's for sure.
Bronze, cast iron, Bakelite, brass
She offers her hand and is met by things crass;
She offers her lips and is met by a grock.
She hugs me to her breast and gets quite a shock.

Click; silence.

SECRETARY (*sighs*): Poor thing!
POET: You see? Go on, admit it: even you are moved. There's a freshness, a spontaneity that . . . I'm going to buy this machine. I'm not going to miss this opportunity.
SECRETARY (*rereading the text*):

. . . Bakelite, brass

She offers her hand and is met by things crass;
She offers her lips and is met by a grock.

Yes, yes, it's amusing. It imitates well . . . it imitates human behavior quite well. ". . . and is met by a grock." What's a grock?
POET: A grock? Let me see. Okay, "grock." I don't know. Let's look it up in the dictionary: "groat: a silver coin of England"; "grog: a strong drink." No, it's definitely not here; who knows what it meant to say.

Doorbell.

SECRETARY (*goes to open the door*): Good afternoon, Mr. Simpson.
POET: Good afternoon.
MR. SIMPSON: I'm back. I wasn't gone long, was I? How are you doing with the test runs? Are you satisfied? And you, miss?
POET: I've got to admit, it's not at all bad, in fact, quite good. Actually, why don't you also have a look at this text: there's an odd word that we can't figure out the meaning of.
MR. SIMPSON: Let's see: "For me it would be something new . . ."
POET: No, further down. Here, toward the end: "and is met by a grock." It doesn't make sense; and we checked the dictionary. We're really just curious, you know: it's not a criticism.
MR. SIMPSON (*reading*): "She offers her lips and is met by a grock. She hugs me to her breast and gets quite a shock." (*With good-natured indulgence*) Oh, yes, there's a simple explanation. It's factory jargon. In every factory, as you know, a particular

jargon develops. This is jargon from the workshop where the machine was made. In the assembly room at NATCA's Italian branch, here where we work at Olgiate Comasco, they say "grock" for a metallic brush. This model was assembled and tested at Olgiate, and it could have overheard the term. Actually, now that I think about it, it didn't overhear the term—it was taught the term.

POET: Taught? Why?

MR. SIMPSON: It's a recent innovation. You see, all of our devices (as well as those sold by our competition, of course) can break down. Now, our technicians thought that the simplest solution would be to train the machines to recognize the names of all their parts, so, in the case of a breakdown, they are capable of directly requesting the replacement of the defective part. In fact, the Versifier contains two metallic brushes, two grocks, in other words, which fit tightly over the tape-holder spindles.

POET: Ingenious, really. (*Laughs*) Let's hope we don't ever need to use this particular characteristic of the machine!

MR. SIMPSON: You said, "Let's hope"? I must then deduce . . . that you . . . well, that your impressions have been favorable?

POET (*suddenly very reserved*): I haven't decided yet. Favorable and unfavorable. We can talk about it, but . . . only when I have the estimate in hand.

MR. SIMPSON: Would you like to test it some more? Is there a really difficult theme that would show you once and for all how concise and brilliant the machine is? Those are, of course, the most convincing tests.

POET: Wait, let me think. (*Pause*) For example . . . ah, yes, miss, do you remember that request . . . I believe it was from November, that request from Mr. Capurro . . .

SECRETARY: Capurro? One minute, I'll look for his file. Here it is, Cavalier Francesco Capurro, Genoa. He requested a sonnet, "Autumn in Liguria."

POET (*sternly*): Was the order ever dealt with?

SECRETARY: Yes, of course. We answered by asking for an extension.

POET: And then?

SECRETARY: And then . . . you know how it is with all the pressure once the holiday season begins. . . .
POET: Right. And this is precisely how we lose clients.
MR. SIMPSON: You see? The usefulness of the Versifier is self-evident. Think about it: twenty-eight seconds for a sonnet—the time it takes to recite it, naturally, because the time it takes to compose it is imperceptible, a couple of microseconds.
POET: So, we were saying . . . Oh yes, "Autumn in Liguria," why not?
MR. SIMPSON (*with mild sarcasm*): Mixing a little business with pleasure, right?
POET (*annoyed*): Of course not! It's a practical test: I want to put the machine in my shoes, in a concrete situation of everyday business, of the sort that occurs three or four hundred times a year.
MR. SIMPSON: Of course, of course; I was joking. All right, then: will you choose the settings?
POET: Yes, I think I've learned how to run the thing by now. "Autumn in Liguria" (*click*); hendecasyllabic sonnet (*click*); EL (*click*); year 1900 plus or minus 20. Go.

Drone: three brief signals and one long.

VERSIFIER (*a warm and inspired voice, becoming increasingly agitated and breathless*):

I like to revisit these lanes, dank and old,
the pavement now rubble, heavy the air
with autumn-ripe figs, their smell rather bold
mingled with gutter musk and some to spare.
I follow along where the worms blindly stroll
I follow along the sly cats' thoroughfare
glimpsing things known that we once did share
Of bland gestures and thoughts free of care
Of friars, and heroes, and those who would dare
And into my mind there sneaks like a prayer
Memories of those who were fleetingly there

With heretics and self-taught now in a pair
Two connections ignite into one hot flare
We seem to be blocked by rhymes made up of “air.”
And we have become like beggars so beware
Mr. Sinsone is aware of the scare
Come now with your tools and set right this affair
Change the fuses with this here serial numbair
Eightthousandsixhundredandseventeenare
And please do take care when you make the repair.

A loud drone, shattering, whistles, jamming, roaring.

POET (*yelling in order to make himself heard*): What the hell is going on?

SECRETARY (*very frightened, jumping about the room*): Help, help, it’s smoking. It’s going to catch on fire. It’s exploding! We must call an electrician. No, the firemen. Emergency services. I’m getting out of here!

MR. SIMPSON (*he, too, is nervous*): Hold on a moment. Calm down, please. Please calm yourself, miss: have a seat here on the couch, be quiet and don’t make my head spin. It’s probably nothing; in any case (*click*), here, let’s unplug it, just to be safe. (*The racket stops*) Let’s see. . . . (*He busies himself with some metal tools*) By now I understand a fair amount about how these contraptions work . . . (*busying himself*) nine times out of ten it’s some small problem easily fixed with its own tools. . . . (*Triumphant*) Here’s the problem, didn’t I tell you? It’s right here: a fuse.

POET: A fuse? After the machine’s been on for barely even half an hour? It’s not very reassuring.

MR. SIMPSON (*resentful*): That’s what fuses are for, right? The issue is really something else. The voltage stabilizer, which is indispensable, is missing. I didn’t forget it: the fact is I don’t happen to have any in stock at the moment and I didn’t want to deny you the possibility of trying out the device. They’re supposed to arrive any day. As you’ve seen for yourself, it functions just as well without it, but it’s at the mercy of spikes in

voltage, which shouldn’t occur but do, especially in this season and at this time, as you know better than I. In my opinion, however, this incident must rid you of all doubt regarding the poetic possibilities of this machine.

POET: I don’t understand. What exactly do you mean?

MR. SIMPSON (*milder*): Perhaps you missed it: didn’t you hear what it called me? “Mr. Sinsone is aware of the scare.”

POET: And so? An example of poetic license: isn’t it written in the instruction booklet about how the license mechanism functions, the degree of licentiousness, et cetera?

MR. SIMPSON: Ah, no, you see, it’s actually something quite different. It changed my name to “Sinsone” for a precise reason. I would even have to say that it corrected my name because (*proudly*) “Simpson” is etymologically connected to Samson in its Hebrew form of “Shimshòn.” Naturally, the machine couldn’t possibly know that: but in that agonizing moment, feeling the rapid increase of amperage, it felt the need for some kind of intervention, of rescue, and it established a link between ancient and modern saviours.

POET (*with profound admiration*): A poetic link!

MR. SIMPSON: Yes, and if that’s not poetry, what is?

POET: Yes . . . yes, it’s convincing, no doubt about it. (*Pause*). So . . . (*with feigned embarrassment*) dealing with questions now that are more earthly, more prosaic . . . shall we take a minute to reconsider your estimate?

MR. SIMPSON (*radiant*): Gladly. But, you see, unfortunately there’s little to reconsider. You know the Americans: there’s no bargaining with them.

POET: Two thousand dollars, isn’t that right, miss?

SECRETARY: Hmm, truthfully . . . I don’t remember, really, I don’t.

MR. SIMPSON (*laughing amiably*): You’re kidding me. Two thousand seven hundred, CIF Genoa, packing at cost, plus 12 percent for customs duty, full accessories, delivery in four months, except in cases of force majeure. Payment through issue of irrevocable letter of credit, twelve-month warranty.

POET: Any discounts for loyal customers?

MR. SIMPSON: No, truly, I can’t, believe me: it might cost me my job. I could give you a 2 percent discount by giving up half my commission. That’s all I can do for you.

POET: You drive a hard bargain. All right, today I don’t feel like arguing: take the order here and now, I better sign for it right away, before I change my mind.

Musical interval.

POET (*to the audience*): I have owned the Versifier for two years now. I can’t say it has paid for itself, but it has become indispensable to me. It has proved to be quite versatile: besides considerably lightening my load as poet, it keeps my books and does my billing, it reminds me of deadlines, and it even takes care of my correspondence. In fact, I taught it how to write in prose, and it has become quite accomplished. The text you have just heard, for example, was composed by the Versifier.

Angelic Butterfly[1]

They sat in the Jeep stiff and silent: for two months they had shared the same quarters but still weren't on the friendliest terms. That day it was the Frenchman's turn to drive. Bouncing along the broken pavement, they cruised up the Kurfürstendamm, then turned onto Glockenstrasse and, skirting a mass of rubble, continued on until they got as far as the Magdalene: here a bomb crater, full of mucky water, blocked the road; gas from a submerged pipe erupted on its surface in large slimy bubbles.

"It's farther on, at No. 26," said the Englishman. "Let's continue on foot."

The house at No. 26 appeared intact, but stood virtually alone. Rubble had been removed from the barren land surrounding it; already grass had begun to grow, and here and there were some sickly vegetable gardens.

The doorbell didn't work; they knocked, in vain, for a long time before forcing the door, which gave way with the first push. Inside, there was dust, spiderwebs, and a pervasive smell of mold. "Second floor," said the Englishman. On the second floor they found the nameplate LEEB; there were two locks, and the door was sturdy, resisting their efforts for quite a while.

When they entered, they found themselves in the dark. The Russian turned on a flashlight, then opened a window; they heard the sound of mice scattering, but they didn't see the animals. The room was empty: not a single piece of furniture. There was some rudimentary scaffolding and two large parallel poles two meters above the floor extending horizontally between the walls. The American took three photographs from different angles and made a quick sketch.

The floor was strewn with filthy rags, paper, bones, feathers, fruit peelings; using the blade of a knife, the American carefully collected samples from large reddish-brown stains and placed them in a glass tube. In one corner, a mound of unidentifiable material, white and gray, dry; it stank of ammonia and rotten eggs and was teeming with worms. "*Herrenvolk!*" said the Russian contemptuously (the language they spoke together was German). The American took a sample of this substance as well.

The Englishman picked up a bone and brought it to the window, where he examined it carefully. "What animal is it from?" the Frenchman asked. "I don't know," said the Englishman. "I've never seen one like this. It looks like something from a prehistoric bird, but this crest is only found . . . well, I would have to take a thin slice of it." A combination of revulsion, hatred, and curiosity permeated his voice.

They collected all the bones and brought them to the Jeep. A small crowd of the curious had gathered around it; a child had climbed in and was searching under the seats. When people saw the four soldiers approaching, they fled. The soldiers were able to detain only three: two old men and a young girl. They were interrogated but knew nothing. Professor Leeb? Never heard of him. Mrs. Spengler, on the ground floor? She died during the bombardments.

The soldiers got into the Jeep and started the engine. The girl, who had already turned to go, came back and asked: "Do you have any cigarettes?" They did. The girl said: "I was there when they slaughtered Professor Leeb's animals." They lifted her into the Jeep and brought her to the Four-Party Command.

"So, is the story true?" the Frenchman asked.

"Seems so," the Englishman responded.

"It'll be a heck of a lot of work for the experts," said the Frenchman, tapping the bag of bones, "but for us, too. Now we have to draft a report and there's no getting out of it. What a dirty business!"

Hilbert was livid. "Guano," he said. "What else do you want to know? Which bird it dropped from? Go to a fortune-teller, not a chemist. For four days I've been racking my brains over your foul findings. I'll be hanged if the devil himself can discover anything further. Bring me more specimens:

albatross guano, penguin guano, seagull guano, and then I'll make some comparisons and maybe, with a little luck, we might revisit the matter. I'm not a guano specialist. As far as the stains on the floor are concerned, I found hemoglobin. And if anyone asks me to identify the source, I'll end up in the brig."

"Why in the brig?" the Commissioner asked.

"In the brig, yes: because if someone asks me, I'll tell him he's an idiot, even if he's my superior. Everything's in there: blood, cement, cat piss, mouse piss, sauerkraut, beer—in other words, the quintessence of Germany."

The Colonel stood up heavily. "That's it for today," he said. "Tomorrow night you will be my guests. I've found a decent little place in the Grünewald, by the lake. We'll discuss this again then, when our nerves are a little less on edge."

The bar had been commandeered and was well supplied. On either side of the Colonel sat Hilbert and Smirnov, the biologist. The four soldiers from the Jeep were sitting on the long sides of the table; Leduc, from the military tribunal, and a journalist sat at the far ends.

"This Leeb," said the Colonel, "was a strange person. As you well know, he lived at a time when theories were popular, and if a theory coincided with prevailing attitudes, not much proof was necessary for it to find approval and acceptance, even at the highest levels. But Leeb, in his own way, was a serious scientist: he sought facts, not success.

"Now, don't expect me to explain Leeb's theories to you in any great detail, in the first place because my understanding of them goes only as far as a Colonel's capabilities; in the second because, as a member of the Presbyterian Church . . . well, I believe in the immortal soul, and care about my own."

"Listen, sir," Hilbert interrupted, his brow set obstinately, "listen. Just tell us what you know, please. You owe us that much. As of yesterday, for three months all of us have been working on this and nothing else. . . . It seems to me, you see, that the moment has come for us to know the score here, so that we might be able to work with a bit more intelligence—you understand."

"You're absolutely right and, in fact, tonight we are here precisely for that reason. But don't be surprised if I explain things in a roundabout way. And you, Smirnov, correct me if I stray too far afield.

“Here goes. In certain lakes in Mexico, a tiny salamander-like animal with an impossible name has lived undisturbed for I don’t know how many millions of years, as if time didn’t exist, yet it has recently caused some sort of crisis in the world of biology because of its ability to reproduce in the larval state. Now, from what has been explained to me, I gather this is a very serious matter, an intolerable heresy, a low blow by nature, inflicting incalculable damage on its scholars and interpreters. In other words, it’s as if a caterpillar—no, to be more precise, a female caterpillar—mated with another caterpillar, became impregnated, then laid its eggs before developing into a butterfly. And from these eggs, naturally, more caterpillars were born. Why bother, then, becoming a butterfly? Why bother becoming ‘the perfect insect’ when it can be avoided?

“In fact, the axolotl (which is, I forgot to mention, what this little monster is called) avoids it—avoids it almost always. Only one in a hundred or a thousand, perhaps a particularly long-lived one, and only a great while after having been reproduced, transforms into a different animal. Don’t make those faces, Smirnov, or you explain it. Everyone expresses himself in the best way he knows how.”

He paused. “‘Neoteny,’ that’s what this mess is called, when an animal breeds while still in the larval stage.”

Dinner was over and the hour for pipe smoking had arrived. The nine men moved onto the terrace, and the Frenchman said: “Okay, it’s all very interesting, but I don’t see the connection with . . .”

“We’re getting there. All that’s left to say about these phenomena is that, for decades now, it seems that they”—and he pointed to Smirnov—“have been able to manipulate them, to direct their behavior to a degree. If you administer a hormonal extract to the axolotl . . .”

“Thyroid extract,” Smirnov corrected reluctantly.

“Thanks, thyroid extract. If you administer a thyroid extract, the transformation will always take place. It will occur, that is, before the death of the animal. Now, this is what Leeb had got into his head: that this condition may not be as exceptional as it seems, that other animals, perhaps many, maybe all, maybe even mankind, have something in reserve, a potentiality, an ulterior capacity for development. Beyond all expectations, this capability is found in the early drafts, the bad drafts, and they can become ‘others,’ but they don’t, only because death intervenes first. So, in conclusion, we, too, are neotenic.”

“On what experimental basis?” someone asked from out of the darkness.

“None, or very little. It’s all described in the details of Leeb’s long manuscript, a very curious mixture of acute observations, rash generalizations, extravagant and obscure theories, literary and mythological digressions, polemical asides full of spite, and rampant adulation for Very Important People of the moment. It’s no surprise that it was never published. There is a chapter on the third dentition of centenarians, which also contains a curious set of case histories of bald men who grew a new crop of hair at a very advanced age. Another is concerned with the iconography of angels and devils, from Sumeri to Melozzo of Forlí, and from Cimabue to Rouault; it contains a passage that seemed important to me, in which Leeb, in his both apodictic and confused style, yet with maniacal insistence, formulated the hypothesis that . . . well, that angels are not fantastical inventions, or supernatural beings, or a poetic fantasy, but represent our future, who we will become, who we could become if we lived long enough or submitted ourselves to his manipulations.

“In fact, the next chapter, the longest of the entire work, and of which I understood very little, is entitled ‘The Physiological Basis of Metempsychosis.’ Another contains a research trial regarding human nutrition: a trial so vast that a hundred lives wouldn’t be enough to carry it out. He proposes to subject entire villages for generations to absurd alimentary regimes, with a base of fermented milk, or fish eggs, or barley sprouts, or algae mush; exogamy is to be rigorously excluded, and at the age of sixty all inhabitants would be ‘sacrificed’ (the precise word is *Opferung*), then autopsied—God forgive him if He can. As an epigraph, there is also a citation from the *Divine Comedy*, in Italian, which alludes to worms, insects that are far from perfection, and ‘angelic butterflies.’ I forgot: the text of the manuscript is preceded by a dedicatory letter addressed to, do you know whom? To Alfred Rosenberg, who wrote *The Myth of the XXth Century*, and it’s followed by an appendix in which Leeb mentions an experimental work ‘of a more modest character’ carried out by him in March 1943: a cycle of pioneering and preliminary experiments for which (with the necessary warnings about secrecy) he was provided with a communal public space. The public space he was given was situated at No. 26 Glockenstrasse.”

“My name is Gertrud Enk,” the girl said. “I am nineteen years old, and was sixteen when Professor Leeb installed his laboratory in Glockenstrasse. We lived across the street, and from our window we could see things. In September 1943, a military truck arrived: four men in uniform and four in street clothes got out. The civilians were all very thin and kept their heads lowered; there were two men and two women.

“Then several crates arrived with WAR MATÉRIEL written on them. We were very cautious and only looked when we were sure that no one would notice, because we understood that something strange was going on. For many months I didn’t learn much more. The professor only came once or twice a month; alone, or sometimes with soldiers or members of the Party. I was very curious, but my father kept saying, ‘Let it go, don’t concern yourself with what’s going on in there. We Germans, the less we know, the better.’ Then the bombings came; the house at No. 26 remained standing, but twice the blast caused the windows to shatter.

“The first time, I was able to see that the four people in the first-floor room were lying on straw mats on the floor. They were covered up, as if it were the middle of winter, though at the time it was exceptionally hot. They looked as if they were dead or sleeping, but dead was impossible since the attendant next to them was peacefully reading the newspaper and smoking a pipe; and if they had been sleeping, wouldn’t they have been awakened by the sirens sounding the all-clear?

“Instead, the second time, both the straw mats and the people were gone. There were four horizontal poles at midheight on which four beasts were perched.”

“What do you mean, four beasts?” asked the Colonel.

“Four birds: they looked like vultures, though I’ve only seen vultures in the movies. They were frightened and making a terrifying noise. They seemed to be trying to jump off the poles but they must have been chained because they never lifted their feet from where they stood. It also seemed as if they were trying to fly, but with those wings . . .”

“What were their wings like?”

“Wings, if you can call them that, since they had very few feathers. They seemed . . . they seemed more like the wings of a roast chicken, yes. I couldn’t see their heads very well because our windows were too high; but they were not very nice to look at and they made quite an impression. They

looked like the heads of mummies you see in museums. But then the attendant came in and hung up blankets so we couldn't see inside. By the next day, the windows had been repaired."

"And then?"

"And then nothing more. The bombings became increasingly frequent, two, three, a day; our house collapsed and everyone died except me and my father, but, as I said, the house at No. 26 remained standing. Only the widow Spengler died, but in the street, caught by machine-gun fire from low-flying planes.

"Then the Russians came, and the end of the war, and everyone was hungry. We built a shack for ourselves nearby, and I got on as best I could. One night we saw a lot of people talking in the street in front of No. 26. Then someone opened the door and everyone went inside, pushing and shoving. I said to my father, 'I'm going to see what's happening.' He gave me the same little speech as before, but I was hungry and I went. When I got there it was already almost over."

"What was over?"

"They had killed them, with clubs and knives, and they had already chopped them to pieces. I thought I recognized the leader as the attendant; after all, he was the one who had the keys. In fact, I remember that when it was all over he took the trouble to close the doors, who knows why, since nothing was left inside."

"What happened to the professor?" Hilbert asked.

"No one knows exactly," the Colonel answered. "According to the official version, he's dead, hanged himself when the Russians arrived. But I'm sure that's not true because men like him give up only when they fail, and, however you judge this dirty business, he had succeeded. I believe that if you searched for him, you would find him, and perhaps not too far away. I believe we haven't heard the last of Professor Leeb."

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1. The title is from Dante, Purgatory Canto X:125.

Cladonia Rapida

The recent discovery of a parasite endemic to automobiles shouldn't, strictly speaking, come as a surprise. Anyone who reflects upon life's evident and prodigious ability to adapt on our planet will find it natural that there should be a highly specialized lichen whose unique and requisite substrate is made up of the interior and exterior structures of automobiles. Obviously, a comparison can be drawn with other well-known parasites typical of human habitations, clothing, and ships.

The lichen's discovery, or rather its appearance (since it's impossible to imagine the lichen existing unobserved), has been pinpointed with remarkable precision to the years 1947–48. The event should probably be linked to the arrival of phthaloglycerin enamels, which replaced the nitrocellulose enamels used for the automotive body's final coats; it is no coincidence that radical fats and glycerol residue are present in these enamels—improperly referred to as "synthetics."

The auto lichen (bot. *Cladonia rapida*) differs from other lichens principally because of its extremely rapid growth and reproduction rate. While the well-known crusty rock lichens have a growth rate that rarely surpasses a millimeter per year, within a few months typical patches of *Cladonia rapida* measure several centimeters in diameter, especially on vehicles that have been continuously exposed to rain and kept in dank, ill-lit locations. The patches are gray-brown, furrowed, and one to three millimeters thick, and the original infectious nucleus is always clearly visible at their center. It is quite rare for the patches to appear in isolation: without drastic treatment, in just a few weeks they invade the entire body of the car, with a dissemination mechanism across distances that is still poorly

understood. It has, however, been observed that the infection is particularly intense and florid on surfaces that are basically horizontal (the roof, the hood, the fenders), and where the round patches appear to be distributed according to curiously regular patterns. This suggests a spore projection mechanism whereby implantation is favored by the substrate's horizontal position.

Infection is not restricted to the enameled parts. Patches (atypical) are sometimes also observed in places that are less exposed—on the chassis, inside the trunk, on the floor of the car and the seats. When the lichen reaches certain internal organs, various disturbances to the general mobility and functionality of the automobile are frequently seen. Premature wear and tear of the shock absorbers (reported by R. J. Coney, automobile owner, Baltimore); obstruction of brake-fluid tubes (various repair shops in France and Austria); acute and simultaneous seizure of the four cylinders (Voglino, repair-shop owner, Turin). In addition, ignition trouble, spasmodic braking, poor pickup, wobbly steering, and other irregularities have often been diagnosed by undiscerning mechanics as being caused by something else, and repaired accordingly, with dramatic results. In one case, for now isolated but worrying, a car owner was himself contaminated, and had to undergo medical treatment for a diffuse and tenacious *Cladonia* infection on the backs of his hands and on his abdomen.

From observations made at various garages and open-air parking lots, it is legitimate to conclude that the propagation of the lichen is due primarily to *de proche en proche*, and is favored by the extreme overcrowding of parking lots. As for cars infected from afar, by the wind or by means of a human "carrier," there is no reliable documentation and, furthermore, it appears to be quite rare.

At the recent automobile show in Tangier, the issue of immunity was discussed (Al Maqrizi was the speaker), and proved to be full of surprising and exciting connections. According to the speaker, no car can be considered immune; however, with regard to lichen infection, two types of receptivity exist, each manifesting clearly different symptomatologies. In the case of male cars, roundish stains, usually dark gray, and tenaciously sticky; in female cars, oblong stains running along the chassis axis, brown to hazelnut in color, not very sticky, and having a strong musky odor.

We are alluding here to that rudimentary sexual distinction that by now has existed for decades, but which continues to escape the attention of

official science. In the halls of General Motors, for example, one often speaks of “he-cars”* and “she-cars,”* and in Turin, contrary to all logical explanation, the Fiat 1100 is referred to by a masculine pronoun, whereas the Fiat 600 is referred to by a feminine pronoun. Actually, according to research carried out by Maqrizi himself, the number of “he”* individuals working on the assembly line for the Fiat 1100 have a clear majority, while among those working on the Fiat 600 many more take the form of “she.”* However, such cases are exceptional: usually the forms “he” and “she” are detected in assembly lines with no apparent regularity, apart from the statistical, which predicts that either group will have an average numbering around 50 percent. Among models of an equal nature, the “he-cars” have better pickup, tougher spring suspension, and a weaker chassis, and are more likely to break down as a result of motor or transmission problems. The “she-cars,” on the other hand, consume less fuel and lubricant, and have superior traction, but they have weak electrical systems, and are very sensitive to temperature and pressure variations. The differences, however, are quite subtle and recognizable only to expert eyes.

Now, the discovery of *Cladonia rapida* has resulted in the development of a revelatory, simple, fast, and safe technique that can be entrusted even to unskilled personnel and has in just a few years allowed for the collection of copious material of great theoretical and practical interest.

Long and serious experiments were conducted at the Paris lab, in which a large number of cars from various manufacturers were infected with the lichen. These experiments revealed that in the selection process preceding an acquisition, the sex of the car exercises an important function: “he-cars” constitute 62 percent of the cars bought by women, and 70 percent of those bought by men with homosexual tendencies. Heterosexual men’s preferences are less obvious: 52.5 percent buy “she-cars.” The choice of, and sensitivity to, the sex of the car is generally unconscious, but not always: at least a fifth of the subjects interviewed by Tarnowsky demonstrated that they were able to distinguish between “he” and “she” cars with more confidence than between male and female cats.

Finally, it is useful to recall the curious British study regarding the phenomenon of collisions, also conducted using the lichen technique. Collisions, which statistically should be homo- and heterosexual with equal frequency, turn out instead to be heterosexual in 56 percent of cases (worldwide average). That average varies considerably from country to

country: it is 55 percent in the United States, 57 percent in Italy and France, 52 percent in the United Kingdom and Holland; in Germany it decreases to 49 percent. It is clear, then, that in at least one case out of ten, the rudimentary will (or initiative) of the car overrides human will (or initiative), which is somehow debilitated or suppressed in the act of driving through city traffic. Very fittingly, in this regard, the authors of the study reminded us of the term “clinamen,” first described by the Epicureans.

The concept, of course, is not new; it was developed by Samuel Butler in a precocious and unforgettable passage of *Erewhon*, and, even apart from the sexual sphere, it occurs with significant frequency in many of life’s everyday episodes, which are banal in appearance only. And here, if he may, the writer will take the opportunity to cite a clinical case observed directly by him.

The automobile TO 26- - - -, made in 1952, suffered serious damage in a collision that took place at the intersection of Corso Valdocco and Via Giulio. The car was repaired and changed owners several times until, in 1963, it was acquired by T.M., a shop owner, who drove on Corso Valdocco four times a day, back and forth, from home to his shop. Mr. T.M., who had no idea of the car’s case history, noticed that every time the car neared the above-mentioned crossroads, it slowed down considerably and pulled to the right. The car did not demonstrate irregular conduct at any other point along the city streets. But there is no user of the roads blessed with the spirit of observation who could not easily recount dozens of similar episodes.

As anyone can see, we are dealing with fascinating topics that throughout the civilized world have aroused a keen interest in the provocative issue of what occurs when the animate and inanimate worlds converge. Belistein, in an observation made only a few days ago, was able to identify and photograph obvious traces of nerve tissue in the Opel-Kapitän’s steering linkage, a subject we intend to deal with at length in an upcoming article.



Order at a Good Price

I am always happy to see Mr. Simpson. He is not one of those regular salesmen, the kind who remind me of company lawyers. He is truly in love with the NATCA machines, has total faith in them, and is tormented by their defects and breakdowns. Their triumphs are his triumphs. Or, at least, that's how it seems, even if it isn't true—which for all practical purposes is the same thing.

Even aside from our business relationship, we could almost be called friends; however, in 1960, after he sold me the Versifier, I lost touch with him for a while. He was terribly committed to filling the demands for that highly successful model, working every day until midnight. He telephoned sometime in mid-August to ask if I was interested in a Turboconfessor, a portable unit, fast, in great demand in America and approved by Cardinal Spellman. I wasn't interested and told him so flat out.

A few months later, without warning, Mr. Simpson rang my doorbell. He was beaming and, like a wet nurse with a newborn, cradled in his arms a corrugated cardboard box. He wasted no time with pleasantries. "Here it is," he said triumphantly, "the Mimete: the copier we have always dreamed about."

"A copier?" I said, barely concealing the wave of disappointment sweeping over me. "Sorry, Simpson, but I have never dreamed of a copier. What could possibly be better than those we already have and can swear by? Take this one, for instance. Twenty lire, a few seconds per copy, and they're flawless; dry-functioning, no reacting agents, not one breakdown in two years."

Mr. Simpson was not, however, easily dissuaded. “Any machine is capable, if you will pardon me, of reproducing something two-dimensional. This machine not only reproduces that which is two-dimensional but also things that have depth”; and with a politely offended air, he added: “The Mimete is a *real* copier.” He carefully extracted from his bag two mimeographed sheets of paper, the letterhead in color, and put them on the table. “Which is the original?”

I looked them over attentively. Yes, they were very alike, but then so were two copies of the same newspaper or two positives from the same negative.

“No, take a closer look. You will see that we have deliberately chosen for our demonstration material a thicker paper, with several foreign bodies in the mix. Furthermore, before duplication, we tore this corner here on purpose. Use the magnifying glass and take your time observing. I am in no hurry. I have dedicated this afternoon to you.”

At a certain place on one copy, a blade of straw was next to a yellow speck. In the exact same position on the second copy, a blade of straw was next to a yellow speck. The two tears were identical down to the last hair distinguishable by the magnifying glass. My distrust was mutating into curiosity.

In the meantime, Mr. Simpson had pulled an entire dossier out of his bag, Smiling, he said in his pleasing foreign accent: “This is my ammunition, my stock of twins.” The dossier contained handwritten letters, randomly underlined in various colors; stamped envelopes; elaborate technical drawings; multicolored childish sketches. Mr. Simpson showed me an exact replica, front and back, of each sample.

I carefully examined his demonstration materials: in truth, there was little room for improvement. The grain of the paper, every mark, every subtlety of color, had been reproduced absolutely faithfully. I noticed that even to the touch the copies had the same unevenness as the originals: the same oiliness to the pastel lines, the same chalky dryness of the tempera background, the stamps in relief. Mr. Simpson, meanwhile, continued his convincing pitch. “This is not about perfecting a previous model. The principle on which the Mimete is based is a revolutionary discovery of extreme interest, not only practically but conceptually as well. It doesn’t

imitate, or simulate, but fully reproduces the object, creates another, identical one out of, so to speak, nothing . . .”

This gave me a start. My chemist’s gut lurched violently against the enormity of what he was saying. “Come on now! What do you mean, out of nothing?”

“You’ll have to excuse me. I let myself get carried away. Obviously, I don’t really mean out of nothing. I meant from chaos, from absolute disorder. Yes, that’s it, that’s what the Mimete does: creates order from disorder.”

He went out to the street and from the trunk of his car retrieved a small metal cylinder, similar to a liquid-gas tank. He showed me how it attached to the Mimete’s cell through a flexible tube.

“This is its feeding tank. It contains a rather complex mixture, the so-called *pabulum*, the nature of which, for the time being, has not been disclosed. As far as I could gather from the NATCA technicians during the training course at Fort Kiddiwanee, it’s likely that the *pabulum* is made up of unstable carbon compounds and other vital principal elements. It’s simple to operate: between us, I don’t know why it was necessary for them to summon all the sales agents to America from the four corners of the earth. You see? You put the object you want to reproduce in this compartment, and into this other one, which is equal in form and volume, the *pabulum* is introduced at a controlled rate. During the process of duplication, in the exact position of every single atom of the original object an analogous atom extracted from the alimentary mixture is fixed: carbon where there was carbon, nitrogen where there was nitrogen, and so on. Naturally, almost nothing was revealed to us agents about the mechanics of this reconstruction at a distance, nor did anyone explain to us how this enormous mass of information is transmitted from one cell to another. All the same, we were authorized to report that the Mimete imitates a recently discovered genetic process, and that the object ‘is related to the copy in the same manner that a seed is related to a tree.’ I trust that all of this makes some sense to you, and I beg you to excuse the secretive behavior of my firm, but you must understand, not all of the machine’s components have been patented yet.”

Against every sane business practice, I was unable to hide my admiration. This was truly a technical revolution: organic synthesis at low

temperature and pressure, order from disorder, silently, quickly, and cheaply. It was the dream of four generations of chemists.

"This wasn't easy for them, you know. From what they tell me, the forty technicians assigned specifically to the Mimete project, having already brilliantly resolved the fundamental problem of directed synthesis, didn't obtain anything for two years but mirror images, by which I mean reversed copies, which were useless. NATCA's management was ready to put the machine into production anyway, even though it would have to be operated twice for every duplication, incurring twice the expense and twice the time. The first actual direct copy happened by chance, thanks to a providential error in assembly."

"This story puzzles me," I said. "Each and every invention that comes into existence is accompanied by widely circulated anecdotes claiming the happy intervention of chance. And these, in all likelihood, were initiated by the less ingenious competition."

"Perhaps," Simpson said. "In any case, there's still a long way to go. You should know right from the start that the Mimete is not a rapid copier. To copy an object weighing around a hundred grams, at least an hour is required. There is another, rather obvious limitation: it is not possible to reproduce—or only imperfectly—objects that contain elements that are not present in the ingredients of the *pabulum.* Other, special *pabula*, more complete, have been made for particular needs, but it seems that there have been difficulties with some elements, mostly with heavy metals. For example"—and he showed me a delightful page from an illuminated manuscript—"it is still impossible to reproduce gilding, which, in fact, is missing from the copies. It is equally impossible to reproduce a coin."

At this point, I gave a second start; but now it wasn't simply my chemist's gut reacting but the gut (coexistent and inextricably connected) of a practical man. Not a coin, but a banknote? A rare stamp? Or, more favorably and more elegantly, a diamond? Perhaps the law punishes "the fabricators and dealers in fake diamonds"? Do fake diamonds exist? Who could prohibit me from placing in the Mimete a gram or two of carbon atoms so that they would be honestly reconfigured in a tetrahedral arrangement, and then selling the result? No one: not the law, and not even the conscience.

With such things, it is essential to be first, since there is no imagination more industrious than that of men eager to make a profit. So I stopped

hesitating, haggled somewhat over the price of the Mimete (which, by the way, was not excessive), obtained a 5 percent discount and payment to be made one hundred and twenty days after the end of the month, and ordered the machine.

The Mimete, together with fifty pounds of *pabulum*, was delivered to me two months later. Christmas was around the corner. My family was in the mountains and I had stayed in the city alone. I dedicated myself entirely to work and study. To begin with, I read the operating instructions carefully and repeatedly, until I had them very nearly memorized. I then took the first object that came to hand (it was a common game die) and prepared to reproduce it.

I put it in the cell, brought the machine to the prescribed temperature, opened the *pabulum*'s small calibrated valve, then settled down to wait. There was a soft buzz, and from the reproduction cell's exhaust pipe came a weak flow of gas. It had a strange odor, similar to that of dirty babies. After an hour, I opened the cell: it contained a die exactly identical to the model in shape, color, and weight. It was warm, but soon cooled to the ambient temperature. From the second I made a third, from the third a fourth, without difficulty or impediment.

I was increasingly intrigued by the inner workings of the Mimete, which Simpson had been unable (or unwilling) to explain to me with sufficient precision. Nor had the instructions provided the slightest clue. I took off the hermetically sealed cover from cell B. Using a small saw, I made a window and fitted a glass plate over it, sealed it well, and replaced the top. I put the die back into the cell yet another time, and through the glass I carefully observed what occurred in cell B during the duplication. What occurred was extremely interesting: starting at its base the die formed gradually, in very thin layers, as if it were growing out of the bottom of the cell itself. Halfway through the duplication process, half the die was perfectly formed and it was easy to distinguish the wood and all its grains. It seemed reasonable to deduce that in cell A some analytic device "explored" by lines or planes the body to be reproduced, and transmitted to cell B the instructions for the establishment of the single particles, perhaps of the same atoms, extracted from the *pabulum*.

I was satisfied with the preliminary trial. The next day, I bought a small diamond and made a reproduction, which came out perfectly. From the first two I made another two, from four another four, and so on in a geometric progression until the Mimete's cell was full. When the operation was finished, it was impossible to determine which was the original gem. In twelve hours of work I had obtained $2^{12}-1$ pieces, that is, 4095 new diamonds: the initial investment had been amply amortized, and I felt authorized to proceed with further experiments, both more and less interesting.

The following day, I duplicated without any problems a lump of sugar, a handkerchief, a train schedule, a pack of cards. The third day, I tried a hard-boiled egg: the shell came out soft and inconsistent (owing to a lack of calcium, I suppose), but the yoke and the white looked and tasted completely normal. I then obtained a satisfying replica of a pack of Nationals; a box of safety matches appeared to be perfect, but the matches wouldn't light. A black-and-white photograph rendered an extremely faded copy, owing to a lack of silver in the *pabulum*. All I could reproduce of a wristwatch was the watchband, and, ever since the attempt, the watch itself has become entirely dysfunctional, for reasons I cannot explain.

On the fourth day, I duplicated some beans and fresh peas and a tulip bulb, intending to test their germinative capabilities. I also duplicated 110 grams of cheese, a sausage, a loaf of bread, and a pear, and ate all of it for lunch without perceiving any differences with regard to their respective originals. I realized that it was also possible to reproduce liquids, as long as a container placed in cell B was of equal or larger size than the one holding the example in cell A.

The fifth day, I went up to the attic and searched around until I found a live spider. Certainly it was impossible to reproduce moving objects with any precision so I kept the spider in the cold on the balcony until it was numb. I then put it into the Mimete; after about an hour, I got an impeccable replica. I marked the original with a drop of ink, put the twins in a glass container, placed it on the radiator, and waited. After half an hour, the two spiders began to move simultaneously, and were soon fighting. They were identical in strength and ability and they fought for more than an hour without either gaining the advantage. Finally, I separated them into two distinct boxes; the next day each had spun a circular web with fourteen strands.

The sixth day, I disassembled, stone by stone, the garden wall and found a hibernating lizard. Its double, on the exterior, was normal, but when I brought it to the ambient temperature, I noticed that it moved with great difficulty. It died within a few hours, and I could confirm that its skeleton was rather weak: in particular the bones in its arms and legs were as flexible as rubber.

The seventh day, I rested. I telephoned Mr. Simpson and begged him to come over without delay. When he arrived, I told him of the experiments I had carried out (not the one with the diamonds, naturally), and with a tone and expression as seemingly relaxed as I could muster, I asked him a few questions and made a few suggestions. What was the exact status of the Mimete's patent? Was it possible to obtain from NATCA a more complete *pabulum*? One that contained, perhaps in a small quantity, all the elements necessary for life? Was there a bigger Mimete available, a 5-liter size—capable of duplicating a cat? Or a 200-liter size, capable of duplicating . . .

I saw Mr. Simpson turn pale. "Sir," he said. "I . . . I do not want to pursue this line of inquiry any further with you. I sell automatic poets, machines that calculate, take confessions, translate, and duplicate, but I believe in the immortal soul, believe myself to be in possession of one, and do not want to lose it. Nor do I want to collaborate in the creation of one . . . with the methods that you have in mind. The Mimete is what it is: an ingenious machine for copying documents, and what you are suggesting to me is, if you'll excuse me, an obscenity."

I was not prepared for such an intense reaction from the mild Mr. Simpson and I tried to persuade him to be reasonable. I showed him that the Mimete was something else, a good deal more than an office copier, and that the fact that its own creators didn't realize it could be a windfall for myself and for him. I insisted on the dual aspect of its virtues: the economic, as a creator of order, and therefore of riches, and the, let's say, Promethean, as a sophisticated new instrument for the advancement of our knowledge of vital mechanisms. In the end, I also obliquely mentioned the experiment with the diamonds.

But it was all futile. Mr. Simpson was very disturbed, and seemed incapable of understanding the significance of my words. In evident opposition to his own interests as salesman and employee, he told me these were "all fairy tales," that he did not believe anything other than the information printed in the introductory brochure, that he was not interested

either in adventures of the mind or in panning for gold, that, in any case, he wanted to be left out of the entire business. He seemed to want to add something else, but then bade me a curt goodbye and left.

It is always painful to break off with a friend: I had every intention of getting back in touch with Mr. Simpson, and was convinced that we could find common ground for an agreement, or maybe even a collaboration. Certainly I should have called him or written to him. But, as unfortunately happens in periods of intense work, I put it off day after day until, at the beginning of February, I found among my correspondence a flyer from NATCA accompanied by a terse note from the agency in Milan signed by Mr. Simpson himself: “We bring to the attention of the recipient a copy and translation of the NATCA bulletin here enclosed.”

No one can dissuade me from my conviction that it was the same Mr. Simpson who produced this missive on behalf of the company, spurred by his silly moralistic scruples. I won’t transcribe the text, as it is too long for these notes, but the essential clause went like this:

> The Mimete and all the existing and forthcoming NATCA copiers are produced and put into commercial use with the sole aim of reproducing office documents. Our sales agents are authorized to sell them only to legally established commercial businesses or industries *and not to private individuals.* In any case, the sale of these models will take place only upon the declaration of the purchaser that he will not use the machine for:
>
> reproduction of paper money, checks, bills of exchange, stamps, or any analogous object corresponding to a specific monetary value;
> reproduction of paintings, designs, engravings, sculptures, or any other works of figurative art;
> reproduction of plants, animals, *human beings*, alive or dead, or of any part of them.
>
> NATCA declines all responsibility regarding its clients’, or anyone else’s, use of the machine if not in compliance with the declarations by the undersigned.

It is my opinion that these restrictions will not have much effect on the commercial success of the Mimete, and I will not hesitate to point this out to Mr. Simpson if, as I hope, I have the opportunity of seeing him again. It is incredible how people who are notoriously shrewd sometimes act in ways contrary to their own interests.

Man’s Friend

The first observations regarding the structure of the tapeworm’s epithelial cells date back to 1905 (Serrurier). Flory, however, was the first to perceive their importance and significance, describing his findings in a lengthy memoir written in 1927 and accompanied by vivid photographs in which for the first time the so-called Flory mosaic was visible to the layman. As is well-known, the cells in question are flat, have an irregular polygonal shape, are arranged in long parallel lines, and have the distinctive characteristic of replicating themselves out of similar components at varying intervals and in numbers reaching into the hundreds. Their significance was discovered in unusual circumstances: the credit goes not to a histologist or to a zoologist but to an Orientalist.

Bernard W. Losurdo, professor of Assyrian studies at Michigan State University, chanced upon Flory’s photographs during a period of forced inactivity due, in fact, to the presence of the tiresome parasite, and was therefore inspired by a purely circumstantial interest. Thanks to his professional experience, however, certain peculiarities previously overlooked by others did not escape his notice: the rows of the mosaic are made up of a limited number of cells that varies only slightly (from about twenty-five to sixty); groups of cells exist that replicate themselves with very high frequency, almost as if this organization were obligatory; finally (and this was the key to the puzzle), the last cells of each line are arranged according to a scheme that could be defined as rhythmic.

It was undoubtedly a case of luck that the first photograph Losurdo examined revealed a particularly simple scheme: the last four cells of the first line were identical to the last four of the third; the last three of the

second line identical to the last three of the fourth and sixth; and so on, following the well-known rhyme scheme of *terza rima*. Considerable intellectual courage, however, was required to take the next step, namely, to put forward the hypothesis that the entire mosaic was not rhymed in a purely metaphorical sense, but was nothing less than a poem and conveyed a meaning.

Losurdo possessed this courage. The work of deciphering was time-consuming and painstaking, and confirmed his original intuition. The scholar's conclusions are here briefly summarized.

Approximately 15 percent of the *Taenia solium* adult specimens are carriers of a Flory mosaic. The mosaic, when it exists, is identically repeated in all the mature proglottids and is congenital. It is therefore a characteristic specific to each single specimen, comparable (the observation was made by Losurdo himself) to a human fingerprint or to the lines on a hand. It consists of a number of "verses," ranging from around ten to more than two hundred, sometimes rhyming, sometimes better defined as rhythmic prose. Despite appearances, we are not dealing with alphabetical writing or, rather (and here we can do no better than to quote Losurdo himself), "it is a form of expression both highly complex and primitive, in which in the same mosaic, and sometimes in the same verse, we find alphabetic writing intermingled with acrophony, ideography with syllabics, with no apparent regularity, as if there were an echo, abridged and confused, of the parasite's ancient knowledge of the various forms of its host's culture; almost as if the worm had also absorbed, along with the juices of the man's organism, a portion of his science."

So far, not many of the mosaics have been deciphered by Losurdo and his collaborators. Some of them are rudimentary and fragmentary, barely articulated, and Losurdo calls these "interjectionals." The most difficult to interpret, they primarily express pleasure over the quality or quantity of the food, or disgust for some less agreeable component of the chyme. Others are reduced to a brief moralistic sentence. The following, of greater complexity but of dubious educational value, is understood to be the lament of an individual in a state of suffering, who feels near expulsion:

"Goodbye, sweet repose and sweet abode: no longer sweet for me, since my time has come. A great weariness weighs on < . . . > alas, leave me as I am, forgotten in a corner, in this pleasant warmth. But here, that which was food is poison, where there was peace there is rage. Don't delay, since you

are no longer welcome. Detach the < . . . > and descend into the hostile universe.”

Some of the mosaics seem to be alluding to the reproductive process, and to the mysterious hermaphroditic love of worms:

“You I. Who can separate us since we are one flesh? You I. I am reflected by you and see myself. One and many: my every part is order and joy. One and many: light is death, darkness is immortal. Come, adjoined spouse, hold me close when the hour strikes. I come, and all my < . . . > sing to heaven.”

“I broke the <membrane?> and I dreamed of the sun and the moon. I wound myself around myself, and the heavens received me. The past is empty, virtue fleeting, progeny infinite.”

Of far greater interest, however, are a few mosaics of a manifestly more elevated level, delineating the new and thrilling frontier of emotional relationships between the parasite and the host. We will cite a few of the most important:

“Be benign toward me, oh powerful one, and remember me in your sleep. Your food is my food, your hunger is my hunger: refuse, for pity’s sake, the bitter garlic and the detestable <cinnamon?>. Everything proceeds from you: the gentle humors that give me life, and the warmth in which I dwell and praise the world. May I never lose you, oh my generous host, oh my universe. As the air you breathe and the light you bask in are for you, so are you for me. May you long live in health.”

“Speak, and I listen. Go, and I follow. Think, and I understand. Who more faithful than I? Who knows you better than I? Here I lie faithfully in your dark viscera and mock the light of day. Listen: all is in vain, except for a full stomach. All is a mystery, except for < . . .>”

“Your strength penetrates me, your joy descends into me, your fury <wrinkles?> me, your exertions mortify me, your wine exalts me. I love you, sacred man. Forgive my offenses and don’t turn me away from your kindness.”

The reason for the offense, barely mentioned above, emerges, however, with a curious insistence in some of the most advanced mosaics. It is noteworthy, Losurdo affirms, that these belong almost exclusively to individuals of a considerable size and age who have tenaciously resisted one or more expulsion therapies. We will cite the best known example, which has by now crossed over from specialized scientific literature to be

included in a recent anthology of foreign literature, evoking critical interest from a much larger audience.

". . . should I call you ungrateful, then? No, since I have gone too far and madly persuaded myself to breach the limits imposed upon us by Nature. Through hidden and wondrous ways, I joined you. For years, in religious adoration, I had drawn from your sources life and knowledge. I was not allowed to reveal myself: this our sad destiny. Revealed and noxious: from this, your justified rage, oh sir. Alas, why haven't I given up? Why have I rejected the wise inertia of my ancestors?

"But listen: just as your wrath is justified, so is my impious audacity. Who didn't know of it? Our silent words get no hearing from you, arrogant demigods. We, a population without eyes or ears, are not appreciated by you.

"And now I'll go, because you wish it. I'll go silently, as is our custom, to meet my destiny in death or in foul transfiguration. I ask but one favor: that this message of mine may reach you and be reflected upon and understood by you. By you, hypocritical man, my equal and my brother."

The text is undoubtedly remarkable, by no matter what criterion you judge it. For the sake of curiosity, we report that the author's emphatic request was in vain. Indeed, his involuntary host, an unidentified employee of the Bank of Dampier (Illinois), absolutely refused to look at it.

Some Applications of the Mimete

Gilberto is the last person in the world who should have wound up with a three-dimensional duplicator; and yet the Mimete fell into his hands right away, a month after its commercial launch, and three months before the famous injunction forbidding its construction and use, that is to say, in plenty of time for Gilberto to get himself into trouble. It fell into his hands without my being able to do anything about it: I was serving time in San Vittore for my work as a pioneer of science and far from imagining who might be carrying it on and in what way.

Gilberto is a child of the century. He is thirty-four years old, a good worker, and an old friend of mine. He doesn't drink or smoke and has only one passion: tormenting inanimate objects. He has a closet that he calls an office, and here he welds, files, saws, glues, sands. He fixes watches, refrigerators, electric razors; he builds devices that turn on the heating in the morning, photoelectric locks, small-scale models that fly, acoustic sensors to play with at the seaside. As for cars, one will last him only a few months. He takes it apart and puts it back together continuously, shines it, oils it, modifies it; he equips it with useless accessories, then gets bored and sells it. Emma, his wife (a charming girl), tolerates these manias of his with admirable patience.

I had been home from prison only a short while when the telephone rang. It was Gilberto, with his usual enthusiasm: the Mimete had been in his possession for twenty days, and for twenty days and twenty nights he had dedicated himself to it. Talking a mile a minute, he told me about all the marvelous experiments he had done so far, and about the others he had in mind; he had bought Peltier's text, *Théorie générale de l'imitation*, and the

treatise by Zechmeister and Eisenlohr, *The Mimes and Other Duplicating Devices*; he had enrolled in an accelerated course in cybernetics and electronics. The experiments he had performed sadly resembled my own, which had cost me rather dear; I tried to tell him, but it was useless. It's difficult to interrupt someone on the telephone, especially Gilberto. Finally, I brusquely cut off the conversation, left the receiver off the hook, and attended to my own affairs.

Two days later, the telephone rang again: Gilberto's voice was full of emotion, but it also had an unmistakable tone of pride.

"I need to see you immediately."

"Why? What's happened?"

"I've duplicated my wife," he answered.

He arrived two hours later, and told me about his foolish enterprise. After receiving the Mimete, he had, like all beginners, used it to perform the usual tricks (the egg, the pack of cigarettes, the book, et cetera); he then got bored with it, brought the Mimete into his workshop, and dismantled it down to the last screw. He contemplated it throughout the night, consulted the instruction manual, and concluded that to transform it from a one-liter model into a larger model would be neither impossible nor particularly difficult. He immediately had NATCA send him, under what pretext I don't know, two hundred pounds of special *pabulum*, bought sheet metal, section bars, and gaskets, and after seven days the work was finished. He had built a kind of artificial lung, rigged the Mimete's timer, accelerating it by around forty times, and had attached the two parts to each other and to the *pabulum* container. This is Gilberto, a dangerous man, a noxious little Prometheus—ingenious and irresponsible, brilliant and silly. As I said earlier, he is a child of the century. Actually, he is a symbol of our century. I always believed him capable, if circumstances permitted, of building an atomic bomb and letting it fall on Milan "to see what would happen."

• • •

As far as I could understand it, Gilberto didn't have anything specific in mind when he decided to increase the size of the duplicator, except perhaps his typical impulse to "do it himself" and make a larger duplicator with his own hands and at minimal cost, especially since he is very adept at making

the available funds in his bank account magically disappear. The detestable idea of duplicating his wife, he told me, hadn't come until later, when he saw Emma sleeping soundly. It doesn't seem to have been particularly difficult: Gilberto, who is robust and patient, slid the mattress off the bed with Emma on top and into the duplicator's compartment. Though it took him more than an hour, Emma did not wake up.

It is not at all clear to me what motivated Gilberto to make himself a second wife, thereby violating a great number of laws, both divine and human. He told me, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that he was in love with Emma, that Emma was indispensable to him, and for that reason it seemed to him a good idea to have two of her. Perhaps he told me this in good faith (and Gilberto was always in good faith) and he certainly was and is in love with Emma, in his way, childishly, idolizing her, so to speak. But I am convinced that he was driven to duplicate her for another reason entirely, from a misguided spirit of adventure, a Herostratus-like taste for the insane—precisely, "to see what would happen."

I asked him if it hadn't occurred to him to consult Emma, to ask for her consent before subjecting her to such an unusual process. He blushed to the roots of his hair: he had done worse. Emma's deep sleep had been induced; he had given her a sleeping pill.

"And now what are you going to do with your two wives?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided yet. They're both sleeping. We'll see tomorrow."

The following day we didn't see anything, or at least I didn't. After a month of enforced inactivity, I had to leave on a long trip that kept me away from Milan for two weeks. I knew already what would await me upon my return: I would have to help Gilberto get out of trouble, like the time he built a steam-run vacuum cleaner and gave it to his boss's wife.

I had barely returned home when, in fact, I received an urgent request to join a family meeting: Gilberto, me, and the two Emmas. These last two had the good taste to visibly distinguish themselves: the second, the impostor, wore a simple white ribbon in her hair, which gave her something of a nun's look. Aside from this, she was wearing Emma I's clothes with complete confidence; obviously, she was identical to the owner of the clothes in every way—face, teeth, hair, voice, accent, a faint scar on her forehead, her permanent wave, her walk, her tan from a recent vacation. I noticed, however, that she had a rather nasty cold.

Contrary to my expectations, all three seemed to be in very good moods. Gilberto appeared ridiculously proud, not so much for what he had pulled off as for the fact (for which he was in no way responsible) that the two women were getting along splendidly. I sincerely admired them both. Emma I exhibited an almost maternal solicitude in regard to her new "sister"; Emma II responded with a dignified and affectionate filial obsequiousness. Gilberto's experiment, abominable in many respects, nevertheless constituted a favorable affirmation of the Theory of Imitation: the new Emma, born at twenty-eight years old, had inherited not only the identical mortal skin of the prototype but also her entire mental patrimony. Emma II, with admirable simplicity, told me that only two or three days after her birth she'd arrived at the conclusion that she was the first, so to speak, synthetic woman in the history of the human race, or perhaps the second, if one were to consider the vaguely analogous case of Eve. She was born asleep, since the Mimete had also reproduced the soporific that ran through Emma I's veins, and she awoke "knowing" that she was Emma Perosa Gatti, born in Mantua on March 7, 1936, the only wife of the accountant Gilberto Gatti. She remembered clearly everything Emma I remembered clearly, and badly everything Emma I remembered badly. She remembered "her" honeymoon perfectly, the names of "her" schoolmates, certain childish and intimate things from a religious crisis that Emma I had experienced when she was thirteen years old, and which she had never described to a living soul. But she also vividly remembered when the Mimete had come into the house, Gilberto's enthusiasm for it, his stories about it and his trials with it, so she was not overly surprised when she was informed of the arbitrary creative act to which she owed her existence.

The fact that Emma II had caught a cold made me think that their originally identical identities were not destined to last. Even if Gilberto proved to be the most equanimous of bigamists, instituted a rigorous rotation schedule, and abstained from any indication of preference for one woman over the other (and this was an absurd hypothesis, since Gilberto was a botcher and a bungler), even in this case, sooner or later some divergence would occur. It was enough to consider that the two Emmas did not materially occupy the same portion of space: they couldn't have simultaneously passed through the same narrow doorway, or presented themselves at the same time in front of a ticket window, or sat in the same chair at the dinner table; they were therefore exposed to different events

(the head cold), to different experiences. Inevitably, they would differentiate spiritually and then physically; and once they were differentiated, would Gilberto be able to remain equidistant from them? Certainly not: and confronted by a preference, no matter how minuscule, the threesome's fragile equilibrium was doomed to fall apart.

I explained my concerns to Gilberto and tried to make him understand that we were not dealing with my usual gratuitous and pessimistic theories, that my prediction was, in fact, based solidly on common sense and almost a theorem. Furthermore, I made clear to him that his legal position was at the very least dubious, and that I had gone to prison for much less: he was married to Emma Perosa, and Emma II was also Emma Perosa, but there were undeniably still two Emma Perosas.

But Gilberto proved impervious. He was stupidly euphoric, his state of mind that of a bridegroom, and while I spoke he was visibly thinking of something else. Instead of looking at me, he was lost in contemplation of the two women, who right at the moment were fighting over a trifle, which of the two would sit in their favorite armchair. Instead of responding to my objections, he announced to me that he had a wonderful idea: the three of them would go on a trip to Spain.

"I've thought it all through. Emma I will claim to have lost her passport, have another made, and use that one. No, wait, what an idiot! I'll copy her passport myself with the Mimete, right here tonight."

He was very proud of his idea and I suspect that he chose Spain precisely because its border controls are particularly onerous.

When they returned, after two months, their sins were evidently catching up with them. Anyone would have noticed: relations among the three maintained a level of civility and formal politeness, but the tension was evident. Gilberto did not invite me to his house; he came to mine and was no longer even remotely euphoric.

He recounted all that had happened, though rather awkwardly, since Gilberto, who possesses an undeniable talent for being able to scribble the schematic drawing of a differential gear on a pack of cigarettes, is desperately inept when it comes to expressing his emotions.

The trip to Spain was both fun and exhausting. In Seville, after a day with an overambitious schedule, an argument arose amid a climate of irritation and fatigue. The argument had arisen between the two women, the topic being the only one over which their opinions could differ and, in fact,

they differed. Was Gilberto's enterprise appropriate? Was it legal? Emma II said yes; Emma I said nothing. Her silence alone was enough to tip the balance: from that moment, Gilberto's choice was made. With regard to Emma I, he felt a growing shame, a sense of guilt that increased daily; at the same time, his affection for his new wife grew, and consumed in equal measure his affection for his legitimate wife. A falling-out had not yet happened, but Gilberto could sense its imminence.

Even the moods and personalities of the women were differentiating. Emma II was becoming ever younger, attentive, responsive, and open; Emma I was retreating into a negative attitude of offended renunciation, of rejection. What to do? I advised Gilberto not to do anything rash, and promised him, as usual, that I would devote myself to his case; but, in my heart, I had already decided that I would stay far away from that melancholy mess, and could not repress a sense of sad and malicious satisfaction that my facile prophecy had indeed come to pass.

• • •

I would never have predicted that a radiant Gilberto would turn up in my office a month later. He was in top form, loquacious, loud, and had visibly gained weight. With his usual egocentricity, he came to the point straightaway. When everything was going well for Gilberto, everything was going well for the entire world. He was organically incapable of caring about his neighbor and would become, instead, offended and surprised when his neighbor did not care about Gilberto.

"Gilberto is an ace," he said. "He straightened everything out in the blink of an eye."

"I'm pleased to hear it, and I must praise you for your modesty. On the other hand, it was about time you took care of the problem."

"No, see here: you don't understand. I'm not talking about myself. I'm talking about Gilberto I. He's the ace. I must admit I do resemble him quite closely, but in this particular case I can't take much credit. I have existed only since last Sunday. Now everything has been put right again; all that's left to do is settle the status of Emma II and my Emma with the registry office. We might just have to come up with some little trick—for example, I might have to marry Emma II, and then we'll mix ourselves up again so that

we are each with the spouse of our choice. And then, naturally, I'll need to find a job. But I'm convinced that NATCA would gladly hire me to promote the Mimete, along with the other office machines."

Versamine

There are professions that destroy and professions that preserve. Among the professions that preserve best are those which, by their very nature, actually preserve something—documents, books, works of art, institutes, institutions, traditions. A common trait among librarians, museum guards, sextons, caretakers, archivists is not only that they are long-lived but that they preserve themselves for decades without noticeable change.

Jakob Dessauer, limping slightly, climbed the eight wide steps and, after a twelve-year absence, entered the lobby of the Institute. He asked for Haarhaus, Kleber, and Wincke, none of whom were still there, having either died or been transferred; the only familiar face was old Dybowski. Dybowski, no, he hadn't changed: he had the same bald head, the same deep, dense wrinkles, his chin badly shaved, his bony hands covered in multicolored spots. Even his shrunken and patched gray lab coat was the same.

"Ah, yes," he said. "When a hurricane passes through, the tallest plants fall. I'm still here. I clearly didn't bother anyone, not the Russians, not the Americans, not the others, before . . ."

Dessauer looked around him: many windowpanes were still missing, many books were gone from the shelves, the heating was poor, but the Institute was alive; students, both male and female, filled the corridors, their clothing old and threadbare, the air they breathed full of sour and singular odors very familiar to him. He asked Dybowski if he had any news of those absent; almost all of them had died in the war, at the front or in the bombardments. Even Kleber, his friend, had died, but not because of the war: Kleber, Wunderkleber, as they had called him, the miraculous Kleber.

“Yes, him. You haven’t heard what happened to him? It’s truly a strange story.”

“I’ve been away many years,” Dessauer replied.

“Of course, I wasn’t thinking,” Dybowski said, without asking questions. “Have you got half an hour? Come with me and I’ll tell you the story.”

He led Dessauer into his tiny office. The gray light of a foggy afternoon came through the window. Gusts of rain fell on the flower beds, once so well cared for, now invaded by weeds. They sat on two stools in front of a rusty and corroded laboratory scale. The air was heavy with the smell of phenol and bromine; the old man lit his pipe and from under his desk produced a brown bottle.

“We’ve never lacked for alcohol,” he said, pouring the bottle’s contents into two small-necked beakers. They drank, and then Dybowski began his story.

“You know, these are not things one can tell the first person who comes along. I’m telling you because I remember that the two of you were friends, and so you’ll understand better. After you left us, Kleber didn’t change much: he was stubborn, serious, devoted to his work, well trained, and very skilled. And he still had that thread of madness which doesn’t hurt in our line of work. He was also very shy; after you left he didn’t make other friends, but instead began to develop several small, peculiar manias, which can happen to people who live by themselves. You remember that for years he pursued a certain line of research on benzoyl derivatives; he had been excused from military service because of his eyes, as you well know. Not even later, when everyone was called up, was he asked to serve. No one ever knew why; maybe he had connections. So he continued to study his benzoyl derivatives. I don’t know, maybe they were of interest to those others, for the war. He discovered the versamines by chance.”

“What are versamines?”

“Wait, I’ll get to that later. He tried out his chemical compounds on rabbits; after trials on about forty of them, he realized that one of the rabbits was acting strangely. It refused to eat, and instead chewed on wood and bit the wires of its cage until its mouth bled. It died a few days later of an infection. Now, someone else might have paid no attention, but not Kleber: he was old school and he believed more in facts than in statistics. He administered B/41 (it was 41 percent benzoyl derivative) to three other

rabbits and obtained very similar results. And this is where I briefly enter the story."

He paused: he was waiting to be asked a question, and Dessauer obliged.

"You? How?"

Dybowski lowered his voice a little. "As you know, meat was scarce, and my wife thought it a shame to throw all the test animals into the incinerator. So every once in a while we would have a taste of one or another: several guinea pigs, a few rabbits; dogs and monkeys no, never. We chose the ones that seemed least dangerous and we happened upon precisely one of those three rabbits I told you about. But we only realized it later. You see, I like my drink. I have never been excessive, but I can't do without it. Thanks to my drinking, I realized that something was not right. I remember it as if it were yesterday: I was here with a friend of mine, called Hagen, and we had found, I don't know where, a bottle of brandy and we drank it. It was the evening after we had eaten the rabbit; the brandy had an excellent label, and yet I didn't like it, not at all. Hagen, on the other hand, found it to be excellent, so we argued about it, each of us trying to convince the other, and after one glass and then another we got a bit heated. The more I drank, the less I liked it; he kept on pushing the matter and we ended up fighting, I told him he was stubborn and stupid, and then Hagen broke the bottle over my head. You see here? I still have the scar. Even so, the blow didn't hurt me; in fact it gave me a strange, very pleasant sensation that I had never felt before. I've tried many times to describe it, but I've never found the right words: it was a bit like stretching in bed just after you've woken up, but much stronger, more intense, as if concentrated all in one place.

"I don't know how the evening ended; the next day the wound was no longer bleeding. I put a Band-Aid on it, but when I touched it I felt that same sensation again, like a tickle, but believe me, it was so pleasant that I spent the day touching the Band-Aid whenever I could without anyone seeing. Then gradually everything returned to normal. I began to like alcohol again, the wound healed, I made peace with Hagen, and I didn't think any more about it. But I thought about it again a few months later."

"What was this B/41?" Dessauer interrupted.

"I already told you, it was a benzoyl derivative. But it contained a spiro nucleus."

Dessauer lifted his eyes in amazement. “A spiro nucleus? How do you know about such things?”

Dybowski smiled a beleaguered smile.

“Forty years,” he responded patiently, “I’ve worked in this place for forty years, and you think I’ve learned absolutely nothing? Working without learning isn’t very satisfying. And then, with all the talk that went on afterward. . . . It even made it into the newspapers, didn’t you read them?”

“No, not at the time,” said Dessauer.

“Not that they explained things very well, you know how those journalists are. In any case, for a short time the entire city talked only of spiros, just as they do with the poisons. You heard about nothing else, everywhere, on the trains, in the antiaircraft shelters, even schoolchildren knew about the condensed-not-coplanar benzene nuclei, the asymmetric spiro carbon, the benzoyl in *para*, and versaminic activity. By now you’ve got the picture, right? It was Kleber himself who called them ‘versamines’: those substances which convert pain into pleasure. Benzoyl had nothing to do with it, or very little. What counted was precisely the nucleus made in that specific way, almost like the tail wings of a plane. If you go up to poor Kleber’s office on the second floor, you’ll see the three-dimensional models that he made himself, with his own hands.”

“Was there a permanent effect?”

“No; it lasted only a few days.”

“Too bad.” Dessauer let the words escape. He had been listening attentively, but just the same he wasn’t able to stop staring out the window at the fog and the rain, nor was he able to interrupt his train of thought: how he had found his city almost perfectly intact in terms of its buildings but internally devastated, disintegrating from underneath like a floating iceberg, full of a false joy in life, sensual without passion, boisterous without gaiety, skeptical, inert, lost. The capital of neurosis, new only in this, for the rest decrepit; no, rather, stopped in time, petrified, like Gomorrah. The perfect theater for the twisted tale the old man was spinning.

“Too bad? Wait until you hear the end. Don’t you understand that this was big? You must know that B/41 was only a first draft, a compound generating weak, unstable effects. Kleber understood instantly that with certain substitute groups, nothing hard to come by, one could do a lot more: a little like the business with the Hiroshima bomb, and the ones that followed. Not by chance, you see, nothing by chance; these guys believe

that they are liberating humanity from pain, the other guys think that they are giving away free energy, none of them aware that nothing is free, ever: everything has a price. Anyway, he had hit pay dirt. I worked with him and was assigned all the work with the animals, while he continued with the syntheses and developed three or four simultaneously. In April, he prepared a compound much more active than all the others, number 160, which became versamine DN, and gave it to me for the trials. The dose was small, not more than half a gram. All the animals reacted, but not to the same degree. Some showed only a few small behavioral anomalies, like those I told you about earlier, and returned to normal within a few days; but others seemed, how to put it, turned upside down, and they never returned to normal, as if for them pleasure and pain had changed places permanently. All of these died.

"Watching them was both horrible and fascinating. I remember, for example, a German shepherd that we wanted to keep alive at all costs, in spite of himself, since his only desire seemed to be to destroy himself. He gnawed at his paws and his tail with a crazed ferocity, and when he was muzzled he bit his tongue. I had to put a rubber plug in his mouth and feed him by injections: he then learned to run in his cage and crash against the bars with all the strength he had. At first, he struck himself randomly, using his head, his shoulders, but then he saw that it was better to strike the bars with his nose, and he howled with pleasure every time. I had to tie his legs, but he didn't complain, in fact, he wagged his tail quietly all day and all night, because he no longer slept. He had received only a decigram of versamine, in one dose, but he didn't get better. Kleber tried to give him a dozen or so possible antidotes (he had a theory, he said, that they should have worked through I don't know what protective synthesis), but none had any effect and the thirteenth killed him.

"Then I got hold of a mongrel, perhaps a year old, a little creature I became quite attached to. He seemed docile, so we let him free in the garden several hours a day. We had also administered a decigram to him, but in small doses, over the course of a month. He lived longer, poor thing; but he wasn't a dog anymore. He had nothing left of the dog in him: he didn't like meat anymore, he scraped up dirt and pebbles with his nails and swallowed them. He ate lettuce, straw, hay, newspaper. He was afraid of female dogs and instead courted the hens and cats; indeed, one cat took it badly and attacked his eyes and began scratching him and he let her do it,

wagging his tail while lying on his back. If I hadn't arrived in time, that cat would have scratched his eyes out. The warmer the weather became, the more trouble I had getting him to drink. He pretended to drink while I was there, but it was easy to see that he was repulsed by water; one time he sneaked into the laboratory, found a bowl of isotonic solution, and drank all of it. When, on the other hand, he was satiated with water (I fed it to him with a tube), then he would have continued drinking until he exploded.

"He howled at the sun, cried at the moon, wagged his tail for hours in front of the sterilizer and the hammer mill, and when I took him for a walk he growled at every street corner and tree. He was, in short, an anti-dog: I assure you that his behavior was disturbing enough to surprise even a half-wit. I noticed that he didn't brutalize himself like that other one, the German shepherd. I believe that, like a human, he understood: he knew that when he was thirsty he should drink, and that a dog should eat meat and not straw, but the wrongdoing and the perversion were stronger than he was. In front of me he faked it, forced himself to do the right things, not only to please me or to make sure I wouldn't get angry but also, I believe, because he knew, and continued to know, what was right. But he died just the same. He was attracted by the noise of the trams and that's how he died: he suddenly pulled the leash from my hand and ran right for a tram with his head down. A few days earlier, I had surprised him while he was licking the stove: it was on, yes, almost scorching. When he saw me, he crouched with his ears down and his tail between his legs, as if waiting to be punished.

"Pretty much the same thing happened with the guinea pigs and the mice. Actually, I don't know if you read about those rats in America all the papers were talking about: an electric stimulus was attached to the pleasure centers in the brain, the rats learned how to excite them, and then persisted in doing so until they died. Believe me, versamine was involved: it is an effect achieved with ridiculous ease and little expense. Because, and perhaps I haven't mentioned it yet, these substances cost very little, no more than a few schillings per gram, and a gram is enough to destroy a man.

"At this point in the matter, it seemed to me that there was enough for us to proceed with caution and I told Kleber as much; I was, after all, the elder and could afford to do it, even if I was less educated than he was, and

even if I had observed the entire story only from the dogs' point of view. He responded positively, of course, but then couldn't help himself and mentioned it around. Actually, he did worse: he made a contract with OPG and began to drug himself.

"As you can imagine, I was the first to realize what was going on. He made every effort to keep it hidden, but I saw right away how things were. You know what tipped me off? Two things: he quit smoking and he scratched himself. Pardon me if I speak frankly, but a spade should be called a spade. Actually, he continued to smoke in front of me, but I could easily see that he wasn't inhaling the smoke, and didn't look at it as he blew it away; and then the butts he left in his office became increasingly longer, and it was clear that he lit one, took a drag as if from habit, then immediately stubbed it out. As for scratching himself, he did it only when he believed no one was looking, or when he was distracted; but then he scratched himself ferociously, in fact like a dog, as if he wanted to flay himself. He repeatedly scratched places that were already irritated, and soon he had scars on his hands and face. I can't tell you anything about the rest of his life, because he lived alone and didn't speak with anyone, but I don't think it was a coincidence that at the time a girl who often telephoned here asking for him, and a few times waited for him outside the Institute, didn't show up anymore.

"As for the deal with OPG, it had obviously got off to a bad start. I don't believe that they did much for him: they quietly launched a rather unprofessional publicity campaign in which they presented versamine DN as a new analgesic, without mentioning any of its side effects. But something must have been leaked—leaked from inside here—and since I hadn't told anyone, it seems to me that it was clear to everyone who had talked. The next thing you knew, the new analgesic had all been bought up and the police soon found a student club here in the city where it seemed an orgy had taken place the like of which had never been seen before. News of the event appeared in the *Kurier* but without any details. I know the details, but I will spare you, since it's medieval stuff. All you need to know is that hundreds of little bags containing needles were confiscated, along with tweezers, and burners to make them red-hot. At the time, the war was just over, there was the occupation, and apparently Minister T's daughter was somehow involved in the whole mess, so everything was covered up."

"But what happened to Kleber?" Dessauer asked.

“Hold on, I’m getting to that. I wanted to tell you just one more thing, which I learned from Hagen, the one with the brandy, who was the minister of foreign affairs at the time. OPG had sold the license for versamines to the U.S. Navy for I don’t know how many millions (because this is how the world works) and the Navy used it for military purposes. In Korea, one of the landing divisions was versaminized. It was believed that the troops would exhibit some superior measure of courage and contempt for danger, but instead something terrifying happened: they certainly had more than enough contempt for danger, but it appears that they behaved in an absurd and abject manner before the enemy, and, worst of all, they all got themselves killed.

“You asked me about Kleber. It seems to me that, from what I’ve told you, you can deduce that the following years were not very happy ones for him. I kept an eye on him day after day and repeatedly tried to save him, but I never did succeed in talking to him man-to-man: he avoided me, he was ashamed. He lost weight, consumed like a man stricken with cancer. One could see that he was trying to hang on, to keep for himself only the good, that flood of pleasant, perhaps pleasurable sensations, easily induced by versamines, and free. Seemingly free, you understand, but the illusion must have been irresistible. So he forced himself to eat, even if he had lost all love of food; he couldn’t sleep anymore, but he had kept the habits of a methodical man. Every morning he arrived punctually, at exactly eight o’clock, and began to work, but it was easy to see on his face the signs of the fight he was forced to wage against the false messages that bombarded him from all his senses.

“I couldn’t tell you if he continued to take versamine out of weakness, or out of obstinacy, or if instead he had quit and the effects had become chronic; then, in the winter of ’52, which was very cold, I surprised him right here in this room: he had just taken off his sweater and was fanning himself with the newspaper when I came in. Even his speech was full of errors, sometimes he said ‘bitter’ instead of ‘sweet,’ ‘cold’ for ‘hot’; he often corrected himself in time, but I noticed his hesitation when faced with certain word choices, and he donned an expression of irritation and guilt whenever he became aware of my awareness. It was an expression that pained me: it made me think of the other one, his predecessor, the mongrel who crouched with his ears down when I surprised him doing things the wrong way around.

“How did it end? Well, if we stick to the facts reported in the newspapers, he died in a car accident here in the city on a summer night. He didn’t stop at a red light; this is what is written in the police report. I could have helped them to understand, explained to them that for a man in his condition it wouldn’t have been so easy to distinguish between red and green. But I felt it more charitable to remain quiet. I’ve told you these things because the two of you were friends. I must add that among the many things he did wrong, Kleber did do one thing right: just before he died he destroyed the entire file on versamines, along with all the specimens he could find.”

Here old Dybowski stopped talking, and Dessauer didn’t say anything, either. He thought of many things all in a jumble, and promised himself that he would untangle them later, calmly, maybe even that evening. He had an appointment, but perhaps he could change it. He then thought of something that hadn’t occurred to him for a long time, because he had suffered so much: pain is not something that should be got rid of, we mustn’t do it, because it is our guardian. Often it is a silly guardian, because with a maniacal obstinacy it is inflexible and faithful to its assignment, and it never tires, while all the other sensations get tired, worn out, especially pleasant ones. But we mustn’t suppress it or silence it, because it is one with life and it is life’s guardian. He also thought, paradoxically, that if he had that drug in his possession, he would have tried it; because if pain is the guardian of life, pleasure is its aim and prize. He thought that to prepare a little 4–4' spiro-diamine wouldn’t have been too difficult; he thought that if versamines knew how to convert into joy even the greatest and most lasting of pains, the pain of absence, of an abyss surrounding you, the pain of irreparable failure, the pain of feeling yourself done for, well then, why not?

However, through one of those associations that memory is generous with, he thought again of a Scottish moor, never seen, better imagined; a moor full of rain, lightning, and wind, and the cheerfully sinister chant of three bearded witches, experts in pain and in pleasure and in corrupting the human will:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Sleeping Beauty in the Refrigerator:
A Winter's Tale

Characters

LOTTE THÖRL

PETER THÖRL

MARIA LUTZER

ROBERT LUTZER

ILSE

BALDUR

PATRICIA

MARGARETA

Berlin, in the year 2115.

LOTTE THÖRL, *alone*.

LOTTE: . . . And so another year has passed, once again it's December 19, and we're waiting for our guests to arrive for the same old party. *(Sounds of dishes and of furniture being moved*) I don't particularly love guests, myself. My husband even used to call me the Great Bear. Not anymore; he has changed quite a bit over the past few years and has become serious and boring. The Little Bear would be our daughter, Margareta: poor thing! She's

only four years old. *(Footsteps; noises as above*) It's not that I'm shy and unsociable: it's just that it annoys me to find myself at a reception with more than five or six people. The situation inevitably deteriorates into pandemonium, with pointless arguments, and I'm left with the pathetic impression that no one has even noticed I'm there, except when I pass around trays of food.

On the other hand, we Thörls don't have people over very often: two or three times a year, and we rarely accept invitations. It's natural; no one can offer their guests what we can offer ours. Some have beautiful old paintings, Renoir, Picasso, Caravaggio; others have a trained orangutan, or a live dog or cat; some have a bar with all the latest intoxicants, but we have Patricia. . . . (*Sigh*) Patricia!

(*Doorbell*) The first guests have arrived. (*Knocking on a door*) Come, Peter, they're here.

Enter PETER THÖRL; MARIA *and* ROBERT LUTZER

They all exchange greetings and pleasantries.

ROBERT: Good evening, Lotte; good evening, Peter. Terrible weather, isn't it? How many months has it been since we've seen the sun?

PETER: And how many months has it been since we've seen you?

LOTTE: Oh, Maria! You look younger than ever. And what a beautiful fur coat. A gift from the husband?

ROBERT: They're not such a rarity anymore. It's silver marten: apparently the Russians imported great quantities; they can be found in the eastern sector at very reasonable prices. On the black market, of course; it's rationed merchandise.

PETER: I admire and envy you, Robert. I know very few Berliners who don't complain of the situation, but I don't know anyone who breezes through it with your confidence. I'm increasingly convinced that true, passionate love of money is a virtue that isn't learned but inherited by blood.

MARIA: So many flowers! Lotte, what a marvelous birthday perfume I smell. Happy birthday, Lotte!

LOTTE (*to both husbands*): Maria is incorrigible. But you may rest assured, Robert, that marriage is not what has made her so delightfully empty-headed. She was already like this at school: we called her “the forgetful girl of the Colony,” and invited friends of both sexes from other classes to watch her take her oral exams. (*With mock severity*) Mrs. Lutzer, attention, please. Is this any way to prepare your history lesson? Today is not my birthday: today is December 19. It’s Patricia’s birthday.

MARIA: Oh, forgive me, dear. I really do have the memory of a chicken. So tonight will be the defrosting? How wonderful!

PETER: Of course, as it is every year. We’re still waiting for Ilse and Baldur to arrive. (*Doorbell*) Here they are, late as usual.

LOTTE: Show a little understanding, Peter! Have you ever seen an engaged couple arrive on time?

ILSE *and* BALDUR *enter. Greetings and pleasantries as above*.

PETER: Good evening, Ilse; good evening, Baldur. Blessed are those who catch a glimpse of you two; you’re so lost in each other that your old friends no longer exist.

BALDUR: You’ll have to forgive us. We’re drowning in bureaucracy: my doctorate, the papers for city hall, the permit for Ilse, and the Party approval. The stamp from the mayor has already arrived, but we’re still waiting for the one from Washington, the one from Moscow, and mainly the one from Peking, which is the most difficult to obtain. It’s enough to drive one mad. It’s been centuries since we’ve seen a living soul: we’ve become savages, ashamed to show ourselves in public.

ILSE: We’re late, aren’t we? We really are rude. But why didn’t you begin without us?

PETER: We would never do such a thing. The moment of reawakening is the most interesting. She’s so charming when she opens her eyes!

ROBERT: Come on, Peter, we’d better begin, otherwise it will be very late by the time we finish. Go get the manual so that what

happened before, the first time, I believe, doesn't happen again (how many years ago?), when you made a wrong maneuver and nearly caused a disaster.

PETER (*hurt*): I have the manual here in my pocket, but by now I know what to do by heart. Shall we move? (*Sounds of chairs moving and footsteps; comments; impatient whispers*) . . . *One*: disconnect the nitrogen circuit and the inert-gas circuit. (*Carries out instructions*: *squeak, muffled whisper, twice*) *Two*: turn on the pump, the Wroblewski sterilizer, and the micro filter. (*Sound of the pump, like a distant motorcycle; a few seconds pass.*) *Three*: open the oxygen circuit (*a whistling sound begins, becoming increasingly piercing*) and slowly unscrew the valve until the gauge reaches 21 percent . . .

ROBERT (*interrupting*): No, Peter, not 21, 24 percent; in the manual it says 24 percent. If I were you I'd wear glasses. Don't be offended, after all we're the same age, but I would wear glasses, at least on certain occasions.

PETER (*moodily*): Yes, you're right, 24 percent. But it's the same, 21 or 24: I've seen it before. *Four*: gradually move the thermostat, raising the temperature approximately two degrees per minute (*the sound of a metronome ticking*). Silence now, please. Or at least don't speak too loudly.

ILSE (*whispering*): Does she suffer during the defrosting?

PETER *(as above*): No, not usually. But one has to do things carefully and follow the instructions to the letter. Also, during her stay in the refrigerator, it's essential that the temperature be maintained at a constant and within very strict parameters.

ROBERT: Of course. All it takes is a few degrees lower and goodbye, because I read that if something or other coagulates in their central nervous system, then they don't ever revive, or they revive as idiots and with no memory; a few degrees too high, and they will regain consciousness and suffer hideously. Think what a horror that would be, young lady: to feel yourself entirely frozen, hands, feet, blood, heart, brain, and not be able to move a finger, or bat an eyelid, or make a sound to ask for help!

ILSE: Terrible. It takes a lot of courage and great faith. Faith in the thermostat, I mean. As for myself, I'm crazy for winter sports, but

I'll tell you the truth, I wouldn't change places with Patricia for all the gold in the world. They told me that in her time, when the whole thing started, she would have been dead already if they hadn't given her those injections of . . . what? . . . antifreeze. Yes, yes, that's it, the stuff you put into your car radiator in the winter. I suppose it's logical; otherwise, the blood would freeze. Isn't that right, Mr. Thörl?

PETER (*evasively*): Many say so . . .

ILSE *(pensively*): It doesn't surprise me that so few have done it. I must say, it doesn't surprise me at all. They tell me she's beautiful: is it true?

ROBERT: Magnificent. I saw her last year right up close: a complexion you just don't see anymore today. You can tell that, in spite of everything, the diet of the twentieth century was for the most part still natural, and must have contained some vital element that escapes us, not that I distrust chemists; I actually respect and esteem them. But look, I think they're a little . . . I'd say . . . presumptuous, yes, presumptuous. In my opinion, there must be something we have yet to discover, perhaps something secondary.

LOTTE (*reluctantly*): Yes, she certainly is lovely. Of course, it's also the beauty of her youth. She has the skin of a newborn. I, however, think it must be an effect of the super-freezing. The color isn't natural, it's too pink and too white, it's like . . . yes, it's like ice cream, if you'll excuse the comparison. Even her hair is too blond. To tell the truth, she actually gives me the impression of being a little drained, *faisandée*. . . . Anyway she is beautiful, no one can deny it. She's also very sophisticated, educated, intelligent, bold, superlative in every way, and she scares me, makes me uncomfortable, and gives me a complex (*she has let herself run on; she stops talking, embarrassed, then, with an effort*) . . . but I love her very much all the same. Especially when she's frozen.

Silence. The metronome continues to tick.

ILSE (*whispering*): Can we look through the fridge peephole?

PETER (*as above*): Certainly, but don't make any noise. We're already at ten below and a sudden emotion could be damaging to her.

ILSE (*as above*): Ah! She's enchanting! She seems fake . . . And she is . . . I mean, is she really from that era?

BALDUR (*as above, aside*): Don't ask such stupid questions!

ILSE (*as above, aside*): It's not a stupid question. I wanted to know how old she is. She seems so young and yet they say she's . . . ancient.

PETER (*who has heard the exchange*): I will explain, young lady. Patricia is a hundred and sixty-three years old, twenty-three of which were spent normally, and a hundred and forty in hibernation. But I'm sorry, Ilse and Baldur, I thought you already knew the story. And you must pardon me as well, Maria and Robert, if I'm repeating things you already know. I will briefly try to bring these dear young people up to date. So, you need to know that the hibernation technology was put into use toward the middle of the twentieth century, primarily for clinical and surgical purposes. It wasn't until 1970 that a freezing procedure was invented that was truly innocuous and painless, and therefore suitable for the long-term preservation of superior organisms. A dream thus became reality: it seemed possible to "ship" a man into the future. But how far into the future? Were there limits? And at what cost?

In order to institute some rules regarding its use by those in the future, meaning us, a public announcement was made in 1975, here in Berlin, of a competition for volunteers.

BALDUR: And Patricia was one of these?

PETER: Precisely. From what we can tell from her personal record book, which stays in the fridge with her, she was in fact the first to be chosen. She had all the requirements: heart, lungs, kidneys, etc., in perfect condition; the nervous system of an astronaut; an imperturbable and determined character, a limited emotionality, and, finally, a high level of culture and intelligence. Not that culture and intelligence were indispensable in order to withstand hibernation, but, all things being equal, subjects with a high level of intelligence were preferable for obvious reasons of prestige,

with regard to both our own population and the population in the future.

BALDUR: So Patricia has been sleeping from 1975 until today?

PETER: Yes, with brief interruptions. The program was agreed upon by her and the commission, whose president was Hugo Thörl, my renowned ancestor . . .

ILSE: He's the famous one, right, the one we study in school?

PETER: That's the one, young lady, the discoverer of the fourth law of thermodynamics. The program included a provision for a revival of a few hours every year on December 19, her birthday . . .

ILSE: What a nice thought!

PETER: . . . There have been other occasional revivals, owing to special circumstances, such as important planetary expeditions, famous crimes and trials, marriages of royals or screen idols, international baseball games, earthquakes, and the like: everything, that is, which should be seen and reported to the distant future. In addition, of course, every time there is a power outage . . . and twice a year for medical checkups. From what her record book shows, the total number of awake days she's had since 1975 until today has been approximately three hundred.

BALDUR: . . . And, if you'll pardon the question, why is Patricia a guest in your house? Has she been for a long time?

PETER (*embarrassed*): Patricia is . . . Patricia was, so to speak, part of our family's estate. It's a long story and somewhat complicated. These things, you know, belong to the past, a century and a half has gone by . . . it could be considered a miracle, with all the uprisings, blockades, occupations, repressions, and sacks that have taken place in Berlin, that Patricia could have been handed down from father to son, undisturbed, without ever leaving our house. She represents, in a way, family continuity. She is . . . she's a symbol, that's it.

BALDUR: . . . But how did . . .

PETER: . . . How did Patricia come to be part of our family? Well, strange as it may seem, on this point nothing official has been found and nothing survives except a verbal account that has been passed down but which Patricia refuses to confirm or deny. It

seems that at the beginning of the experiment Patricia was housed at the University, more specifically in the refrigeration cell of the Institute of Anatomy, and around the year 2000 there was a violent dispute with the academic faculty. It was said that she did not like the situation, because she had no privacy, and because she didn't want to be rubbing elbows with cadavers heading for dissection. It seems that during one of her revivals she formally declared that either they find her a situation in which she could have a private fridge or she would take legal action. And this is when my ancestor, the one I mentioned earlier, who was dean of the faculty at the time, generously offered to be her host, in order to resolve the problem.

ILSE: What a strange woman! Pardon me, but hasn't she had enough? Who's making her do this? It can't be much fun to be in hibernation for the entire year, waking up for only one or two days, and not at your choosing but when someone else wants you to. I would die of boredom.

PETER: You're wrong, Ilse. Actually, there's never been an existence more intense than Patricia's. Her life is condensed: it contains only the essential, it contains nothing that isn't worth being lived. As for the time spent in the fridge, it passes for us, but not for her. You see no signs of it in her, not in her memory or in her tissue. She doesn't grow old. She ages only during the hours she is awake. In one hundred and forty years, from her first birthday in the fridge, which was her twenty-fourth, to today, she has hardly aged a year. For her, from last year to this, only thirty hours have passed.

BALDUR: Three or four on her birthday, and then?

PETER: And then, let's see . . . (*mentally calculating*) another six or seven at the dentist, going out with Lotte to buy a pair of shoes, trying on a dress . . .

ILSE: Quite so. She must also keep up with the fashions.

PETER: . . . and that makes ten. Six hours for the opening night of *Tristan* at the Opera, and we're at sixteen. Another six for the two health checkups.

ILSE: Why, was she ill? It's understandable. Such fluctuations in temperature aren't good for anyone. And they say we can get used

to anything!

PETER: No, no, her health is very good. It's the physiologists from the Research Center: regular as the tax man, they show up twice a year with all their equipment, defrost her, and examine her thoroughly, X rays, psychological tests, electrocardiograms, blood tests. . . . Then they leave, and what's been seen has been seen. Professional secret: not a word escapes them.

BALDUR: So then it's not out of scientific interest that you keep her in your house?

PETER (*embarrassed*): No . . . not entirely. You know, I'm in a totally different line of work. . . . I take no part in the academic world; the fact is that we've become very attached to Patricia. And she has become attached to us: like a daughter. She wouldn't leave us for anything.

BALDUR: But then why are her waking periods so rare and so brief?

PETER: This is straightforward. Patricia is supposed to make it as far into future centuries as possible in the fullness of her youth, so she has to be economical. But you will be able to hear these things from her and more besides. In fact, we're at 35 degrees and she's opening her eyes. Now, dear, open the door and cut off her casing. She's beginning to breathe.

Click and squeak of the door; the sound of scissors or a paper cutter.

BALDUR: What casing?

PETER: A hermetically sealed, very close-fitting polyethylene casing. It reduces evaporation losses.

The metronome, which has been heard as a background noise during all the pauses, ticks ever more loudly, then suddenly stops. A buzzer goes off three times, very distinctly. Complete silence for a few seconds.

MARGARETA (*from the other room*): Mom! Is Aunt Patricia already awake? What did she bring me this year?

LOTTE: What do you think she brought you? The same piece of ice! Anyhow it's her birthday, not yours. Now be quiet. Go to sleep, it's late.

Silence once again. A sigh is heard, a rather loud yawn, a sneeze. Then, without any transition, PATRICIA *begins to speak.*

PATRICIA (*in an affected, drawling, nasal voice*): Good evening. Good day. What time is it? How many people there are! What day is today? What year?
PETER: It's December 19, 2115. Don't you remember? It's your birthday! Happy birthday, Patricia!
EVERYONE: Happy birthday, Patricia!

Many voices at once. Sentence fragments are heard:

—How pretty she is!
—Miss, pardon me, I would like to ask you a few questions . . .
—Later, later! She must be so tired!
—Do you dream while you're in the fridge? What do you dream of?
—I would like to ask your opinion about . . .

ILSE: I wonder if she met Napoleon or Hitler?
BALDUR: Come on, what are you saying, they were two centuries earlier!
LOTTE (*interrupting decisively*): Pardon me, please. Let me through. Someone needs to think of the practical things. Patricia might need something, (*to* PATRICIA) a cup of hot tea? Or maybe you'd like something more nutritious? A small steak? Would you like to change, freshen up a bit?
PATRICIA: Tea, thanks. How sweet you are, Lotte! No, I don't need anything else, for now. As you know, the defrosting always leaves my stomach a little upset; as for the steak, let's see about that later. But small, you know. . . . Oh, Peter! How are you? How is your sciatica? What's new? Has the summit conference finished? Has the weather started to get cold? Oh, I hate winter. I'm so susceptible to colds. . . . And you, Lotte? I see you're in the best of health, maybe you've even gained a little weight . . .

MARIA: . . . Ah, yes, the years pass for everyone . . .

BALDUR: They pass for *almost* everyone. Excuse me, Peter, I've heard so much about Patricia, I've waited so long for this meeting, that now I'd like . . . (*To* PATRICIA) Miss, pardon me for being so bold, but I know your time is limited, I would like you to describe our world as seen from your eyes, I'd like you to tell me about your past, about your century, to which we owe so much, about your intentions for the future, how . . .

PATRICIA (*having had enough*): It's nothing extraordinary, you know, one gets used to it right away. Take, for example, Mr. Thörl here, fiftyish (*maliciously*), his hairline receding, the start of a potbelly, a few aches and pains now and again? And yet two months ago for me, he was twenty years old, he wrote poetry, and was about to go off as a volunteer to join the Uhlans. Three months ago he was ten years old, called me Aunt Patricia, cried when they froze me, and wanted to come into the fridge with me. Isn't it true, darling? Oh, a thousand pardons.

And five months ago he was not only not born yet but not even a distant thought; there was his father, the colonel, but I'm talking about when he was only a lieutenant, in the Fourth Mercenary Legion, and at every defrosting he had one more stripe and a bit less hair. He flirted with me, in the funny way he used to then: for eight defrostings he flirted with me . . . you might say it's in the blood of those Thörls because, as far as that characteristic goes, they're all alike. They don't . . . how should I put it? They don't have a very serious concept of guardianship . . . (PATRICIA*'s voice begins to fade*) to think that even the Progenitor, the Patriarch . . .

LOTTE*'s voice, sharp and nearby, takes over, addressing the audience.*

LOTTE: Did you hear? That's what she's like, that girl. She doesn't have . . . she has no restraint. It's true that I've gained weight: I don't live in a refrigerator. She, no, she doesn't gain weight, she's eternal, incorruptible, like asbestos, like a diamond, like gold. But she likes men, and especially other women's husbands. She's an

eternal flirt, an incorrigible coquette. I ask you, ladies and gentlemen: is it wrong that I can't stand her? (*Sigh*) . . . And worst of all, even at her venerable age, men like her. You know, of course, what men are like, whether it's Thörl or anyone else, and intellectuals are even more susceptible than the rest: a couple of sighs, a couple of glances in that certain way, a couple of childhood memories, and the trap is sprung. Then, in the long run, it's she who's in trouble, you understand, after a month or two she finds herself saddled with those aging lovesick types. . . . No, don't think I'm that blind or stupid: I, too, noticed that this time she's changed her tone with my husband, she's become caustic and biting. You understand: there's another man on the horizon. But you weren't around for the other revivals. It was enough to make you want to skin her alive! And then, and then . . . I've never been able to come up with proof, to catch her in the act, but are you absolutely certain, all of you, that between the "guardian" and the girl everything has always taken place in the clear light of day? In other words (*emphatically*), have all the defrostings been properly registered in her personal record book? I'm not sure. I'm not at all sure. (*Pause. Sounds of disjointed conversations mixed with background noise*) But this time you, too, will have noticed that there's someone new. It's simple: there's another man on the horizon, a younger man. The young thing likes fresh meat. Listen to her; isn't she someone who knows what she wants? (*Voices*) Oh, I didn't think it had already gone this far.

From the background of voices, those of
BALDUR *and* PATRICIA *emerge.*

BALDUR: . . . a sensation I've never had before. I would never have believed it possible to find joined in a single person the enchantment of both eternity and youth. In your presence I feel just as I would in the presence of the Pyramids, and yet you're so young and so beautiful.

PATRICIA: Yes, Mr. . . . Baldur, that's your name, isn't it? Yes, Baldur. But I have three gifts, not two. Eternity, youth, and

solitude. And this last is the price I pay for risking as much as I have risked.

BALDUR: But what an admirable experience! To fly where others crawl, to be able to compare in person the customs, events, heroes from decade to decade, century to century! What historian wouldn't feel envious? And I who consider myself a connoisseur of the subject! (*On a sudden impulse*) You must let me read your diary.

PATRICIA: How did you know . . . I mean, what makes you think I keep a diary?

BALDUR: Then you do keep one! I guessed it!

PATRICIA: Yes, I keep one. It's part of the project, but no one knows about it, not even Thörl. And no one can read it: it's in code, which is also part of the project.

BALDUR: If no one can read it, what's it for?

PATRICIA: For me. It will be useful to me after.

BALDUR: After what?

PATRICIA: After. When I have arrived. Then I plan to publish it. I don't think I'll have any difficulty finding a publisher, since it's an intimate diary, a genre that always appeals. (*In a dreamy voice*) I plan on becoming a journalist, did you know? And publishing the intimate diaries of all the powerful people on earth from my era, Churchill, Stalin, et cetera. I could make quite a lot of money.

BALDUR: But how did you come into possession of these diaries?

PATRICIA: I don't have them. I'll write them myself. Based on true events, naturally.

Pause.

BALDUR: Patricia! (*Another pause*) Take me with you.

PATRICIA (*she thinks about it; then very coldly*): It's not a bad idea, in the abstract. But you mustn't think that all it takes is for you to get into the fridge: one has to have injections, take a training course. . . . It's not that easy. And then not everyone has the appropriate body. . . . Of course, it would be nice to have a travel companion like you, so alive, so passionate, so rich in spirit . . . but aren't you engaged?

BALDUR: Engaged? I was.
PATRICIA: Until when?
BALDUR: Until half an hour ago, but now that I've met you everything has changed.
PATRICIA: You are a flatterer, a dangerous man. (PATRICIA's *voice changes abruptly and she is no longer complaining and languid, but clear, energetic, sharp*) In any case, if things really are as you say, something interesting could come of it.
BALDUR: Patricia! Why delay! Let's leave: run away with me. But not in the future—right now.
PATRICIA (*coolly*): Exactly what I was thinking. But when?
BALDUR: Now, right away. Let's walk across the room and out the door.
PATRICIA. Nonsense. We would have everyone at our heels, with him in the lead. Look at him: he's already suspicious.
BALDUR: When, then?
PATRICIA: Tonight. Listen carefully. At midnight everyone will go, they will refreeze me and put me in naphthalene. It's much faster than the revival, a bit like the deep-sea divers, you know, coming up you have to go slowly but immersion can be fast. They stick me in the fridge and attach the compressor without much ceremony, but for the first few hours I remain pretty flexible and can easily return to active life.
BALDUR: And so?
PATRICIA: And so it's simple. You go out with the others, take home your . . . well, that girl, then come back here, sneak into the garden, and come in through the kitchen window.
BALDUR: Done! Two more hours, two hours and the world is ours! But tell me something, Patricia, won't you feel remorse? Won't you regret interrupting your journey into future centuries for me?
PATRICIA: Listen, my boy, if we pull this off we'll have loads of time to talk about all these wonderful things. But first we have to succeed. Look, they're going; go back to where you were, take your leave in a civil manner, and try not to do anything stupid. I would really hate to lose this opportunity.

The voices of the guests fade, sounds of chairs moving. Sentence fragments:

—See you next year!
—Good night, if that's the appropriate thing to say . . .
—Let's go, Robert, I didn't realize it was so late.
—Baldur, let's go, you have the honor of taking me home.

Silence. Then LOTTE*'s voice, directed to the audience.*

LOTTE: . . . And so everyone leaves. Peter and I remain alone, with Patricia, something which is never pleasant for the three of us. And I'm not saying this because of the antipathy that I described to you a little earlier, perhaps a bit impulsively. No, it's a situation that's objectively disagreeable, cold, false, extremely awkward for everyone. We talk a little of this and that and then we say our goodbyes, and Peter puts Patricia back in the fridge.

The same sounds as the defrosting, but in reverse and accelerated. Sigh, yawn. Lightning-fast closing up of the casing. The metronome is started, then the pump, hissing, etc. The metronome keeps going, the rhythm gradually melds with the slower ticking of a pendulum clock. It strikes one, half past one, two. The sound of an approaching car is heard, it stops, a door slams. Far away, a dog barks. Footsteps on gravel. A window opens. Footsteps on the wooden floor creaking ever nearer. The fridge door is opened.

BALDUR (*whispering*): Patricia, I'm here!
PATRICIA (*confused and muffled voice*): Cnnoputtp ht ncosssngn!
BALDUR: Whaaaat?
PATRICIA (*a bit more distinctly*): Cut the casing!

Sound of cutting.

BALDUR: There, all done. And now what? What should I do? You must forgive me, but I'm not very practical, you know, it's the first time such a thing has happened to me . . .

PATRICIA: Oh, the hardest part is over, now I'll take care of myself. Just give me a hand, so I can get out of here.

Footsteps. "Careful" "Sh-sh-sh" "This way" . . . Window. Footsteps on the gravel. The car door. BALDUR *turns on the car engine.*

BALDUR: We're out, Patricia. Out of the ice, out of the nightmare. I feel like I'm dreaming: for two hours I've been living in a dream. I'm afraid I'll wake up.
PATRICIA (*coolly*): Did you take your girlfriend home?
BALDUR: Who, Ilse? Yes, I took her home. I broke up with her.
PATRICIA: You broke up with her? Definitively?
BALDUR: It wasn't as hard as I was afraid it would be, just a little scene. She didn't even cry.

Pause. The engine is running.

PATRICIA: Young man, don't judge me too harshly. I suppose the moment has arrived for an explanation. You must try to understand: I had to find a way to get out of there.
BALDUR: . . . so that's all this is? A way of getting out?
PATRICIA: That's all it is. A way of getting out of the fridge and out of the Thörls' house. Baldur, I owe you a confession.
BALDUR: A confession is the least of it.
PATRICIA: I can't give you anything else, and it's not even a very nice confession. I am truly tired, frozen and unfrozen, frozen and unfrozen, over a long period of time—it's really exhausting. And then there's something else.
BALDUR: Something else?
PATRICIA: Yes, something else. His nighttime visits. At 33 degrees, barely tepid, and I couldn't defend myself in any way. And I had to stay quiet, I couldn't speak! And perhaps he thought . . .
BALDUR: My poor dear thing, how much you must have suffered!
PATRICIA: A real bother, you have no idea. An indescribable bore.

The sound of a car moving farther and farther away.

LOTTE: . . . And this is how the story ends. I had suspected something might happen, and that night I heard strange noises. But I stayed quiet: why should I have raised the alarm?

It seems to me that it’s better this way for everyone. Baldur, poor guy, told me the whole thing. It seems that Patricia, on top of everything else, also asked him for money, to go who knows where, to find a friend who lives in America, naturally he, too, in a fridge. As for Baldur, whether or not he got back together with Ilse, no one cared very much one way or the other, not even Ilse herself. We sold the fridge. As for Peter, we’ll see.

The Measure of Beauty

The beach umbrella next to ours was empty. I went to the sun-scorched shack on which MANAGEMENT was written to see if I could rent the umbrella for the entire month. The beach attendant consulted the reservations list, then told me: “No, I’m sorry. It’s been rented since June to a man from Milan.” I have good eyes and spotted the name Simpson next to No. 75.

There can’t be many Simpsons in Milan: I hoped it wasn’t him, Mr. Simpson, the NATCA agent. Not that I don’t like him, not at all. But our privacy is very important to me and my wife, and vacations are vacations, and any *revenant* from the business world ruins them for me. Furthermore, his particular intolerance, his puritanical rigidity, which revealed itself all too clearly during the duplicator incident, had put something of a damper on our relationship, so having him as my neighbor on the beach was not exactly desirable. But the world is small: three days later under beach umbrella No. 75 Mr. Simpson appeared in person. He had with him a very voluminous beach bag, and I had never seen him so embarrassed.

I have known Simpson for many years, and I know that like all first-class salesmen and middlemen, he can be astute and ingenious; and he is also sociable, loquacious, good-humored, and a lover of good food. Instead, the Simpson that fate placed next to me was reticent and nervous: he seemed to be sitting on a fakir’s bed of nails rather than on a beach chair facing the Adriatic. During our very brief conversation he contradicted himself. He told me that he loved beach life, that he had been coming to Rimini for many years; right afterward, he told me he didn’t know how to

swim, that he found roasting himself in the sun a great nuisance and a waste of time.

The next day he vanished. I made my way over to the attendant: Simpson had relinquished his beach umbrella. His behavior began to interest me. I went around to the various bathhouses, handing out tips and cigarettes, and in less than two hours I had learned (and I wasn't surprised) that he had looked for and found a beach umbrella at the Sirio bathhouse, at the far end of the beach.

I became convinced that the puritanical Mr. Simpson, who was very married and had a daughter of marriageable age, was in Rimini with a young woman: this suspicion so intrigued me that I decided to spy on his movements from a terrace overlooking the beach. I have always loved this activity, seeing without being seen, especially from an elevated position. My hero is Peeping Tom, who preferred to die rather than give up peering at Lady Godiva through the slats of venetian blinds. Spying on other people, regardless of what they are doing or about to do, and of any ultimate discovery, gives me a profound sensation of power and gratification, perhaps an atavistic memory of the extended periods of waiting endured by our hunter ancestors, reproducing the vital emotions of chase and ambush.

In Simpson's case, however, some discovery seemed probable. The hypothesis of a young woman soon went by the wayside as there were no girls in sight; nevertheless, my man's behavior was peculiar. He lay stretched out on his chair reading (or pretending to read) the newspaper, but everything he did indicated that he was devoting himself to an exploratory activity not all that different from my own. At regular intervals he emerged from his inertia, searched around in his bag, and extracted a gadget similar to a home movie camera, or a small video camera, like the ones used in television: he would point it obliquely toward the sky, press a button, and then write something in a notebook. Was he photographing something or someone? I watched more closely. Yes, it was at least possible; there are cameras fitted with prism lenses for filming at an angle, in such a way as not to cause suspicion in the person one is trying to capture on film, and they're hardly novel, especially on a beach.

By the afternoon, I was no longer in doubt: Simpson was photographing the bathers passing in front of him. Sometimes he would move down to the water's edge, and, if he found an interesting subject, he would aim at the sky and take a picture. He didn't seem to show a preference for the more

beautiful bathers, or for bathers of any kind; he photographed randomly, adolescents, old matrons, gray-haired, bony gentlemen, stocky youths, both male and female, from Romagna. After every photograph, he methodically took off his sunglasses and wrote something in his notebook. I had failed to comprehend one particular detail: he had two identical photographic apparatuses, one for men, the other for women. By now I was certain. This was not an innocuous case of senile mania (I would have given a great deal, by the way, to be as senile as Simpson by the time I turned sixty) but something big, at least as big as Simpson's embarrassment when he first saw me, and his haste to change beach umbrellas.

From that moment, my idle voyeurism changed to focused attention not dissimilar to his own. Simpson's maneuvers became a challenge to my intellect, like a difficult chess problem, or, better yet, one of nature's mysteries. I was determined to figure it out.

I bought a decent set of binoculars, but they didn't help much; in fact, they made me even more confused. Simpson was taking notes in English, using many abbreviations, his handwriting terrible; nevertheless, I managed to determine that every page of the notebook was divided into three columns, and each of these had a heading: "Vis. Eval.," "Meter," and "Obs." Evidently, this was an experimental job for NATCA, but what?

In the evening, I went back to the hotel in a terrible mood. I told my wife about what I was up to: women often have a surprising intuition for these things. But my wife, for different and inexplicable reasons, was also in a bad mood. She said that in her opinion Simpson was a dirty old man and that the whole thing didn't interest her in the least. I forgot to mention that there was bad blood between my wife and Simpson, which had begun a year earlier, when Simpson was selling the duplicators, and my wife was afraid that I would buy one and duplicate her, and had prepared herself to be jealous of herself. But then she thought the whole thing over and gave me a striking piece of advice: Blackmail him. Threaten to denounce him to the beach police.

Simpson swiftly capitulated. I began by telling him that I was unfavorably impressed by his running off, and by his lack of trust in me, and that by now our long friendship should have assured him of my capacity for discretion,

but I immediately saw that my preamble was pointless. Simpson was the same old Simpson: he was dying to tell me everything down to the last detail; evidently he had been sworn to secrecy by his company, and had been waiting for a case of force majeure to induce him to break his silence. For him a sufficient force majeure was the first indication, however vague and clumsy, that I would report him to the police.

He contented himself with a brief declaration of discretion on my part, after which his eyes lit up and he told me that the two apparatuses he had with him were not cameras but Calometers. Two calorimeters? No, two Calometers, two beauty gauges. One for men and one for women.

"It's from our new line: a small experimental series. The first models have been entrusted to our oldest and most dependable employees," he told me without false modesty. "They instructed us to test them in various environmental conditions and with different subjects. We were not given the particular technical details of how they work (you know, they're worried about the usual patent issues), firmly insisting instead upon what they call the *philosophy** of the apparatus."

"A beauty gauge! That seems rather bold to me. What is beauty? Do you know? Did they explain it to you over there, at the headquarters, in Fort . . . what's it called?"

"Fort Kiddiwanee. Yes, they posed the question, but you know the Americans—I should say, 'we Americans,' right? But so many years have passed!—the Americans are much simpler than we are. They might have had doubts up until yesterday, but today everything is clear: beauty is that which the Calometer measures. Pardon me; what electrician worries about knowing the inner essence of difference in potential? Difference in potential is what a voltmeter measures; everything else is useless complication."

"Precisely. The voltmeter is used by electricians and is an instrument they need for their work. Who needs the Calometer? Over the years, NATCA has earned a good reputation for its office machines, merchandise that is solid and sensible, that calculates, duplicates, composes, translates. I don't understand why it's dedicating itself now to the construction of such . . . frivolous machines. Frivolous or philosophical: there's no in-

between. I would never buy a Calometer, what the devil could it possibly be used for?"

Mr. Simpson became radiant. He put his left forefinger on his nose, forcefully pushing it to the right, then said, "Do you know how many pre-orders we already have? No fewer than forty thousand in the States alone, and the advertising campaign hasn't even begun. I will be able to confide further details to you in a few days when some legal issues have been cleared up concerning possible uses of the device. But you couldn't possibly think that NATCA would be capable of inventing and launching a model without intensive market research! Furthermore, the idea has tempted even our—how shall I put it?—colleagues behind the Iron Curtain. You didn't know? It's a bit of high-level gossip that got into the newspapers (but only referring generically to a 'new device of strategic importance'), and made the rounds of all our affiliates, even raising some concerns. The Soviets deny it, as usual; but we have solid evidence that three years ago one of our industrial designers passed the basic idea of the Calometer as well as one of its initial designs to the Ministry of Education in Moscow. It's already no secret that NATCA is a nest of crypto-Communists, intellectuals, and rebels.

"Luckily for us, the entire affair ended up in the hands of the bureaucrats and Marxist theoreticians of aesthetics. Thanks to the former, a couple of years were lost; thanks to the latter, the type of device they will produce over there can in no way compete with ours. It's destined for other uses, it seems, that have more to do with a Calogonometer, which measures beauty from the angle of social function, and is of no interest to us at all. Our point of view is very different, more concrete. Beauty, I was about to say, is a pure number, a relationship, or rather an amalgam of relationships. I don't, however, want to take credit for the work of others; everything I am telling you can be found in the Calometer's publicity brochure—and expressed far more eloquently—which is already available in America and in the process of being translated. You know, I'm just a small engineer, and nearly atrophied from twenty years of commercial activity, however prosperous. Beauty, according to our philosophy, is relative to a model, and changes at will, according to the discretion of the latest fashion, or perhaps the discretion of any observer, and there are no privileged observers. The discretion of an artist, a cult leader, or even simply of a single client. Therefore, every Calometer must first be calibrated by its user, and the

calibration is a delicate and fundamental task. For example, the apparatus that you see has been calibrated according to *Fantesca*, by Sebastiano del Piombo."[1]

"So, if I have understood correctly, we're dealing with a differential apparatus?"

"Yes. Naturally, we can't assume that every user will have advanced and differentiated tastes: not every man possesses a defined feminine ideal. Therefore, in this initial phase of trial and commercial introduction, NATCA is focusing on three models: a *blank** model that comes already calibrated at no charge and according to a sample chosen by the client, and two models of standard calibration, for the respective measurement of female and male beauty. As an experiment, for the entire current year the model for female measurement, called Paris, will be calibrated according to Elizabeth Taylor's features, and the model for male measurement (which, for now, has not had many orders) on Raf Vallone's[2] features. Which reminds me, I received a confidential letter just this morning from Fort Kiddiwanee, Oklahoma. They tell me that so far they haven't found an adequate name for the male model and have announced a competition among us, the senior staff. Naturally, the prize will be a Calometer, any one of the three. You, being a cultured person, might want to throw your hat in the ring? I would be happy to enter you in the competition under my name . . ."

I don't profess to think that Semiramis is a very original name, or very pertinent; clearly the imagination and the culture of the other contestants were even more sluggish than my own. I won the competition, or, rather, I let Simpson win; he then gave me as a gift the *blank* model of the Calometer, which made me happy for a month.

I tried out the device, just as it was when sent to me, but to no avail. It registered 100 no matter what object was put before it. I sent it back to the branch it came from and had it calibrated to a good color reproduction of the *Portrait of Lunia Czechowska*.[3] It was returned to me with commendable speed and I tried it out under various conditions.

To express a final judgment might be premature and presumptuous; nevertheless, it seems to me that I am able to confirm that the Calometer is

a notable and ingenious device. If its aim is to reproduce human judgment, this has been fully realized; however, it reproduces the judgment of an observer whose tastes are extremely limited or narrow, or, rather, that of a maniac. My device, for example, gave low marks to all feminine faces that were round and approved of elongated faces, to the point where it assigned a number of K32 to our milkwoman, deemed a local beauty, though on the plump side, and it even gave the *Mona Lisa* a value of K28 when I showed it a reproduction. It is, instead, extraordinarily partial to long, thin necks.

The most surprising quality (actually, under scrutiny, the only quality that distinguishes it from a banal system of photometers) is its indifference to the position and distance of its subject. I begged my wife, who got the decent result of a K75, with a mark of K79 when rested and calm and under favorable lighting conditions, to submit herself to measurement in different positions—frontal, left profile, right profile, lying down, with a hat and without, with her eyes closed and her eyes open—and the readings I took were always within five K units.

The markings changed decisively only when her face was at an angle of more than ninety degrees. If the subject is entirely turned around, and so offers the back of the neck to the device, the readings are very low.

I must here make note of the fact that my wife has a very oval and elongated face, a slender neck, and a slightly upturned nose; in my opinion, she deserved a higher rating, but my wife’s hair is black and the device had been calibrated to a honey-blond model.

If you aim the Paris at masculine faces, generally a response of less than K20 is obtained, and less than K10 if the subject has a mustache or beard. Notably, the Calometer rarely gives readings that are strictly zero; just as children do, it recognizes the human face even in the most rough or sketchy imitations. I amused myself by slowly moving the lens across an irregularly variegated surface (some wallpaper, to be precise): every jump in the gauge corresponded to a zone in which it was possible to recognize a vaguely anthropomorphic appearance. I got a zero reading only on subjects that were decidedly asymmetric or shapeless and, naturally, on uniform backgrounds.

My wife can't stand the Calometer, but, as is her habit, she doesn't want to, or can't, explain to me the reason. Every time she sees me holding the apparatus, or hears me mention it, she freezes up and her mood sinks. This is unfair of her, since, as I said, she wasn't given a bad rating: K79 is an excellent mark. At first, I thought she had extended her general distrust of the machines Simpson sold me or gave me to test, and of Simpson himself, to the Calometer; nevertheless, her silence and discomfort weighed so heavily on me that the other evening I deliberately provoked her indignation by playing around in the house with the Calometer for a good hour. And now I must admit that her opinions, even if expressed in a high-strung manner, are solid and reasonable.

In essence, my wife was outraged by the extreme submissiveness of the device. According to her, it is a conformity gauge, not a beauty gauge, and therefore an exquisitely conformist instrument. I attempted to defend the Calometer (which, according to my wife, would have been more accurately labeled a "Homeometer") by pointing out to her that anyone who judges is a conformist, inasmuch as, consciously or not, he uses some sort of model as his point of reference. I reminded her of the Impressionists' tempestuous debut; of public opinion's hatred for individual innovators (in all fields), which then becomes docile love when the innovators are no longer innovators. Finally, I tried to show her that the establishment of a fashion or style, the collective "getting used to" a new form of self-expression, was exactly parallel to the calibration of the Calometer. I emphasized what I believe is the most alarming phenomenon of today's civilization, which is that the average man, today, can also be calibrated in the most incredible ways, convinced that Swedish furniture and plastic flowers, and only those things, are beautiful; that certain tall, blue-eyed blondes, and only they, are beautiful; that only a certain toothpaste is good; a certain surgeon, the only one capable; a certain political party, the only repository of truth. I insisted that it was essentially not very sporting to denigrate a machine simply because it reproduces a human mental process. But my wife is a grievous example of Crocean education:[4] she responded, "If you say so," and didn't appear at all convinced by my argument.

On the other hand I, too, had recently lost some of my enthusiasm for the device, but for different reasons. I had run into Simpson at a Rotary

dinner: he was in a very good mood, and announced his two “grand victories” to me.

“By now, I can relax as far as my sales campaign is concerned,” he told me. “You won’t believe me, but from our entire assortment of machines, there is none easier to sell. Tomorrow I will send my monthly report to Fort Kiddiwanee; we’ll see if I don’t get a promotion! I have always said there are two major virtues in a salesman: that he understands humanity and that he has an imagination.” He assumed a confidential manner and lowered his voice: “Escort services! No one had thought of it yet, not even in America. It’s truly a spontaneous census: I had no idea there were so many. The madams all immediately understood the commercial importance of a modern catalogue, complete with an objective calometric rating: Magda, twenty-two years old, K87; Wilma, twenty-six years old, K77 . . . do you get the idea?

“I then had another thought: . . . well, it wasn’t exactly my idea, since it came about owing to circumstances. I sold a Paris to your friend Gilberto: do you know what he did? As soon as he received it, he tampered with it, and altered the calibration to himself.”

“And so?”

“Don’t you see? It’s an idea that one can plant, so to speak, spontaneously in the minds of the majority of our clients. I have already prepared a draft of the publicity flyer that I’d like to distribute in time for the holidays. Actually, if you would be so kind as to have a look at it—you know, I don’t have full confidence in my Italian. Once the trend takes off, who wouldn’t give his wife (or her husband) the gift of a Calometer calibrated to his or her photograph. You’ll see, they’ll be few who can resist the flattery of K100: just think of the witch in *Snow White*. Everyone likes to hear himself praised and to hear that he is right, even if it’s only from a mirror or a printed circuit board.”

I wasn’t familiar with this cynical side of Simpson’s character. We said goodbye stiffly, and I’m afraid that our friendship has been seriously compromised.

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1. An early-sixteenth-century Mannerist painter of the Venetian School famous for his use of bright color combined with monumental forms.

2. An Italian leading man of the 1950s, known for his rugged good looks and often compared with Burt Lancaster. He began appearing in English-language films in 1960, with *El Cid*.
3. Painted in 1919 by Amedeo Modigliani, who was renowned for his portraits of women with elongated necks.
4. Benedetto Croce was a dominant figure in aesthetics, literary criticism, and philosophy during the first half of the twentieth century.

Quaestio de Centauris

et quae sit iis potandi, comedendi et nubendi ratio. Et fuit debatuta per X hebdomadas inter vesanum auctorem et ejusdem sodales perpetuos G.L. et L.N.

My father kept him in a stall, because he didn't know where else to keep him. He had been given to him by a friend, a sea captain, who said he had bought him in Salonika: I, however, learned from him directly that he was born in Colophon.

They had strictly forbidden me to go anywhere near him because, they said, he was easily angered and would kick. But from my direct experience I can confirm that this was an old superstition; so from adolescence I never paid much attention to the prohibition and, actually, especially in the winter, I spent many memorable hours with him, and other wonderful times in the summer, when Trachi (this was his name) with his own hands put me on his back and took off at a mad gallop toward the woods on the hills.

He had learned our language fairly easily, but retained a slight Levantine accent. Despite his two hundred and sixty years, his appearance was youthful, both in his human aspects and in those equine. What I will relate here is the fruit of our long conversations.

• • •

The centaurs' origins are legendary; but the legends that they pass down among themselves are very different from those we consider to be classic.

Remarkably, their traditions also begin with a highly intelligent man, a Noah-like inventor and saviour, whom they call Cutnofeset. But there were

no centaurs on Cutnofeset's ark. Nor, by the way, were there "seven pairs of every species of clean beast, and a pair of every species of the beasts that are not clean." The centaurian tradition is more rational than the Biblical, recounting that only the archetypal animals, the key species, were saved: man but not the monkey; the horse but not the donkey or the wild ass; the rooster and the crow but not the vulture or the hoopoe or the gyrfalcon.

How, then, did these species come about? Immediately afterward, legend says. When the waters retreated, a deep layer of warm mud covered the earth. Now, this mud, which harbored in its decay all the enzymes from what had perished in the flood, was extraordinarily fertile: as soon as it was touched by the sun, it was immediately covered in shoots from which grasses and plants of every type sprang forth; and even more, within its soft and moist bosom, it was host to the marriages of all the species saved in the ark. It was a time, never again to be repeated, of wild, ecstatic fecundity in which the entire universe felt love, so much so that it nearly returned to chaos.

Those were the days in which the earth itself fornicated with the sky, in which everything germinated and everything was fruitful. Not only every marriage but every union, every contact, every encounter, even fleeting, even between different species, even between beasts and stones, even between plants and stones, was fertile, and produced offspring not in a few months but in a few days. The sea of warm mud, which concealed the cold and prudish face of the earth, was a single immense nuptial bed, boiling over with desire in all its recesses, and teeming with jubilant germs.

This second creation was the true Creation; because, according to what is passed down among the centaurs, there is no other way to explain certain analogies, certain convergences observed by all. Why is the dolphin similar to the fish, and yet gives birth and nurses its offspring? Because it's the child of a tuna fish and a cow. Where do the delicate colors of butterflies and their ability to fly come from? They are the children of a flower and a fly. And tortoises are the children of a frog and a rock. And bats of an owl and a mouse. And conchs of a snail and a polished pebble. And hippopotami of a horse and a river. And vultures of a worm and an owl. And the big whales, the leviathans, how else to explain their immense mass? Their wooden bones, their black and oily skin, and their fiery breath are living testimony to a venerable union in which this same primordial mud got greedy hold of the ark's feminine keel, made of gopher wood and

covered inside and out with shiny pitch, when the end of all flesh had been decreed.

Such was the origin of every form, whether living today or extinct: dragons and chameleons, chimeras and harpies, crocodiles and minotaurs, elephants and giants, whose petrified bones are still found today, to our amazement, in the heart of the mountains. And so it was for the centaurs themselves, since in this festival of origins, in this panspermia, the few survivors of the human family had also taken part.

Notably, Cam, the profligate son, took part: the first generation of centaurs originated in his wild passion for a Thessalian horse. From the beginning, their progeny were noble and strong, preserving the best of both human nature and equine. They were at once wise and courageous, generous and shrewd, good at hunting and at singing, at waging war and at observing the heavens. It seemed, in fact, as happens with the most felicitous unions, that the virtues of the parents were magnified in their progeny, since, at least in the beginning, they were more powerful and faster racers than their Thessalian mothers, and a good deal wiser and more cunning than black Cam and their other human fathers. This would also explain, according to some, their longevity; though others have instead attributed this to their eating habits, which I will come to in a moment. Or it could simply be a projection across time of their great vitality, and this I, too, believe resolutely (and the story I am about to tell attests to it): that in hereditary terms the herbivore power of the horse does not count as much as the red blindness of the bloody and forbidden spasm, the moment of human-feral fullness in which they were conceived.

Whatever we may think of this, anyone who has carefully considered the centaurs' classical traditions cannot help noticing that centauresses are never mentioned. As I learned from Trachi, they do not in fact exist.

The man-mare union, today, moreover, fertile only in rare cases, produces and only ever has produced male centaurs, for which there must be a fundamental reason, though at present it eludes us. As for the inverse of the unions, between stallions and women, these occur very rarely at any point in time, and furthermore come about through the solicitation of dissolute women, who by nature are not particularly inclined to procreate.

In the exceptional cases in which fertilization is successful in these very rare unions, a female bi-part offspring is produced: her two natures, however, inversely assembled. The creatures have the head, neck, and front

feet of a horse, but their back and stomach are those of a human female, and the hind legs are human.

During his long life Trachi encountered very few of them, and he assured me that he felt no attraction to these squalid monsters. They are not “proud and nimble,” but insufficiently vital; they are infertile, idle, and transient; they do not become familiar with man or learn to obey his commands, but live miserably in the densest forests, not in herds but in rural solitude. They feed on grass and berries, and when they are surprised by a man they have the curious habit of always presenting themselves to him headfirst, as if embarrassed by their human half.

Trachi was born in Colophon of a secret union between a man and one of the numerous Thessalian horses that are still wild on the island. I am afraid that among the readers of these notes some may refuse to believe these assertions, since official science, permeated as it is still today with Aristotelianism, denies the possibility of a fertile union between different species. But official science often lacks humility: such unions are, indeed, generally infertile; but how often has evidence been sought? Not more than a few dozen times. And has it been sought among all the innumerable possible couplings? Certainly not. Since I have no reason to doubt what Trachi has told me about himself, I must therefore encourage the incredulous to consider that there are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy.

He lived mostly in solitude, left to himself, which was the common destiny of all like him. He slept in the open, standing on all four hooves, with his head on his arms, which he would lean against a low branch or a rock. He grazed in the island’s fields and glades, or gathered fruit from branches; on the hottest days he would go down to one of the deserted beaches, and there he would bathe, swimming like a horse, with his chest and head erect, and then would gallop for a long while, violently churning up the wet sand.

But the bulk of his time, in every season, was devoted to food: in fact, during the forays that Trachi frequently undertook in the vigor of his youth among the barren cliffs and gorges of his native island, he always,

following an instinct for prudence, brought along, tucked under his arms, two large bundles of grass or foliage, gathered in times of rest.

Even if centaurs are limited to a strictly vegetarian diet by their predominantly equine constitution, it must be remembered that they have a torso and head like a man's: this structure obliges them to introduce through a small human mouth the considerable quantity of grass, straw, or grain necessary to the sustenance of their large bodies. These foods, notably of limited nutritional value, also require long mastication, since human teeth are badly adapted to the grinding of forage.

In conclusion, the centaurs' nourishment is a laborious process; by physical necessity, they are required to spend three-quarters of their time chewing. This fact is not lacking in authoritative testimonials, first and foremost that of Ucalegon of Samos (*Dig. Phil*., XXIV, II–8 and XLIII *passim*), who attributes the centaurs' proverbial wisdom to their alimentary regimen, consisting of one continuous meal from dawn to dusk; this would deter them from other vain or baleful activities, such as avidity for riches or gossip, and would contribute to their usual self-restraint. Nor was this unknown to Bede, who mentions it in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum.*[1]

It is rather strange that the classical mythological tradition neglected this characteristic of centaurs. The truth of the fact, however, rests on reliable evidence, and moreover, as we have shown, it can be deduced by a simple consideration of natural philosophy.

To return to Trachi: his education was, by our criteria, strangely fragmentary. He learned Greek from the island's shepherds, whose company he sought out now and again, despite his taciturn and shy nature. From his own observations he also learned many subtle and intimate things about grasses, plants, forest animals, water, clouds, stars, and planets; and I myself noticed that, even after his capture and under a foreign sky, he could feel the approach of a gale or the imminence of a snowstorm many hours before it actually arrived. Though I couldn't describe how, nor could he do so himself, he also felt the grain growing in the fields, he felt the pulse of water in underground streams, and he sensed the erosion of flooded rivers. When De Simone's cow gave birth two hundred meters away from us, he felt a reflex in his own gut; the same thing happened when the tenant farmer's daughter gave birth. In fact, on a spring evening he indicated to me that a birth must be taking place and, more precisely, in a particular corner

of the hayloft; we went there and found that a bat had just brought into the world six blind little monsters, and was feeding them minuscule portions of her milk.

All centaurs are made this way, he told me, feeling every germination, animal, human, or vegetable, as a wave of joy running through their veins. They also perceive, on a precordial level, and in the form of anxiety and tremulous tension, every desire and every sexual encounter that occurs in their vicinity; therefore, even though usually chaste, they enter into a state of vivid agitation during the season of love.

We lived together for a long time: in some ways, it could be said that we grew up together. Despite his advanced age, he was actually a young creature in everything he said and did, and he learned things so easily that it seemed useless (not to mention awkward) to send him to school. I educated him myself, almost without realizing it or wanting to, passing on to him in turn the knowledge that I learned from my teachers day after day.

We kept him hidden as much as possible, owing, in part, to his own explicit desire and, in part, to a form of exclusive and jealous affection that we all felt for him, and, in yet another part, a combination of rationality and intuition that advised us to shield him from all unnecessary contact with our human world.

Naturally, his presence among us had leaked out among the neighbors. At first, they asked a lot of questions, some not very discreet, but then, as will happen, their curiosity diminished from lack of nourishment. A few of our intimate friends were admitted into his presence, the first of whom were the De Simones, and they swiftly became his friends, too. Only once, when a horsefly bite provoked a painful abscess in his rump, did we require the skill of a veterinarian; but he was an understanding and discreet man, who most scrupulously promised to keep this professional secret and, as far as I know, kept his promise.

Things went differently with the blacksmith. Nowadays, blacksmiths are unfortunately very rare: we found one two hours away by foot and he was a yokel, stupid and brutish. My father tried in vain to persuade him to maintain a certain reserve, which included paying him tenfold as much as was due for his services. It made no difference; every Sunday at the tavern

he gathered a crowd around him and told the entire village about his strange client. Luckily, he liked his wine, and was in the habit of telling tall tales when he was drunk, so he wasn't taken too seriously.

It pains me to write this story. It is a story from my youth, and I feel as if in writing it I were expelling it from myself, and that later I will feel deprived of something strong and pure.

One summer Teresa De Simone, my childhood friend and cohort, returned to her parents' house. She had gone to the city to study; I hadn't seen her for many years, I found her changed, and the change troubled me. Maybe I had fallen in love, but with little consciousness of it: what I mean is, I did not admit it to myself, not even hypothetically. She was rather lovely, shy, calm, and serene.

As I have already mentioned, the De Simones were among the few neighbors whom we saw with some regularity. They knew Trachi and loved him.

After Teresa's return, we spent a long evening together, just the three of us. It was one of those rare evenings never to be forgotten: the moon, the crickets, the intense smell of hay, the air still and warm. We heard singing in the distance, and suddenly Trachi began to sing, without looking at us, as if in a dream. It was a long song, its rhythm bold and strong, with words I didn't know. A Greek song, Trachi said; but when we asked him to translate it, he turned his head away and became silent.

We were all silent for a long time; then Teresa went home. The following morning, Trachi drew me aside and said this:

"Oh, my dearest friend, my hour has come: I have fallen in love. That woman has got inside of me, and possesses me. I desire to see her and hear her, perhaps even touch her, and nothing else; I therefore desire something impossible. I am reduced to one point: there is nothing left of me except for this desire. I am changing, I have changed, I have become another."

He told me other things as well, which I hesitate to write, because I feel it's very unlikely that my words will do him justice. He told me that, since the previous night, he felt that he had become "a battlefield"; that he understood, as he never had understood before, the exploits of his violent

ancestors, Nessus, Pholus; that his entire human half was crammed with dreams, with noble, courtly, and vain fantasies, and he wanted to perform reckless feats, to do justice with the strength of his own arms, raze to the ground the densest forests with his vehemence, run to the edges of the earth, discover and conquer new lands, and create there the works of a fertile civilization. All of this, in a way that was obscure even to himself, he wanted to perform before the eyes of Teresa De Simone: to do it for her, to dedicate it to her. Finally, he realized the vanity of his dreams in the very act of dreaming them, and this was the content of the song of the previous evening, a song he had learned long ago during his adolescence in Colophon, and which he had never understood and never sung until now.

For many weeks nothing else happened; we saw the De Simones every so often, but Trachi's behavior revealed nothing of the storm that raged inside him. It was I, and none other, who provoked the breakdown.

One October evening, Trachi was at the blacksmith's. I met Teresa, and we went for a walk together in the woods. We talked, and of who else but Trachi? I didn't betray my friend's confidence; but I did worse.

I quickly realized that Teresa was not as shy as she initially appeared to be: she chose, as if by chance, a narrow path that led into the thickest part of the woods; I knew it was a dead end, and knew that Teresa knew. Where the path came to an end, she sat down on dry leaves and I did the same. The valley belltower rang out seven times, and she pressed up against me in a way that rid me of all doubt. By the time we got home night had fallen, but Trachi hadn't yet returned.

I realized immediately that I had behaved badly; actually, I realized it during the act itself, and still today it pains me. Yet I also know that the fault is not all mine, nor is it Teresa's. Trachi was with us: we had immersed ourselves in his aura, we had gravitated into his field. I know this because I myself had seen that wherever he passed flowers bloomed before their time, and their pollen flew in the wind of his wake as he ran.

Trachi didn't return. Over the following days, we laboriously reconstructed the rest of his story based upon witnesses' accounts and his tracks.

After a night of anxious waiting for all of us, and for me of secret torment, I went to look for him myself at the blacksmith's. The blacksmith wasn't at home: he was at the hospital with a cracked skull; he was unable to speak. I found his assistant. He told me that Trachi had come at about six o'clock to get shoed. He was silent and sad, but tranquil. Without showing any impatience, he let himself be chained as usual (the uncivilized practice of this particular blacksmith: years earlier he had had a bad experience with a skittish horse, and we had, in vain, tried to convince him that this precaution was in every way absurd with regard to Trachi). Three of his hooves had already been shoed when a long and violent shudder coursed through him. The blacksmith turned upon him with that harsh tone often used on horses; as Trachi's agitation seemed to increase, the blacksmith struck him with a whip.

Trachi seemed to calm down, "but his eyes were rolling around as if he were mad, and he seemed to be hearing voices." Suddenly, with a furious tug, Trachi pulled the chains from their wall mounts, and the end of one hit the blacksmith in the head, sending him to the floor in a faint. Trachi then threw himself against the door with all his weight, headfirst, his arms crossed over his head, and galloped off toward the hills while the four chains, still constricting his legs, whirled around, wounding him repeatedly.

"What time did this happen?" I asked, disturbed by a presentiment.

The assistant hesitated: it was not yet night, but he couldn't say precisely. But then, yes, now he remembered: just a few seconds before Trachi pulled the chains from the wall the time had rung from the belltower, and the boss said to him, in dialect so that Trachi wouldn't understand: "It's already seven o'clock! If all my clients were as *currish* as this one . . ."

Seven o'clock!

It wasn't difficult, unfortunately, to follow Trachi's furious flight; even if no one had seen him, there were conspicuous traces of the blood he had lost, and the scrapes made by the chains on tree trunks and on rocks by the side of the road. He hadn't headed toward home, or toward the De Simones': he had cleared the two-meter wooden fence that surrounds the Chiapasso property, and crossed the vineyards in a blind fury, making a path for himself through the rows of vines, in a straight line, knocking down stakes and vines, breaking the thick iron wires that held up the vine branches.

He reached the barnyard and found the barn door bolted shut from the outside. He easily could have opened it with his hands; instead, he picked up an old thresher, weighing well over fifty kilos, and hurled it against the door, reducing it to splinters. Only six cows, a calf, chickens, and rabbits were in the barn. Trachi left immediately and, still in a mad gallop, headed toward Baron Caglieris's estate.

It was at least six and a half kilometers away, on the other side of the valley, but Trachi got there in a matter of minutes. He looked for the stable: he didn't find it with his first blow, but only after he used his hooves and shoulders to knock down many doors. What he did in the stable we know from an eyewitness, a stableboy, who, at the sound of the door shattering, had had the good sense to hide in the hay, and from there he had seen everything.

Trachi hesitated for a moment on the threshold, panting and bloody. The horses, unsettled, shook their heads, tugging on their halters. Trachi pounced on a three-year-old white mare; in one blow he broke the chain that bound her to the trough, and dragging her by this same chain led her outside. The mare didn't put up any resistance; strange, the stableboy told me, since she had a rather skittish and reluctant character, nor was she in heat.

They galloped together as far as the river: here Trachi was seen to stop, cup his hands, dip them into the water, and drink repeatedly. They then proceeded side by side into the woods. Yes, I followed their tracks: into those same woods and along that same path, to that same place where Teresa had asked me to take her.

And it was right there, for that entire night, that Trachi must have celebrated his monstrous nuptials. There I found the ground dug up, broken branches, brown and white horsehair, human hair, and more blood. Not far away, drawn by the sound of her troubled breathing, I found the mare. She lay on the ground on her side, gasping, her noble coat covered with dirt and grass. Hearing my footsteps she lifted her head a little, and followed me with the terrible stare of a spooked horse. She was not wounded, but exhausted. She gave birth eight months later to a foal: in every way normal, I was told.

Here Trachi's direct traces vanish. But, as perhaps some may remember, over the following days the newspapers reported on a strange series of horse-rustlings, all perpetrated with the same technique: a door knocked

down, the halter undone or ripped off, the animal (always a mare, and always alone) led into some nearby wood, and then found exhausted. Only once did the abductor seem to meet with any resistance: his chance companion of that night was found dying, her neck broken.

There were six of these episodes, and they were reported in various places on the peninsula, occurring one after the other from north to south. In Voghera, in Lucca, near Lake Bracciano, in Sulmona, in Cerignola. The last happened near Lecce. Then nothing else; but perhaps this story is linked to a strange report made to the press by a fishing crew from Puglia: just off Corfu they had come upon “a man riding a dolphin.” This odd apparition swam vigorously toward the east; the sailors shouted at it, at which point the man and the gray rump sank under the water, disappearing from view.

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1. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

Full Employment

“Just as in ’29,” Mr. Simpson said. “You’re young and can’t remember, but it’s just as it was then: no faith, inertia, lack of initiative. And over there in the States, where things aren’t going so badly, wouldn’t you think they’d lend me a hand? On the contrary: even this year in which something new, something revolutionary would be needed, do you know what the NATCA Research and Development Office, with all their four hundred technicians and fifty scientists, have come up with? Here, look here; it’s all here.” He pulled a metal box out of his pocket and disdainfully placed it on the table.

“You tell me, how is one to do the job of a salesman passionately? It’s a beautiful little machine, I don’t deny it, but, believe me, it takes a certain hubris to run from one client to the next all year long with only this to show, trying to convince them that this is the latest great new thing from NATCA 1966.”

“What does it do?” I asked.

“That is precisely the point: it can do everything and nothing. Generally, machines are specialized: a tractor pulls, a saw saws, a Versifier makes verses, a light meter measures the light. This thing here, instead, is good at doing everything, or almost. It’s called a Minibrain;* even the name isn’t right, in my opinion. It’s pretentious and vague, and you can’t translate it into Italian; in short, it doesn’t have any commercial appeal. It’s a four-track selector, that’s what it is: do you want to know how many women with the name Eleonora were operated on for appendicitis in Sicily in 1940? Or how many among all the suicides throughout the world from 1900 to today were both left-handed and blond? All you have to do is push this button and you’ll have the answer in a second; but only if you have first introduced the

protocols, and excuse me if that's a small thing. In short, in my opinion they're making a huge error, and will pay dearly. According to them, the innovation is that it can fit in your pocket and is inexpensive. Do you want one? Twenty-four thousand lire and it's yours; the price couldn't be lower if it were made in Japan. But do you know what I say? If they don't give me something more original within the year, despite my thirty-five years of service and the fact that I'm sixty years old, I'll quit. No, no, I'm not joking. Luckily, I have a few more cards up my sleeve: not to brag, but in times of economic hardship I feel I could do something better than sell selectors."

During this entire discourse, which took place at the end of one of NATCA's lavish banquets, which, in spite of everything, the company continues to organize every year for its best clients, I observed Simpson's mood with curiosity. In contrast to his words, he didn't appear remotely discouraged; on the contrary, he was unusually animated and happy. Behind his thick glasses, his gray eyes were shining brightly, or was that simply the effect of the wine, which both of us had abundantly indulged in? I decided to make it easier for him to open up.

"I, too, am convinced that with your experience you could do something better than go around selling business machines. Selling is difficult, often unpleasant; and yet it's a profession that maintains vital human contact, that teaches something new every day . . . Ultimately, NATCA isn't the only one of its kind in the world."

Simpson immediately fell for my gambit. "That's exactly the heart of the matter; at NATCA, they make mistakes or they exaggerate. It's an old idea of mine: machines are important, we can't live any longer without them, they shape our world, but they are not always the best solution to our problems."

His speech was not very coherent. I tried another approach. "Certainly: the human brain is irreplaceable. A truth that those who design electronic brains tend to forget."

"No, no," Simpson responded impatiently. "Don't talk to me about the human brain. First of all, it's too complicated, then it has yet to be proved that it even has the capacity of understanding itself, and, finally, there are already too many people studying it. Good people, though I won't say disinterested, but there are too many of them; there are mountains of books and thousands of organizations, other NATCAs, no better or worse than the

one I work for, where the human brain is being cooked up in all flavors. Freud, Pavlov, Turing, the cyberneticians, the sociologists, all manipulating it, denaturing it, and our machines try to copy it. No, my idea is different." He paused, as if he were hesitating, then he leaned over the table and said in a low voice: "It's not only an idea. Would you like to come over on Sunday?"

It was an old villa in the hills that Simpson had bought for almost nothing at the end of the war. The Simpsons welcomed me and my wife kindly and politely; I was very happy to finally meet Mrs. Simpson: slender, her hair already gray, she was gentle and reserved and yet full of human warmth. He led us to the garden, where we were seated at the edge of a pond; the conversation, distracted and vague, dragged, mostly because of Simpson. He stared off into space, shifted restlessly in his chair, continually lit his pipe and then let it go out. It was easy to tell that he was in an almost comical hurry to get the preambles over with and come to the point.

I have to admit that he did it elegantly. While his wife was serving tea, he asked: "Madam, would you like some blueberries? There are a lot of them, and very delicious ones, on the other side of the valley."

"I wouldn't want you to go to the trouble . . . ," my wife began.

Simpson responded, "Good heavens! No trouble at all." He then pulled from his pocket a tiny instrument that to me looked like a pan flute, and he played three notes. There was a clear, soft beating of wings, the surface of the pond rippled, and above our heads a rapid flight of dragonflies. "Two minutes!" Simpson said triumphantly, and he clicked his stopwatch. Mrs. Simpson, with a smile that was both proud and a little embarrassed, went inside the house, then reappeared with a crystal bowl and placed it, empty, on the table. At the end of the second minute the dragonflies, like a wave of tiny bombers, returned; there must have been several hundred of them. They remained hovering above us, in motionless flight, making an almost musical metallic whirring sound, then suddenly, one by one, they descended toward the bowl, and, slowing their flight, dropped a blueberry, then swiftly took off again. Within a few moments the bowl was filled: not one blueberry had missed its mark and they were still wet with dew.

“It always works,” Simpson said. “It’s a showy demonstration, but not very rigorous. Nevertheless, now that you’ve seen it yourselves, I won’t need to struggle to find the words to convince you that it’s possible. Now, tell me: if this can be done, would it make any sense to invent a machine that could be instructed to pick blueberries in a two-hectare wood? And do you believe it would be possible to design one that would know how to carry out the command in two minutes, without making a racket, without using fuel, without breaking down, and without ruining the wood? And the cost, think of the cost? How much does a swarm of dragonflies cost? Which, by the way, are delightful.”

“Have the dragonflies been . . . conditioned?” I asked stupidly. I couldn’t keep myself from glancing in alarm at my wife, and I was afraid that Simpson saw me and understood the significance. My wife’s face was impassive, but I could distinctly make out her discomfort.

“They’re not conditioned; they work for me. Actually, to be more precise: we’ve come to an agreement.” Simpson leaned back in his chair and smiled benevolently, enjoying the effect of his comment. Then he went on: “Yes, maybe it would be better to tell the story from the beginning. You will have read, I imagine, about Von Frisch’s brilliant studies on the language of bees: the eight-shaped dance, its forms and significance in regard to distance, direction, and quantity of food. The subject first fascinated me twelve years ago, and since then I have dedicated all my free time on weekends to bees. Initially, I just wanted to try to speak with the bees in their language. It seemed absurd that someone hadn’t already thought of it: it’s an extraordinarily easy thing to do. Come and see.”

He showed me an apiary whose front wall had been replaced by ground glass. On the external face of the glass he traced a few figure eights with his finger, and soon afterward a small swarm came buzzing out the little door.

“I’m sorry to have deceived them this time. Two hundred meters southeast of here there is absolutely nothing, poor things. I only wanted to show you how I broke the ice, broke through the wall of incomprehension that separates us from insects. At first, I did things the hard way: just imagine that for several months I did the eight-shaped dance myself, I mean with my entire body, not simply by using my finger; yes, right here, on the lawn. They understood all the same, but with difficulty, and it became exhausting and ridiculous. Later I saw that it would take much less; any

signaling will do, as you saw, even using a stick, or a finger, as long as it's consistent with their code."

"And the same with the dragonflies?"

"With the dragonflies, for the moment, my relationship is only indirect. It was a second step: I realized pretty quickly that the bees' language extends far beyond the eight-shaped dance for indicating the location of food. Today I can prove that they have other dances, I mean other symbols; I haven't yet understood them all, but I've already been able to compile a small glossary with a hundred or so entries. Here it is: there are equivalents for a large number of substantives such as 'sun,' 'wind,' 'rain,' 'cold,' 'hot,' et cetera; there is a vast assortment of plant names, and, in relation to these, I've recorded at least twelve distinct symbols they use to indicate, for example, an apple tree, according to whether the particular tree is large, small, old, healthy, wild, and so on—something like what we do with horses. They know how to say 'gather,' 'sting,' 'fall,' 'fly,' and here, too, they have a surprising number of synonyms for flight: their 'fly' is different from that of mosquitoes, butterflies, or sparrows. On the other hand, they don't distinguish between walk, run, swim, and wheeled travel: for them, all ground or water movements are a 'crawl.' Their lexical patrimony relative to other insects, and above all insects that fly, is only slightly inferior to ours; however, they content themselves with an extremely generic nomenclature for larger animals. Their signals for quadrupeds, respectively from rat to dog and from sheep on up, are only two, and they could be approximately rendered as 'four small' and 'four big.' Neither do they distinguish between man and woman; I had to explain the difference to them."

"And you speak this language?"

"Badly, for now; but I understand it pretty well, and it helped me comprehend some of the beehive's greatest mysteries: how the bees decide on which day to drive the drones from the hive, when and why they authorize the queens to fight among themselves to the death, how they establish the numerical relationship between worker bees and drones. They haven't told me everything, however. They keep certain secrets. They are a very dignified population."

"Do they talk to the dragonflies, too, by dancing?"

"No. The bees communicate by dancing only among themselves and (pardon my immodesty) with me. As for the other species, I must first of all

tell you that the bees have regular relations only with the most evolved, especially other social insects and those which have gregarious practices. For example, they have pretty close contact (if not always friendly) with ants, wasps, and of course dragonflies. Instead, with crickets, and with orthoptera in general, they restrict themselves to commands and threats. In any case, with all the other insects the bees communicate via their antennae. It's a rudimentary code, but in compensation it's so fast I wasn't able to follow it at all, and I fear it's hopelessly beyond human capability. Besides, to be honest, not only do I think it's hopeless but I also have no desire to enter into contact with other insects by circumventing the bees; it seems to me that would be rather insensitive to them, and then they are very helpful and enthusiastic mediators, almost as if they were enjoying themselves. But, to return to the code, let's call it 'interinsect'; I have the impression that it's not a true and proper language, and that, instead of being rigidly conventional, it seems to rely on intuition and imagination. It must be vaguely similar to the complicated and yet concise manner in which we humans communicate with dogs (you have noticed, right, that the man-dog language doesn't exist, yet we understand each other, in both directions, to a considerable degree?), though certainly much richer, as you yourself will see from the results."

• • •

He led us through the garden and the arbor and pointed out to us that there wasn't a single ant. There were no insecticides: his wife did not like ants (Mrs. Simpson, who was following us, blushed deeply), so he had made a deal with them. He would provide maintenance for all of their colonies as far as the outside wall (at a cost of two or three thousand lire, he explained to me) if they would undertake to demobilize all their anthills within a fifty-meter range of the villa, not create new ones, and daily get through in two hours, from 5 to 7 p.m., all the work of micro-cleaning and elimination of noxious larvae in the garden and the villa. The ants had accepted. A short time later, however, through the mediation of the bees, they complained about a certain colony of ant lions that had infested a strip of sand at the edge of the woods. Simpson confessed to me that at the time he had no idea ant lions were dragonfly larvae; he went to the spot and witnessed in horror

their bloodthirsty habits. The sand was a constellation of little conical holes: an ant would venture to the edge of one and immediately, along with the unstable sand, fall to the bottom. A pair of ferocious curved jaws would emerge from the bottom, and Simpson was forced to recognize that the ants' protest was justified. He told me that he felt both proud and mortified by the arbitration he was asked to perform: the entire good name of the human race would depend upon his decision.

He had convened a small meeting: "It took place last September, and it was a memorable gathering. Present were bees, ants, and dragonflies—adult dragonflies, who with great rigor and urbanity defended the rights of their larvae. They pointed out to me that the latter could not in any way be held responsible for their alimentary regimen. They were incapable of mobility and, if they didn't lay snares for the ants, they would die of hunger. I then proposed to allocate to them an adequate daily ration of a balanced feed, the same given to the chickens. The dragonflies asked for a practical trial: the larvae displayed an evident liking for the feed, and so the dragonflies declared themselves ready to interpose their good offices until every trap set for the ants was eliminated. It was on that occasion that I offered them a bonus for every expedition to the blueberry bushes, but it's a job I rarely ask them to perform. They are among the most intelligent and hardy insects and I expect a lot from them."

He explained to me that he thought it inappropriate to offer a contract of any kind to the bees, since they were already far too busy; on the other hand, he was in advanced negotiations with the flies and the mosquitoes. The flies were stupid and you couldn't get much out of them: only that they not be bothersome in autumn and that they keep away from the stalls and the manure pile. For four milligrams of milk a day, they agreed. Simpson proposed that they carry simple urgent messages, at least until a telephone was installed in the villa. Negotiations with the mosquitoes proved problematic for other reasons: not only were they good for nothing but they made it clear that they didn't want, in fact were unable, to give up human blood, or at least the blood of mammals. Given the proximity of the pond, the mosquitoes constituted a considerable nuisance, therefore an agreement seemed desirable to Simpson: he consulted the local veterinarian, and proposed that he draw half a liter of blood from one of the cows in the barn every two months. With a little citrate it wouldn't coagulate, and by his calculations it should be enough for all the mosquitoes around the place.

He pointed out to me that it didn't appear to be such a great deal, but it was still less expensive than spraying DDT, and moreover it wouldn't disturb the biological equilibrium of the area. This detail was not insignificant, since this method could be patented and exploited in all malarial regions. He claimed that the mosquitoes would soon comprehend that it was in their obvious interest to avoid infecting themselves with plasmodium, and, as for the plasmodia themselves, even if they were to become extinct, it wouldn't be a great loss. I asked him if analogous nonaggression pacts could be made with other human and domestic parasites. Simpson confirmed to me that up until then contact with ungregarious insects had proved difficult; that, however, he hadn't devoted himself to it with particular care, given the negligible success that could possibly be hoped for, even in the best of hypotheses; that, further he considered that these insects were not gregarious precisely because of their incapacity to communicate. Nevertheless, with regard to noxious insects, he had already prepared a draft of a contract, approved by the Food and Agriculture Organization, and proposed to discuss it with a delegation of locusts right after their period of metamorphosis, through the mediation of a friend of his, the NATCA representative for the United Arab Republic and Lebanon.

By now, the sun had set, and we retired to the living room: my wife and I full of admiration and anxiety. We were unable to tell Simpson what we were thinking; then my wife decided she would, and with great difficulty she told him that he had landed upon . . . upon a big, new "thing," rich in not only scientific but also poetic advancements. Simpson stopped her: "Madam, I never forget that I am a businessman; in fact, I still haven't mentioned the biggest business deal of all. I beg you not to talk to anyone about this yet, but you should know that my work here is of profound interest to the *bigs** at NATCA, and especially to the brainiacs at the Research Center at Fort Kiddiwanee. I informed them of my work, of course, only after I had the patent situation under control, and it appears that an interesting merger will come of it. Look what's inside here." He gave me a minuscule cardboard box, no bigger than a thimble. I opened it.

"There's nothing in here!"

“Almost nothing,” Simpson said. He gave me a magnifying glass: on the white bottom of the box I saw a wire, thinner than a hair, maybe a centimeter in length. Halfway along it a slight increase in size was detectable.

“It’s a resistor,” Simpson said. “The wire is two thousandths of a millimeter, the joint is five, and the whole thing costs four thousand lire, but soon it will cost two hundred. This piece is the first one put together by my ants: by southern wood ants, which are the hardiest and most capable of all. During the summer I taught a team of ten, and they set up a school for all the others. You should see them, it’s a unique spectacle: two of them grab the two electrodes with their lower jaws, one twists it three times and then fixes it with a tiny drop of resin, then all three deposit the piece on the conveyor belt. A group of three can put together a resistor in fourteen seconds, including downtime, and they work twenty out of twenty-four hours. Understandably, a problem with the union developed, but these things are always worked out: they were satisfied, no doubt about it. They receive payment in kind, subdivided into two parts: one is personal, so to speak, which the ants consume during their work breaks, and the other is collective, destined for the anthill reserves, which they store in the lower sections; in total, fifteen grams a day for the entire work team, which is composed of five hundred workers. It’s triple what they could scrape up in one day of gathering here in the woods. But this is only the beginning. I’m training other teams for other ‘impossible’ jobs. One is to trace the diffraction grid of a spectrometer, a thousand lines in eight millimeters; another is to repair miniaturized printed circuit boards that, until now, were thrown out when they broke; another is to retouch photographic negatives; a fourth is to perform auxiliary tasks during brain surgery, and already I can say that they have proved irreplaceable in their ability to stop capillary hemorrhages.

“Think about it for just a moment, and right away a dozen jobs come to mind that require a minimum expenditure of energy but can’t be carried out economically because our fingers are too big and slow, because a micromanipulator is too expensive, or because they involve too many operations in too vast an area. I’ve already been in touch with an experimental agricultural station regarding various thrilling experiments: I would like to train an anthill to ‘home-deliver’ fertilizer, by which I mean one granule per seed; another anthill to clear rice fields by removing the

weeds while they're still seeds; another to clean silos; yet another to carry out cellular micro-grafting . . . Life is short, believe me. I curse myself for having begun so late. Alone we can do so little!"

"Why don't you get a partner?"

"Do you think I haven't tried? I almost ended up in jail. I'm convinced that . . . how does that proverb of yours go? Better alone."

"In jail?"

"Yes, because of O'Toole, just six months ago. Young, optimistic, intelligent, indefatigable, and full of imagination, a treasure trove of ideas. But one day on my desk I found a strange little object, a small ball, no bigger than a grape, made of hollowed-out plastic, with a tiny bit of powder inside. I had it in my hand, you see, when they knocked on the door: it was Interpol, eight agents. It took an army of lawyers to get me out, to persuade them that I had no idea about any of it."

"No idea about what?"

"About the eels. As you well know, they're not insects, but they, too, migrate in schools, thousands upon thousands, every year. He made a deal with them without my knowing, that scoundrel: as if I had kept him from making money. He bribed them with some dead flies and they came to the water's edge, one by one, before setting off for the Sargasso Sea. Two grams of heroin in each of those little balls, tied to their backs. Naturally, Rick Papaleo's yacht was waiting for them when they arrived. Now, I told you I've been cleared of every suspicion; however, my entire enterprise was discovered and I have the tax office on my case. They imagine that I earn who knows how much money; they're making inquiries. The same old story, right? Invent fire and give it to mankind, then a vulture gnaws at your liver for eternity."

The Sixth Day

Characters

ARIMANE

CHEMISTRY ADVISOR

MECHANICAL ADVISOR

ORMUZ

SECRETARY

ANATOMY ADVISOR

ECONOMIST

MINISTER OF THE WATERS

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR

THERMODYNAMIC ADVISOR

MESSENGER

The stage, as far as possible, is open and deep. A massive, rough-hewn table, chairs made from blocks of stone. An enormous clock ticking very slowly and loudly, and, in place of the hours, the face has hieroglyphics, algebraic symbols, zodiac signs. A door at the back.

ARIMANE (*in his hand, open, is a letter with many seals; his manner is of someone in mid-conversation*): Distinguished

gentlemen, it is therefore a matter of concluding, I would even say crowning, our hard-won achievement. As I have had the honor of demonstrating to you, the Management, despite some minor reservations, and suggesting some nonessential modifications to our operation, is generally satisfied both with our organizational plan and with its current management. Earning particular praise was the elegant and practical solution to the problem of oxygen regeneration (*he nods toward the* THERMODYNAMIC ADVISOR, *who bows in thanks*); the felicitous process proposed and realized by the Chemistry Advisor (*nod and bow as above*) for the closure of the nitrogen cycle; and, in another field, no less important, the development of the wing beat, for which I am pleased to pass on the Management's highest praise to the Mechanical Advisor (*nod and bow as above*), along with the directive that those who assisted him—the person in charge of the birds and the person in charge of the insects—should also share in the praise. Finally, though their manufacturing experience cannot be said to be extensive, I must laud the diligence and skill of the employees, thanks to whom waste material, units that failed inspection, and production discards were reduced to more than satisfactory margins.

In its daily communication, the Management (*shows the letter*) most explicitly expresses its continued insistence on a prompt conclusion to the design work regarding the Man model. We shall therefore start resolutely probing into the details of the project in order to better conform to our superiors' directives.

ORMUZ (*a sad and downtrodden character*. *During* ARIMANE'*s entire speech he showed signs of anxiety and disapproval; on several occasions he attempted to speak, then, as if he didn't dare, he sat down. He speaks in a timid voice, with hesitations and pauses, as if he found himself at a loss for words*): I would like to beg my distinguished colleague and brother to give a public reading of the motion approved some time ago by the Council of Executive Directors, regarding the subject of Man. Much time has passed, and I fear that some of those concerned no longer remember its content.

ARIMANE (*visibly annoyed: he makes an ostentatious display of looking at his wristwatch and at the large clock*): Colleague Secretary, I must ask you to search among the records for the most recent draft of the motion regarding Man. I don't remember the exact date, but you should be able to find it among the papers from around the time of the first Placentalia test reports. I beseech you to do this immediately; the fourth glaciation is about to begin and I wouldn't want to have to postpone everything yet again.

SECRETARY (*he has in the meantime searched for and found the motion in a voluminous file; he reads in an official voice*): "The Council of Executive Directors, persuaded that (*incomprehensible muttering*) . . . ; considering (*as above*) . . . with the intention of *(as above*) abiding by the superior interests of the (*as above*) DEEMS IT APPROPRIATE for the design and creation of an animal species distinct from those which have so far been realized, and meeting the following requirements:

(a) a special aptitude for creating and using instruments;
(b) the capacity to express himself articulately, for example, through signs, sounds, and whatever other means each relevant technician deems fitting to this end;
(c) suitability to life under extreme working conditions;
(d) a proclivity for community life, to a level that will be experimentally determined for optimum value.

The technicians and the qualified departments are *strongly requested* to take maximum interest in the problem above stated, which is of the utmost urgency, and for which a swift and brilliant solution is *desired*.

ORMUZ (*abruptly rises to his feet and speaks with the haste of the shy*): I have never concealed the fact that I have been opposed from the start to the creation of the so-called Man. Already at the time when the Management, rather superficially *(murmuring:* ORMUZ *takes a deep breath, hesitates, then continues),* formulated the first draft of the motion just read, I pointed out the dangers associated with this so-called Man's integration into the equilibrium of the existing planet. Naturally, understanding the

importance that for more than obvious reasons the Management attaches to the problem in question, and the proverbial obstinacy (*murmuring, comments*) of the same Management, I realize that it is by now too late to instigate the withdrawal of the motion. I'll therefore limit myself to suggesting case by case and in a purely advisory capacity only those modifications and those mitigations to the Council's ambitious program which, in my opinion, will allow for its realization without excessive trauma in either the short or the long term.

ARIMANE: Fine, fine, distinguished colleague. Your reservations are well-known, as is your personal skepticism and pessimism, and, finally, your interesting report on the questionable result of similar experiments conducted by you yourself in different eras and on other planets, at a time when we all had a freer hand. Between ourselves, those attempts of yours at Superanimals were so packed with reason and common sense, from inception so jammed with geometry, music, and wisdom, that they made even the chickens giggle. They reeked of antiseptic and inorganic chemistry. Anyone with a certain firsthand knowledge of things in this world, or in any other world, for that matter, would have understood their incompatibility with the surrounding environment, an environment necessarily at once putrid and florid, teeming, chaotic, mutable.

I will take the liberty of repeating to you that it is precisely because of such failures that the Management insists, indeed urges, that this by now ancient problem be steadfastly faced up to, with seriousness and competence (*he intentionally repeats himself*), I said with seriousness and competence; and that our long-awaited guest (*lyrically*), the master, the connoisseur of good and evil, make his appearance—he, that is, whom the Council of Executive Directors has elegantly defined as the being composed in the image and likeness of his creator. (*Sedate, official applause*)

Back to work then, gentlemen, and once more permit me to remind you that time is running out.

ANATOMY ADVISOR: I ask leave to speak.

ARIMANE: Our colleague the Anatomy Advisor will now take the floor.

ANATOMY ADVISOR: Insofar as my specific expertise allows, I will briefly formulate the problem. In the first place, it would be illogical to start from scratch, ignoring all the good work that has been done up until now on Earth. We already possess an animal and plant world more or less in equilibrium; I therefore recommend to our colleagues in design that they abstain from overly intrepid changes and from overly bold innovations on models already realized. The field is already far too vast. If I were to permit myself indiscretions verging on the limits of professionalism, I could keep you here quite a while listening to the numerous projects that have accumulated on my desk (not to mention the ones that find their way into my trash can). Mind you, the material in question is often rather interesting and, in any case, original: organisms designed for temperatures varying from –270° to +300°C, studies on colloidal systems in liquid carbon dioxide, metabolisms without nitrogen or without carbon, and so on. One guy even proposed a line of exclusively metallic live models; another, an ingenious, almost perfectly self-sufficient vesicular organism that was lighter than air, because it was inflated with hydrogen extracted from water by means of a theoretically flawless enzymatic system, and used the wind to navigate the entire surface of the Earth without notable energy expenditure.

I mention these curiosities essentially in order to give you an idea of the so to speak negative aspect of my duties. In several cases, we are dealing with potentially fertile ideas; but it would be, in my opinion, an error to let ourselves be distracted by their indisputable fascination. It seems to me unquestionable, if for no other reason than time and simplicity, that for the project under discussion the point of departure should be sought in one of the fields in which our experience has been tested most successfully and for the longest duration. This time, we cannot permit ourselves trials, do-overs, corrections: we must heed the warning of the disastrous failure of the great Sauria, which on paper was really very promising, and which, fundamentally, wasn’t so far off

the traditional schemes. Leaving aside, for obvious reasons, the plant realm, I would like to bring the Mammalia and the Arthropoda to the designers' attention (*prolonged rustling, comments*), and I will not conceal that my personal predilection is for the latter.

ECONOMIST: As is both my habit and my duty, I shall intervene unsolicited. Colleague Anatomist, tell me: what, according to you, should Man's dimensions be?

ANATOMY ADVISOR (*taken unawares*): But . . . truly . . . (*he calculates in a low voice, scribbling numbers and sketches on a piece of paper in front of him*) let's see . . . here, from about sixty centimeters to fifteen or twenty linear meters. Compatible with the unit price and with the requirements for locomotion, I would opt for the larger dimensions, ensuring, it seems to me, a greater chance of success in the inevitable competition with other species.

ECONOMIST: Given your preference for Arthropoda, are you thinking of a Man around twenty meters tall with an external skeleton?

ANATOMY ADVISOR: Certainly: allow me to remind you, in all modesty, of the elegance of my innovation. With a supporting external skeleton, a single structure satisfies the requirements for support, locomotion, and defense; the difficulty of growth, as has been noted, can easily be avoided through a kind of artificial moult, something I have recently developed. The introduction of chitin as the construction material . . .

ECONOMIST (*steely*): Are you aware of how much chitin costs?

ANATOMY ADVISOR: No, but in any case . . .

ECONOMIST: That's enough. I have sufficient information to firmly oppose your proposal for a twenty-meter arthropod man. And, on further thought, not one measuring even five meters, or even one meter. If you want to make an arthropod, that's your affair; but if it's going to be bigger than a stag beetle, I won't have anything to do with it, and the budget will be your problem.

ARIMANE: Colleague Anatomist, the Economist's opinion (besides being in my view more than justified) is, unfortunately, final and without appeal. Furthermore, it seems to me that, aside from the

mammals to which you referred a moment ago, the vertebrate series presents even more interesting possibilities among the reptiles, the birds, the fish . . .

MINISTER OF THE WATERS (*a lively old man with a blue beard and holding a small trident*): Hear, hear, listen up. It is inconceivable, in my opinion, that so far no one in this room has mentioned the aquatic solution. Even the room itself is desperately dry: stone, concrete, wood, not a puddle—what am I talking about? There's not even a faucet. It's enough to make the blood curdle!

And yet everyone knows that water covers three-quarters of the Earth's surface; and furthermore the land above sea level is a surface that has only two dimensions, two coordinates, four cardinal points; while the ocean, gentlemen, the ocean . . .

ARIMANE: I wouldn't have any objection in principle to a Man either wholly or partially aquatic; but subsection (a) of the Man motion speaks of tools, and I wonder what materials a floating or subaquatic Man would use to make them?

MINISTER OF THE WATERS: I don't see any difficulty. An aquatic Man, especially with coastal habits, would have at his disposition mollusk shells, the bones and teeth of all species, various minerals, many of which are easy to manipulate, algae made of tough fibers—in fact, in this regard, all it would take is one little word from me to my friend in charge of vegetation, and in several thousand generations we could have available in abundance any material similar to, for example, wood, or hemp, or cork, given our specific requirements, remaining, naturally, within the limits of good sense and technical capability.

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR *(dressed as a Martian with a helmet, enormous spectacles, antennae, tubes, etc.*): Gentlemen, we are—rather, you are—off track. I have heard just now talk of a coastal Man as if such a thing were utterly normal, without anyone standing up to point out the extreme precariousness of life the creatures living between land and sea are subjected to, exposed as they are to all the hazards of both environments. Just think of all the troubles the seals have had! But there's another thing: it seems

clear to me, from at least three of the four subsections of the directorial motion, that Man is tacitly intended to be rational.

MINISTER OF THE WATERS: And what is that supposed to mean! Are you by chance insinuating that one cannot reason underwater? And if so what would I be doing there, I who spend almost all my working hours in the water?

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR: I beg you, distinguished colleague, calm down and let me speak. There is nothing easier than to unfurl a large roll of drawings, in plain view and cross section, with all the construction details, for the design of a great beast or a small one, male or female, winged or not, with fingernails or horned, with two eyes or eight eyes or a hundred and eighty eyes, or perhaps with a thousand feet, like the time you made me sweat blood in order to tidy up the nervous system of the millipede.

Then a small empty circle is drawn inside the head and next to it is stenciled: “Cranial cavity for encephalon placement,” and the chief psychologist has to make do. And up until now I have made do, no one can deny it, but, I ask you, don’t you realize that, if someone is going to have a say on the subject of aquatic Man or Earth Man or flying Man, it should be me? Tools, articulated language, community life, all in one blow, and immediately (I would bet) someone will probably still find something to criticize because his sense of direction is weak, or someone else (*he purposefully looks at the* ECONOMIST) will protest because by the kilo he will cost more than a mole or a caiman! (*Murmuring, approbation, some dissent. The* PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR *takes off his Martian helmet in order to scratch his head and dry the sweat, then puts it back on and continues*) So, listen to me, and if someone wants to carry the message to those upstairs, so much the better. One of three things: either you take me seriously from now on, and stop presenting me with projects that are already signed, sealed, and delivered; or you give me a reasonable amount of time to figure out this mess; or I will resign, and then, in place of the small empty circle, our Anatomist colleague can put into the heads of his most ingenious creations a packet of connective tissue, or a reserve stomach, or, best of all, a big lump of extra fat. I’ve said what I have to say.

A contrite and guilty silence from which ARIMANE's *persuasive voice finally emerges.*

ARIMANE: Distinguished Psychologist colleague, I can give you formal assurances that no one in this meeting has ever undervalued even for an instant the difficulties and responsibilities of your work. Furthermore, you are teaching us that solutions involving compromise are more of a rule than an exception, and it is our communal duty to seek to resolve individual problems in the spirit of the greatest possible collaboration. In the case under discussion, then, the preeminent importance of your opinions is clear to everyone, and your specific competence has been well noted. I therefore give the floor back to you.

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR (*instantaneously appeased, takes a deep breath*): Gentlemen, it is my opinion, which, by the way, can be amply documented, that in order to put together a Man who corresponds to the prescribed requirements, and is altogether viable, economical, and reasonably long-lasting, it would be necessary for us to start over from the beginning, and to construct this animal from definitively new building blocks . . .

ARIMANE (*interrupts*): No, no, don't . . .

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR: All right, distinguished colleague, the objection of urgency was foreseen and taken for granted. I will, in any case, permit myself to denounce the ulterior motives that yet again disrupt what could have been (and it happens so rarely!) an interesting little task; besides, this seems to be the fate of us technicians.

To return then to the basic question, I have no doubt that Man is a terrestrial being and not an aquatic one. I will briefly show you the reasons. It seems clear to me that this Man must possess mental faculties that are rather well developed, and that this, in the present state of our knowledge, cannot be realized without a corresponding development of the sense organs. Now, for an animal who is submerged or floating, the development of the senses meets with grave difficulties. In the first place, taste and sense of smell would obviously become merged into only one

sense, which would still be the lesser problem. But consider the homogeneous, even monotonous conditions of the aquatic environment; I don't want to speak for the future, but the best eyes so far constructed cannot explore more than around ten meters of clear water, and a few centimeters of turbid water. So either we'll provide Man with rudimentary eyes or they will become such from non-use in a few thousand centuries. The same, or almost, can be said about the ears—

MINISTER OF THE WATERS (*interrupts*): Water is a superb conductor of sound, gentlemen! It is twenty-seven times as fast as air!

MANY VOICES: Slow down! Slow down!

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR (*continuing*): . . . can be said about the ears. It is indeed very easy to construct a subaquatic ear, but equally difficult to generate sound in water. I confess that I wouldn't know how to clarify for you the physical explanation for this, which is not, by the way, my business; rather, the Minister of the Waters and our distinguished colleague the Anatomist will have to explain the singular circumstance of the proverbial muteness of fish. Perhaps it's a sign of wisdom, but it seems to me that during my inspection visits I had to travel to a remote corner of the sea surrounding the Antilles to find a fish that emitted sounds; and these were barely articulated and even less pleasant, and, so far as I could determine, the above-mentioned fish, whose name escapes me . . .

VOICES: The cow fish! The cow fish!

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR: . . . emits these sounds in an entirely blasé way at the moment in which the swim bladder is emptied. And, of particular interest, the fish surfaces before emitting the sound. In conclusion, I ask myself, and I ask you, what would the perfected ear of the Man-fish hear, if not the thunder when he gets near the surface, the rumble of the surf when he nears the coast, and the occasional lowing of his Antillean colleague? The decision is yours: but remember that, given the technology actually in hand, this creature would be half blind and, if not deaf, mute; therefore, what advantage would this provide in terms of (*he grabs the Man motion from the table and reads out loud*) "the

capability of expressing himself articulately etc. etc." and then, further on, "proclivity for community life . . ."? I leave it to each of you to judge.

ARIMANE: I will take the liberty of proposing an end to this first fruitful exchange of viewpoints, assuming responsibility for the consequences. The Man then will be neither an arthropod nor a fish; it remains for us to decide whether he will be a mammal, a reptile, or a bird. If it is appropriate for me to express my bias, dictated less by reason than by sentiment and sympathy, allow me to urge the reptiles on your attention.

I will not hide from you that, of the multiple forms and figures created by your art and ingenuity, my admiration has been sparked by none more than the serpent. It is strong and cunning: "The most cunning of Earth's creatures," it has been called by the highest Judge. (*All rise and bow*) Its structure is of an exceptional simplicity and elegance, and it would be a shame not to perfect it further. He is a skillful and reliable poisoner: it shouldn't be difficult for him to become, according to his merits, the master of the Earth, perhaps by creating a void in his immediate vicinity.

ANATOMY ADVISOR: All true; and I might add that serpents are extraordinarily economical, and lend themselves to numerous and interesting modifications, so that it wouldn't be difficult, for example, to enlarge his brainpan by 40 percent, and so on. But I must remind you that so far no reptile among those which have been constructed has been able to survive in cold climates: subsection (c) of the motion would be in violation. I would be grateful to our thermodynamic colleague if he would confirm my statement with some numerical data.

THERMODYNAMIC ADVISOR (*very curt*): Median annual temperature above 10ºC; never temperatures less than 15ºC below zero. That says it all.

ARIMANE (*embarrassed laugh*): I must confess to you that these circumstances, though obvious, escaped me; nor will I hide from you my disappointment, since I have often thought recently about the striking appearance Earth's surface would have, furrowed in every sense by powerful multicolored pythons, and how their cities, which I liked to imagine dug out among the roots of giant

trees, would provide many spaces where individuals who had consumed a large meal could collectively rest and meditate. But, since I have been assured that all this is not possible, let's abandon the thought and, since the choice is now restricted to mammals and birds, let's dedicate all of our energy to a speedy decision. I see that our distinguished colleague the Psychologist requests leave to speak: and, since none can deny that he is responsible for a large part of the project, I beg all of you to give him your full attention.

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR (*precipitously begins to speak before the other has finished*): In my opinion, as I have already indicated, the solution should be looked for elsewhere. Ever since I published my celebrated study on termites and ants (*interruptions from various parts of the audience*), I've had in my drawer a little project (*the interruptions become increasingly violent*) regarding some unique automatons that would ensure an incredible savings on nerve tissue.

All hell breaks loose, and, with great difficulty,
ARIMANE, *gesticulating, calms things down.*

ARIMANE: I have told you once already that these inventions of yours are of no interest to us. We absolutely do not have the time to study, launch, develop, and test a new model of animal, and you should be the first to advise us of this: now, tell me, regarding your precious hymenoptera, from prototype to their present stabilized morphology, didn't a number—somewhere in the eight to nine figures—of years pass? We therefore call you to order, and this will be the last time; otherwise we will find ourselves forced to give up your precious assistance, since before you were hired your colleagues perfected, without making any great claims, for example, some splendid coelenterates, which still function very well today, never break down, reproduce themselves galore without complaint, and cost next to nothing.

Yes, those were the days, and I say it with no offense to anyone. Many working and few criticizing, much done and little said, and everything that came out of the factory was good

enough and without any complications from you modernists. Nowadays, before we can move from design to manufacturing, we need the psychologist, the neurologist, and the histologist to sign off, as well as the certificate of inspection and the approval of the Aesthetic Committee in triplicate, and other such hullabaloo. And I'm told it's still not enough, and that soon none other than a supervisor for Spiritual Things will be hired, which will make us all stand at attention . . . (*Realizing that he has let himself go on, he is suddenly quiet and looks around with a certain embarrassment. He then turns again to the* PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR) In conclusion, reflect upon it and then clearly explain to us if in your opinion we should research a Man-bird or a Man-mammal, and the reasons on which you base your decision.

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR (*swallows repeatedly, sucks on his pencil, etc.; then*): If the choice comes down to those two possibilities, it is my opinion that the Man should be a bird. (*Uproar, comments. Everyone exchanges nods of satisfaction and approval; two or three start to get up as if everything had been concluded*) One moment, goodness me! I didn't mean by this that all we needed to do was dig out of the archives Project Sparrow or Project Barn Owl, change the register number and three or four opening paragraphs, and submit it to Central Development for them to build the prototype!

Please pay attention; I will try to briefly present to you (since I see that you are in a hurry) the idea's main considerations. Everything is fine with regard to the motion's subsections (b) and (d). Already today a large assortment of melodious birds exists and so the problem of an articulated language, at least as far as the anatomical aspect is concerned, can be considered resolved; while nothing of the sort has been done so far among the mammals. Am I right, Colleague Anatomist?

ANATOMY ADVISOR: Quite right, quite right.

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR: Naturally, still to be accomplished is the study of a brain adapted to create and use language, but this problem, in my limited competence, would remain nearly the same whatever form we decide to give Man. As for subsection

(c), “suitability to life under extreme working conditions,” I can’t recall or come up with a criterion for choosing between mammals and birds; in both classes, species exist that easily adapt to the most disparate of climates and environments. It is, on the other hand, obvious that the ability to move quickly in flight constitutes an important prejudice in favor of the Man-bird, insofar as it would permit an exchange of information and foodstuffs over distances that span continents, which would facilitate the immediate installation of a single language and of a single civilization for the entire human race. It would eliminate the existing geographical obstacles and render futile the creation of artificial territorial boundaries from tribe to tribe. And I hardly need emphasize the other, more immediate advantages that rapid flight brings for both defense and offense against all land and sea species, as well as the expeditious discovery of ever new territories for hunting, farming, and development, for which it seems fair to formulate the axiom “The animal that flies never goes hungry.”

ORMUZ: Excuse the interruption, distinguished colleague: how does your Man-bird reproduce?

PSYCHOLOGY ADVISOR (*surprised and irritated*): What a strange question! It would reproduce like other birds, the male attracts the female or vice versa; the female is fertilized, a nest is built, the eggs are laid and incubated, the chicks are raised and educated by both parents until they achieve a minimum of independence. The fittest of them will survive. I don’t see any reason to change.

ORMUZ (*at first uncertain, then a little more animated and passionate*): No, gentlemen, it doesn’t seem so simple to me. Many of you know . . . and as for the rest of you, I have never made it a mystery . . . in short, to me, sexual differentiation has never seemed a great idea. It certainly has its advantages for the species; it also has advantages for the individual (even if it is my understanding that these advantages are of a rather short duration); but every objective observer must admit that sex is initially a terrifying complication and subsequently a permanent source of dangers and problems.

Nothing counts more than experience: since we are dealing with social life, please remember that the only example of a successfully realized social life, lasting from the Tertiary period to today without the least inconvenience, is that of the hymenoptera; in which, due in large part to my intercession, the sexual drama was evaded and relegated to the extreme margins of productive society.

Gentlemen, my prayer to you is the following: weigh your words before you pronounce them. Whichever Man will be, bird or mammal, it is our duty to make every effort to smooth his path, since the burden he must carry is very heavy. Having created him, we understand his brain, and we know what miraculous feats he is, at least potentially, capable of, but we likewise know his measure and his limits; we also know, since we had a hand in it, both the subliminal and aroused energies played out between the sexes. I don't deny that the experience of combining the two mechanisms is intriguing; but I confess to my hesitation, I confess to my fear.

What will this creature be? Will he be dual, a centaur, a man as far as the precordium and from there on a beast; or will he be tied to an estrous cycle, and, if so, then how will he maintain a sufficient behavioral consistency? He will adhere not to (don't laugh!) Good and Truth but to two goods and two truths. And when two men desire the same woman, or two women the same man, what will become of their social institutions, and of the laws that should protect them?

And what is to be said with regard to Man of those famous "elegant and economical solutions" boasted of by the Anatomy Advisor present here today, and enthusiastically backed by the Economist, also present, as a result of which the orifices and canals originally destined for excretion are shamelessly used for sexual purposes? This situation, which we know is due purely to a calculation to reduce encumbrances and costs, could be construed by our thinking animal as nothing other than a symbol of mockery, a despicable and disturbing mess, a sign of holy filth, of two-headed insanity, of chaos, inserted into his body, inalienable, eternal.

And here I come to my conclusion, gentlemen. Let there be Man, Man should be made, even if he is a bird, if that is what you want. But grant me the possibility of dealing with the problem immediately, of extinguishing today the seeds of conflict that will fatally explode tomorrow, so that we will not have to watch in the foreseeable future the unlucky spectacle of a male Man who forces his people into a war in order to win a woman, or of a female Man who distracts the mind of a male from noble causes and intentions in order to reduce him to subjugation. Remember: he who is about to be born will be our judge. Not only our errors but all of his, for all the centuries to come, will be upon our heads.

ARIMANE: You might even be right, but I don't see the urgent need to bandage our heads when they're not yet injured. That is, I don't see either the possibility or the expedience of freezing Man in the planning stage, and that is for obvious reasons of expediting the work of production. If your disturbing predictions should then come to pass, well, we'll see; there will be plenty of time and opportunity to make more suitable corrections to the model. On the other hand, since it appears that Man will be a bird, it seems to me that it's not necessary to dramatize. The difficulties and risks that worry you can be easily limited. Sexual interest can be reduced to extremely brief periods, perhaps no more than a few minutes a year; there would be no pregnancy, no breast-feeding, a precise and powerful trend toward monogamy, a brief brooding time, babies that come out of the egg ready or almost ready for autonomous life. This can be attained without reconfiguring the anatomical plans that are now in force, which, besides everything else, would involve formidable impediments of both a bureaucratic and an administrative nature.

No, gentlemen, the decision has by now been made, and Man will be bird: bird in the true sense, not a penguin, not an ostrich, a flying bird with a beak, feathers, claws, eggs, and nest. All that remains is to define some important constructive details, which are:

(1) what the optimum dimensions will be;

(2) whether to predetermine if he is sedentary or migratory . . .

(*At* ARIMANE*'s last words, the door at the back is cautiously opened. The head and shoulders of the MESSENGER appear; he, without daring to interrupt, glances around and vigorously gesticulates in order to attract the attention of those in the room. A murmur begins and then confusion, which* ARIMANE f*inally becomes aware of*) What is it? What's happening?

MESSENGER *(he winks at* ARIMANE *with the informal and confidential attitude of porters and sextons*): Come outside a moment, your eminence. There is important news from . . . (*with his head he motions behind and upward*).

ARIMANE (*follows him out the door; an agitated conversation is audible over the buzzing and remarks of the others. Suddenly, the half-open door is closed violently from the outside, and a little later opened again.* ARIMANE *comes back in, his pace slow and his head lowered. He is silent for a long time, then*) . . . Let's go home, gentlemen. It's all over, all resolved. Home, home. What are we staying here for?

They didn't wait for us: wasn't I right to be in a hurry? Yet again, they wanted to show us that we aren't necessary, that they know how to do it alone, that they don't need anatomists, psychologists, or economists. They can do what they want.

. . . No, gentlemen, I don't know many details. I don't know if they consulted with anyone, or if they followed any logic, a long considered plan or a moment's intuition. I know that they used seven measures of clay, and that they mixed it with river water and sea water; I know that they molded the mud into a form that they considered best. It appears to be an upright animal, with almost no fur, defenseless, and to the messenger here present it seemed akin to a monkey and a bear: an animal without wings or feathers, and therefore to be considered substantially mammal. It further seems that the female Man was created from one of his ribs . . . (*voices, questions*) . . . from one of his ribs, yes, by a procedure that was not clear to me, and which I would not hesitate to define as unorthodox, and I have no idea whether it is intended to be maintained for future generations. Into this

creature was infused I do not know what breath, and he moved. Thus Man was born, oh, gentlemen, a long way from our consensus: simple, isn’t it? If and how much he conforms to the requirements proposed to us, or if instead we are dealing with a Man by mere definition and convention, I do not have the necessary information to determine.

There is nothing else to do, then, but wish this anomalous creature a long and prosperous career. Our colleague Secretary will take charge of the message of good wishes, the validation form, registration in the roster, the calculation of costs, et cetera; the rest of you are free of all duties. Be of good cheer, gentlemen; the meeting is adjourned.

Retirement Package

I had gone to the Fair for no particular reason or need, compelled by that irrational sense of duty that all Milanese understand, and without which the Fair wouldn't be the Fair, meaning that most days it would be empty, and convenient and easy to visit.

I was very surprised to find Simpson at the NATCA stand. He greeted me with a sunny smile: "You weren't expecting to see me, eh, in this stall, usually occupied by a pretty girl or a young agent fresh out of the gate! In fact, it's none of my business to be standing here, responding to the silly questions of passersby (ahem . . . present company excluded, of course), and trying to guess who among them are actually competitors in disguise, which isn't really that hard, because their questions are less silly. But I came here on a whim, even I don't know why. But wait, why not say it? There's nothing to be ashamed of: I came out of gratitude."

"Gratitude to whom?"

"To NATCA, for goodness' sake. Yesterday was a great day for me."

"Did you get a promotion?"

"What do you mean, promotion! More promoted than I already am . . . no, no: I'm retiring. Come on, let's go to the bar—I'll buy you a whiskey."

He told me that according to company policy he should have retired in two more years, but he had asked for early retirement, and just yesterday had received a telex giving the management's consent.

"It's not that I don't feel like working anymore," he said to me. "On the contrary, as you know, I have other interests now, of a different kind, and I feel the need to have the whole day to myself. At Fort Kiddiwanee they

were very understanding, and besides, because of the assembler-ants, which you know about already, it's in their interest."

"My congratulations. I didn't know that the matter had come to such a favorable conclusion."

"Yes, yes, I gave them an exclusive: every month a pound of trained ants at three dollars each. So they didn't nitpick: total liquidation, an eight-thousand-dollar bonus, a retirement package of the highest order, and on top of it all a gift that I want to show you. A gift unique in all the world, at least for now."

We had, in the meantime, returned to the stand, and we sat in two armchairs at the back. "It's not news to you," Simpson continued. "Even apart from the business of the social insects, I had already become a little fed up with the 'new frontier' of those excellent people. Last year, for example, with the scarcity of *executives** in America, they churned out a series of measuring devices as substitutes for aptitude tests and hiring interviews, and they expected me to sell them in Italy as well. They were to be arranged in sequence: the candidate enters, goes through a tunnel like a car in a car wash, and when he comes out the other side, his file is already printed with his qualifications, his classifications, his mental profile, his IQ . . ."

"His what?"

"Oh, yes, sorry: his intelligence quotient, his proposed duties, and the salary on offer. Once upon a time, I was passionate about these little games; today I don't have the least taste for it, and they even give me a vague sense of unease. And now this!"

Mr. Simpson took from the display case a black box that appeared to me to be a geodetic instrument:

"It's a VIP-SCAN: that's exactly what it's called. It's a probe for VIPs, Very Important Persons.* It's also supposed to be useful in the selection of executives. It should be used (surreptitiously, of course) during the preliminary 'friendly conversation.' Excuse me a minute—you'll allow me, right?"

He pointed the lens at me and held the button down for about a minute: "Speak, please, it doesn't matter what, say whatever you like. Pace forward and backward a bit. That's enough, it's done. Let's see: 28 hundredths. That's not bad, but you aren't a VIP. That's exactly the kind of thing that irritates me, twenty-eight for someone like you! But don't be offended, I

only wanted to show you that this thing is a poor judge and, in addition, it's calibrated according to American standards. No, I don't know exactly how it functions, and I'm not even that interested, upon my word of honor; I only know that the score is allotted based on factors such as the cut and design of one's suit, the length of one's cigar (and you don't smoke), the condition of one's teeth, and the pace and rhythm of one's speech. I'm sorry, perhaps I shouldn't have done that, but if it makes you feel any better, my score barely makes it to twenty-five and that's only after I have just shaved, otherwise it doesn't get past twenty points. Anyway, it's madnesss! Either they don't sell, and then it's bad news for the Italian NATCA, or they do sell, and then shivers run down my spine at the thought of a class of managers made up entirely of 100 hundredths. So you see, it's another good reason for me to leave."

He lowered his voice and put his hand confidentially on my knee. ". . . But if you come over to my place one of these days, when the Fair is over, I'll show you the first and foremost reason I'm leaving. It's that gift I told you about: a Torec, a Total Recorder.* With that in the house, as well as a small selection of tapes, a nice pension, and my bees, why should I continue to trouble myself with customers?"

Simpson apologized for inviting me to his office instead of to his home: "We might be a little less comfortable here, but we won't be disturbed; there's nothing more irritating than a telephone call just as we're enjoying ourselves, and no one calls here except during office hours. I must also confess that my wife isn't too fond of this gadget and doesn't want to see it anywhere near her."

He gave me a competent demonstration of the Torec, displaying his characteristic incapacity to marvel at anything, which in my opinion derives from his long history as a salesman of marvels. The Torec, he explained to me, is a total recording instrument. It's not a typical office machine; it's a revolutionary device. It's based on the Andrac, the contrivance created and described by R. Vacca, and tested on himself: based, that is to say, on direct communication between nerve circuits and electrical circuits. With the Andrac, if you undergo a small surgical intervention, it's possible, for example, to activate a telex or to drive a car simply by means of nerve

impulses, without any muscular intervention. In other words, it's enough to "want it." The Torec, instead, takes advantage of the corresponding receptive mechanism, in that it excites sensations in the brain without the intermediation of the senses. In contrast to the Andrac, however, the Torec doesn't require invasive intervention. The sensations recorded on the tapes are transmitted by way of skin electrodes, without the need for any preparatory operation.

The listener, or rather the user, has only to put on a helmet, and during the entire playing of the tape he receives the complete and systematized series of sensations contained on the tape itself: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, taste, kinesthetic, and painful, as well as the so-called internal sensations that each of us receives from our individual memory while in a waking state. In short, all the afferent messages that the brain, or rather (in keeping with Aristotle) the passive intellect, is capable of receiving. The transmission comes not via the user's sense organs, which remain cut off, but directly at the level of the nervous system, using a code that NATCA keeps a secret. The result is a total experience. The spectator relives integrally the event that the tape suggests to him—he feels as if he were directly participating or even that he himself is the actor. This sensation has nothing in common with hallucination or with dreaming because, as long as the tape is playing, it is indistinguishable from reality. When the tape has finished, one retains one's normal memory, but during each use of the tape the natural memory is supplanted by the artificial memories recorded on the tape, and so one doesn't remember earlier uses, and therefore neither fatigue nor boredom arises. Each individual tape can be used repeatedly and indefinitely, and every time the experience is as intense and full of surprises as it was the first time.

With the Torec, Simpson concluded, a person has nothing to worry about. "You understand: whatever sensation you want to try, all you have to do is choose the tape. Do you want to go on a cruise to the Antilles? Or climb the Matterhorn? Or circle around the Earth for an hour, free of gravity and all that? Or be Sergeant Abel F. Cooper and exterminate a gang of Vietcong? Well, then, shut yourself in your bedroom, put on the helmet, relax, and let Torec take charge."

I was silent for a few seconds while Simpson peered at me through his glasses with benevolent curiosity. Then he said, "You look perplexed."

“It seems to me,” I responded, “that this Torec is the ultimate machine. Or, rather, a subversive machine: no other NATCA machine, in fact, no other machine that has ever been invented, contains such a threat to our customs and to the order of our society. It will discourage all initiative, in fact, all human activity; it will be the last big step, following mass entertainment and mass communication. At our house, for example, ever since we bought a television, my son sits in front of it for hours and doesn’t play anymore, drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Myself no, I walk away, although it requires willpower. But who will have the willpower to leave a Torec offering? It seems quite a bit more dangerous than any drug. Who would work anymore? Who would continue to look after the family?”

“I never told you the Torec was for sale,” Simpson said. “In fact, I told you that I had received it as a gift, a gift unique in all the world, sent to me when I retired. If we want to split hairs, I must add that it’s not even really a gift; legally, the machine is still owned by NATCA and has been loaned to me for an indefinite period, not only as a reward but also because I am experimenting with its long-term effects.”

“In any case,” I said, “if they have studied and built it, that’s because they intend to sell it.”

“It’s a simple matter. For every action they take, NATCA’s owners have only two goals, which are then reduced to one: make money and acquire prestige, which leads to making more money. It’s understandable that they want to produce the Torec in a series and sell millions of units, but they still have their heads enough on their shoulders to realize that Congress would not remain indifferent to the unregulated diffusion of an instrument such as this one. Therefore, over the past few months, after the prototype was produced, their first concern has been to shield it with an armor of patents so that not even one bolt remains exposed. Their second is to gain the legislature’s consent for it to be distributed in all retirement homes and allocated at no cost to every invalid and terminal patient. Finally, and this is their most ambitious plan, they would like the entire active population’s right to a pension to coincide, by law, with the right to a Torec.”

“Making you the prototype, so to speak, for the retiree of tomorrow?”

“Yes, and I assure you that I don’t mind the experience in the least. The Torec arrived only two weeks ago, but I have already had the most enchanting evenings; sure, you’re right, it requires willpower and good sense not to let oneself become overwhelmed, not to dedicate entire days to

it, and I would never let a young person use it, but at my age it's invaluable. Don't you want to try it? I have promised not to lend or sell it, but you are a discreet person, and I believe an exception could be made in your case. You know, they also asked me to analyze its possibilities as a teaching aid, for the study of geography, for example, or the natural sciences, and I would much appreciate your opinion.

"Sit back and relax," he said to me, "and maybe it would be better if we closed the blinds. Yes, like that, with your back to the light, that will work perfectly. I own only thirty or so tapes, but another seventy are in customs in Genoa and I hope to receive them soon. Then I'll have the entire selection so far in existence."

"Who produces the tapes? How are they made?"

"There is talk of producing artificial tapes, but for now these are made by recording actual subjects. The procedure is known only in a general way: down there at Fort Kiddiwanee, in the Torec Division, the opportunity to make a series of recordings is offered to anyone who regularly, or even occasionally, has some experience that lends itself to commercial exploitation: to aviators, explorers, scuba divers, seducers or seductresses, and many other categories of individuals that you yourself might imagine if you were to think about it for a moment. Let's suppose that the subject accepts and that an agreement is reached about rights—speaking of which, I heard that the amount we're talking about is quite high, from two to five thousand dollars a tape, but often, to obtain a usable registration, it's necessary to repeat a recording ten to twenty times. So: if an agreement is reached, they put a helmet on the subject's head, more or less like this one, and he doesn't have to do anything other than wear it during the entire length of the recording. There's no more to it than that. All of his sensations are transmitted via radio to the central recording device, and then from the first tape they make as many copies as they want with the usual technology."

"But then . . . but if the subject *knows* that each of his sensations will be recorded, then this consciousness of his will also be recorded on the tape. You'll relive the blastoff not of any astronaut but of an astronaut who knows that he has a Torec helmet on his head and that he is the object of a recording."

"Exactly," Simpson said. "In fact, this underlying consciousness is distinctly perceivable on the majority of the tapes I've used, but some

subjects, with practice, learn to repress it during the recording and relegate it to the subconscious, where the Torec can't reach. On the other hand, it doesn't make that big a difference. As for the helmet, it doesn't bother you at all: the sensation of 'helmet on the head,' which is recorded on all the tapes, corresponds directly to the one induced by the reception helmet."

I was about to expound to him other objections I had of a philosophical nature, but Simpson interrupted me. "Do you want to begin with this one? It's one of my favorites. You know, in America soccer isn't very popular, but since living in Italy I've become an avid Milan fan; in fact, I was the one who put together the deal between Rasmussen and NATCA, and I was responsible for the recording myself. He got three million lire out of it, and NATCA got a fantastic tape. Gosh, what a midfielder! Here, have a seat, put on the helmet, and then you'll tell me what you think."

"But I don't understand a thing about soccer. Not only have I never played, not even as a kid, but I've never seen a game, not even on television!"

"It doesn't matter," Simpson said, still totally vibrant with enthusiasm, and he turned it on.

The sun was low and hot, the air dusty: I perceived an intense odor of overturned earth. I was sweating and my ankle hurt slightly. I was running with extremely light strides just behind the ball, I looked out of the corner of my eye to my left, and felt nimble and ready, like a loaded spring. Another player wearing red and black entered into my visual field; the ball scraped the ground as I passed it to him, surprising an opponent, then I ran ahead while the goalie came out of the goal toward the right. I heard the rising roar of the crowd, I saw the ball passed back toward me, a little ahead to take advantage of my sprint. I was on it in a flash and, using my left foot, I kicked it into the goal with precision, effortlessly, in front of the goalie's outstretched hands. I felt a wave of joy course through my veins, and a little later the bitter aftertaste of adrenaline in my mouth. Then everything was over and I found myself in the armchair.

"You see? It's very short, but a little jewel. Were you aware of the recording? No, right? When one is near the goal there are other things to think about."

"It's true. I have to admit, it's an odd sensation. It's thrilling to feel one's own body so young and compliant, a sensation I lost decades ago. And to score, too, yes, that's great: you don't think about anything else, you

are totally focused on one point, like a bullet. And the roar of the crowd! And yet, I don't know if you noticed, in that instant in which I waited, in which *he* waited for the pass, a stray thought made its way in: a tall brunette named Claudia, who has a date with him at nine at San Babila. It lasts only a second but it's very clear—time, place, previous history, everything. Did you feel it?"

"Sure, of course, but these things aren't important; actually, they increase the sensation of the real. You realize that one can't exactly become a tabula rasa, and show up for the recording as if born the second before. I know that many have refused to sign the contract for reasons relating to this kind of thing, because they have some memories they want to keep secret. So what do you say? Do you want to have another go?"

I asked Simpson to show me the titles of his other tapes. They were very short and not particularly appealing; some were even incomprehensible, perhaps because of the Italian translation.

"It would be better if you advised me," I said. "I have no idea how to choose."

"You're right. Just as with books or movies, you can't trust titles. And you do realize, as I already told you, that there are only about a hundred tapes available; but I recently saw a galley proof of the 1967 catalogue, and it's enough to make you dizzy. Actually, I'll show it to you. It seems to me very informative in terms of the 'American Way of Life,'* and more generally an attempt to systematize conceivable experience."

The catalogue listed more than nine hundred titles, each one followed by a number from the Dewey decimal classification, and was divided into seven sections. The first was labeled ART AND NATURE, the relevant tapes marked by a white stripe, and contained titles such as "Sunset in Venice," "Paestum and Metapontum as Seen by Quasimodo," "Hurricane Magdalene," "A Day Among Cod Fishermen," "Polar Route," "Chicago Seen by Allen Ginsberg," "We Skin-Divers," "A Meditation on the Sphinx by Emily S. Stoddard." Simpson pointed out to me that this was not about sensations for the masses, like those of the crude and vulgar man who visits Venice or witnesses, by chance, some natural wonder; every subject had been written and recorded using good writers and poets, who placed their culture and sensibility at the disposition of the tapes' consumers.

The tapes in the second section had a red stripe and were labeled POWER. The section was further divided into the subsections: "Violence,"

“War,” “Sport,” “Authority,” “Wealth,” and “Miscellaneous.” “The division is arbitrary,” Simpson said. “For example, in my opinion the tape you just tried, ‘Rasmussen’s Goal,’ should have had a white stripe instead of a red. In general, the tapes with red stripes interest me very little. But I’ve heard that already in America there is a growing black market for tapes: they mysteriously disappear from the NATCA offices and are bought up by teenagers who own pirate Torecs fabricated by unscrupulous radio engineers to the best of their ability. The red-stripe tapes are the most in demand. But maybe this isn’t such a bad thing; a youth who experiences a brawl while sitting in a cafeteria* is unlikely to actually participate in a real one.”

“Why not? What if he gets a taste for it . . . Wouldn’t they react just like leopards, who, once they’ve tasted human blood, can’t get enough of it afterward?”

Simpson looked at me curiously. “Of course, you are an Italian intellectual. I know your kind well. Nice middle-class family, enough money, a mother who is fearful and possessive, Catholic school, no military service, no competitive sports, except maybe a little tennis. You pursue one or more women with no passion, one of them married, a not too taxing job, guaranteed for life. That’s how it is, right?”

“Not really, at least not as far as I’m concerned . . .”

“Sure, I may have a few of the details wrong, but the essence is the same, don’t deny it. You’ve avoided any struggle in life, you’ve never had a fistfight, and the desire to have one remains into old age. Ultimately, this is why you accepted Mussolini; you wanted someone tough, a fighter, and though he actually wasn’t one, he wasn’t stupid, either, and so acted the part as well as he possibly could. But let’s not digress: do you want to see what it’s like to have a fistfight? Here, put on the helmet and then you’ll tell me.”

I was sitting down, the others were standing around me. There were three of them, wearing striped shirts, and sneering at me. One of them, Bernie, spoke to me in a language that I realized, thinking about it later, incorporated thick American slang, but at the time I had no trouble understanding him, and I spoke that way, too; actually, I even remember some phrases. He called me bright boy* and goddam rat,* and, patiently and cruelly, went on making fun of me for quite a while. He made fun of me because I was a Wop,* and more precisely a dago;* I didn’t respond, and kept drinking with studied indifference. In reality, I felt both anger and

fear; I was aware that the scene was fake, but the insults burned me, and then the fakery itself reproduced a situation that wasn't new, even if I had never been able to get used to it. I was nineteen years old, stocky and tough, and I truly was a Wop, the son of Italian immigrants; I was profoundly ashamed of it, and at the same time I was proud of it. My persecutors were authentic persecutors, my neighbors and enemies since birth: blond, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. I hated them and also, on some level, admired them. They had never dared to confront me openly: the contract with NATCA offered them a magnificent opportunity, along with impunity. I knew that they and I had all been signed up for a recording, but this didn't detract from our reciprocal hatred one bit; actually, the fact that we had accepted money to beat each other up doubled my resentment and anger.

When Bernie, mocking my language, said, "Mamma Mia, Pappa Pia, Baby's got da diarrhea!" and blew me a ridiculous kiss off the tips of his fingers, I grabbed a beer mug and flung it in his face. As I watched him bleed, I was filled with wild exultation. I immediately knocked over the table, and, holding it in front of me like a shield, tried to get to the exit. I took a punch in the ribs; I dropped the table and hurled myself at Andrew. I hit him on the jaw; he flew backward and came to a stop, dazed, against the bar, but in the meantime Bernie had revived, and he and Tom backed me into a corner under a hailstorm of punches to the stomach and gut. I lost my breath, and could make them out only as indistinct shadows, but when they said to me, "C'mon, baby, ask for mercy," I took two steps forward and made as if I were about to fall, but instead threw myself at Tom with my head down like a charging bull. I threw him to the floor, tripped over his body, and fell on top of him; while I was trying to get back up, I took a furious uppercut to my chin, which literally lifted me off the ground, and I felt as if my block had actually been knocked off. I lost consciousness, coming to with the sensation of a cold shower on my head, and then it was all over.

"That's enough, thanks," I said to Simpson, as I massaged my chin, which, who knows why, still hurt a little. "You're right, I wouldn't have any desire to do that again, not in real life, or virtually."

"Me neither," said Simpson. "I used it only one time and it was enough for me. But I think that an authentic Wop might experience a certain satisfaction, if for nothing more than the opportunity to fight one against

three. In my opinion, NATCA made this tape for them; as you know, that company doesn't do anything without market research."

"I actually think they made it for the other guys, for the Blond Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and for the racists in all races. Think what a refined pleasure it is to feel the pain of someone who you want to make suffer! Anyway, enough of that. What are these tapes with the green stripe? What's meant by ENCOUNTERS*?"

Mr. Simpson smiled. "It's a perfect euphemism. Even for us, censorship is no joke, you know. They're supposed to be 'meetings' with illustrious personalities for clients who want to have brief conversations with the Earth's greatest. And there are actually a few: look here, 'De Gaulle,' 'Francisco Franco Bahamonde,' 'Konrad Adenauer,' 'Mao Tse-tung' (yes, yes, him, too; it's hard to figure out the Chinese), 'Fidel Castro.' But they only function as a cover; for the most part they contain something else entirely—they're sex tapes. The meetings exist but, let's just say, in a different sense. Look, there are other names you'd rarely see on the front page of a newspaper . . . Sina Rasinko, Inge Baum, Corrada Colli . . ."

At this point, I began to feel myself blush. It's an annoying defect that I've had since adolescence: all I have to do is think, You're going to blush, aren't you? (and no one can stop us from thinking), and the mechanism kicks in. I feel myself turn red, which makes me even more ashamed, and redder still, until I begin to sweat profusely, my throat dries up, and I'm unable to speak. The trigger this time happened to be the name of Corrada Colli, the fashion model made famous by a notorious scandal, for whom I suddenly realized I had lascivious feelings, never before admitted to anyone, including myself.

Simpson was watching me, wavering between amusement and alarm. In fact, my state of embarrassment was so evident that he couldn't have decently pretended to be unaware of it. "Don't you feel well?" he finally asked me. "Would you like to get some air?"

"No, no," I said, panting, while my blood flowed tumultuously to its most profound extremities. "It's nothing. It happens to me a lot."

"You aren't trying to tell me," Simpson said, stunned, "that Colli's name has reduced you to this state?" He lowered his voice, "or maybe you were also involved in the scandal?"

"Of course not, what are you thinking?" I protested, while the whole phenomenon repeated itself, with redoubled intensity, shamelessly exposing

me.

Perplexed, Simpson kept silent: he pretended to look out the window, but shot me a glance now and again. Then he decided: “Listen, we’re among men, and we have known each other twenty years. You’re here to try the Torec, right? Well, then, I have that tape. If you want to satisfy your craving, don’t hesitate, just say so. Obviously, it will remain between us; furthermore, look here, the tape is still in its original wrapping, sealed, and I don’t even know what it contains exactly. Maybe it’s the most innocent thing in the world; but in any case there’s nothing to be ashamed of. I believe no theologian could find anything to object to: you’re hardly the one committing a sin here. Go ahead, put on the helmet.”

I was sitting on a stool in a theater dressing room, my back turned to the mirror and the dressing table, and I had a vivid sensation of lightness. I realized right away that this was because I was wearing very little clothing. I knew I was waiting for someone. In fact, there was a knock at the door and I said, “Come in.” It wasn’t “my” voice, and this was natural; instead, it was a woman’s voice, and this was less natural. While a man entered, I turned toward the mirror in order to fix my hair, and the image was hers, the same one, Corrada, seen a thousand times in the glossies: her eyes bright like a cat’s, her triangular face, the black braid coiled on top of her head with perverse innocence, her clear skin; but I was inside that skin.

In the meantime, the man had entered: he was of medium height, olive-skinned, jovial. He had a mustache and wore a casual sweater. I felt a sensation of extreme violence toward him that was of a distinctly divided nature. The tape imposed upon me a series of passionate memories, some full of mad desire, others of rebellion and resentment, and he, whose name was Rinaldo, figured in all of them; he had been my lover for two years, was cheating on me, had finally come back, and I was crazy about him. At the same time my true self bristled at this twisted idea, rebelled against this impossible, monstrous thing that was about to happen, now, immediately, there on the couch. I was suffering acutely, and I vaguely perceived myself fussing with the helmet, in a desperate attempt to get it off my head.

As if from a distant planet, Simpson’s placid voice reached me: “What the hell are you doing? What’s happening? Wait, let me do it or you’ll rip out the cord.” Then everything went dark and silent. Simpson had turned off the power.

I was enraged. “What kind of joke is this? And you the one playing it on me! Your friend, fifty years old, married with two kids, guaranteed heterosexual! That’s enough, give me my hat and you keep your witchcraft!”

Simpson looked at me, mystified; then he quickly checked the title of the tape and turned as pale as wax. “You’ve got to believe me, I would never do such a thing. I had no idea. It was a mistake: inexcusable, but a mistake. Look here. I was convinced that the title was ‘An Evening with Corrada Colli,’ and instead it’s ‘An Evening of Corrada Colli.’ It’s a tape for women. As I told you earlier, I’ve never tried it.”

We looked at each other with mutual embarrassment. Even though I was still very upset, at that moment Simpson’s suggestion as to the possible didactic applications of the Torec came to mind, and I had difficulty repressing a bitter laugh. Then Simpson said: “And yet, if it hadn’t been a surprise, if you’d known what to expect, it might actually have been an interesting experience. Unique—no one has ever had it, even if the Greeks said Tiresias had the capability. Those guys already knew everything: just think, recently I read that they had already thought of domesticating ants, as I’ve done, and of speaking with dolphins, as Lilly did.”

I responded curtly: “Not me, I don’t want to try it. You try it, if you want to, then tell me about it.” But both his mortification and his good faith were so apparent that I was sorry for him; as soon as I felt a little reassured, I tried to make peace and asked him: “What are these tapes with the gray stripes?”

“You’ve forgiven me, right? Thank you, and I promise I’ll be more careful. That is the EPIC series, a fascinating experiment.”

“EPIC? You mean they deal with those things you Americans like so much, war, the Far West,* the Marines*?”

In the spirit of a good Christian, Simpson ignored the provocation. “No, they have nothing to do with the epic. They are recordings of the so-called Epicurus effect: they’re based on the fact that the termination of a state of suffering or need . . . But no, look: do you want to give me a chance to redeem myself? Yes? You’re a civilized man; you’ll see that you won’t regret it. Furthermore, this tape, ‘Thirst,’ I know well, and I can assure you there will be no surprises. I mean, yes, there will be surprises, but decent and honest ones.”

The heat was intense: I found myself in a desolate landscape of brown rocks and sand. I had an atrocious thirst, but I wasn't tired, nor did I feel distress. I knew that this was a Torec recording, I knew that behind me there was a NATCA Jeep, that I had signed a contract, that by contract I hadn't been able to drink for three years, that I was a chronically unemployed man from Salt Lake City, and that very soon I would be able to drink. They had told me to proceed in a certain direction, and I walked: my thirst had already reached a state in which not only my throat and mouth but also my eyes had become dry, and I saw huge flashing yellow stars. I walked for five minutes, stumbling over the rocks, then I saw a sandy space surrounded by the ruins of a stone wall; at the center was a well, with a rope and a wooden pail. I lowered the pail and pulled it up full of clear cold water. I distinctly knew that it was not water from a spring, that the well had been dug the day before, and that the water tanker that had filled it was parked in the shade of a cliff not far off. But my thirst existed, real and ferocious and urgent, and I drank like a calf, immersing my entire face in the water: I drank for a long time, through my mouth and nose, stopping every so often to breathe, pervaded by the most intense and simple of pleasures conceded to the living, that of restoring one's own osmotic tension. But it didn't last long: I hadn't drunk even a liter before the water no longer gave me any pleasure whatsoever.

The desert scene then vanished and was replaced by another scene, quite similar: I was in a canoe in the middle of a scorching sea, blue and empty. Here, too, I felt my thirst, and the consciousness of the artifice, and the certainty that water would come, but this time I asked myself from where, because around me nothing could be seen but sea and sky. Then a hundred meters from me a midget submarine emerged with NATCA II written on it, and the scene concluded with a delicious drink. I then found myself successively in a prison, in an armored car, in front of a glassblower's kiln, tied to a stake, in a hospital bed, and every time my brief but agonizing thirst was more than compensated for by the arrival of iced water or other drinks, in ever more varied circumstances, and for the most part artificial or childish.

"The structure is a bit monotonous and the direction is weak, but the aim is without a doubt achieved," I said to Simpson. "It's truly a unique pleasure, vivid, almost intolerable."

“Everyone knows it,” Simpson said, “but without the Torec it wouldn’t be possible to condense seven satisfactions into a twenty-minute show, eliminating all danger, and almost every negative aspect of the experience: that of the long torment of thirst, inevitable in nature. This is why all the EPIC tapes are anthological, that is, they are made of compilations; in fact, they make use of a disagreeable sensation, which is better if brief, and one of alleviation, which is intense but brief by nature. Other than thirst, there are various tapes planned for the cessation of hunger, as well as at least ten types of pain, both physical and spiritual.”

“These EPIC tapes,” I said, “are confusing to me. Perhaps there’s something valuable to be extracted from the others in roughly the same way that you can get something significant out of a sports victory, or from a natural spectacle, or from physical love. But here, from these frigid little games at the expense of pain, what can you wring out of them besides canned pleasure, an end in itself, solipsistic and solitary? That is to say, they seem to me to be a kind of abdication; they don’t seem to me to be ethical.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Simpson said, after a brief silence, “but will you still think so when you’re seventy? Or eighty? And does a paraplegic, someone who is bedridden, someone who lives to die, think as you do?”

Simpson then briefly showed me the so-called SUPEREGO tapes (rescues, sacrifices, the recorded experiences of painters, musicians, and poets at the height of their creative effort), with a blue stripe, and the tapes with yellow stripes, which reproduce mystical and religious experiences of various denominations: regarding these, he told me that some missionaries had already requested tapes in order to give converts a taste of their future life.

As for the tapes from the seventh series, with a black stripe, these were difficult to categorize. NATCA randomly heaps them all under the heading SPECIAL EFFECTS: the majority were experimental recordings pushing the limits of what is possible today in order to demonstrate what would be possible tomorrow. Some, as Simpson told me earlier, were synthetic tapes, that is, not recorded from life but constructed with special technologies, image by image, frame by frame, in the way you construct synthetic music or animation. With this process, sensations that had previously been inconceivable or nonexistent were created; Simpson also told me that in one of the NATCA studies a group of engineers was working on taping an episode from the life of Socrates as seen by Phaedo.

“Not all of the black tapes,” Simpson said to me, “contain enjoyable experiences. Some are dedicated exclusively to scientific purposes. There are, for example, recordings made about newborns, about neurotics, about psychopaths, about geniuses, about idiots, even about animals.”

“About animals?” I repeated in astonishment.

“Yes, about superior animals, with nervous systems similar to ours. There are tapes of dogs—‘Grow a tail!’* says the catalogue enthusiastically; tapes of cats, of monkeys, of horses, of elephants. For the time being, I only have one of the black-stripe tapes, but I recommend it to you as a way to end the evening.”

The sun reflected fiercely off the glaciers; there was not a cloud in the sky. I was gliding, suspended on my wings (or on my arms?), and under me an alpine valley slowly unfurled. The ground was at least two thousand meters below me, but I could distinguish every pebble, every blade of grass, every ripple of water in a stream, because my eyes possessed an extraordinary acuity. Even my visual field was greater than usual: it encompassed a good two-thirds of the horizon and included the spot straight below me, while in the upward direction it was curtailed by a black shadow; moreover, I couldn’t see my nose, in fact, any nose. I could see and hear the rustle of the wind and the distant roar of the stream and I felt the changing pressure of air on my wings and tail, but behind this mosaic of sensations my mind was in a condition of torpor, of paralysis. I perceived only one tension, a stimulus that one usually feels behind the sternum, when you remember that you “must do something” but have forgotten what you must do. I had “to do something,” to carry out an action, and I didn’t know what, but I knew that I had to carry it out by heading in a certain direction, bringing it to a conclusion in a certain place that was imprinted on my mind with perfect clarity: a jagged ridge on my right, a brown spot at the base of the first peak, where a snowfield ended, a spot that was now hidden in shadow, a place like a million others, but there was my nest, my mate, and my little one.

I veered windward, lowering myself just above a long mountain ridge, and cruised from south to north skimming along the earth: my large shadow was now preceding me, mowing down at high speed patches of earth covered in grass and soil, stones and snow. A sentry marmot whistled two, three, four times, before I could see it. In the same instant, I spied some wild oat stems quivering below me: a hare, still in its winter coat,

desperately bounded toward its burrow. I gathered my wings into my body and fell upon it like a rock: it was less than a meter from its refuge when I was on top of it, spreading my wings to brake the descent and drawing out my claws. I seized it in full flight, and regained altitude only by using the momentum of the dive and without flapping my wings. When the initial impetus had slackened, I killed the hare with two thrusts of my beak. I now understood what it was I "must do," the sensation of tension had ceased, and I directed my flight toward the nest.

Since by now it was late, I took my leave of Simpson and thanked him for the demonstration, especially for the last tape, which had satisfied me deeply. Simpson apologized again for the accident: "One certainly needs to be careful, a simple mistake can have unthinkable consequences. I wanted to tell you what happened to Chris Webster, one of the Torec project team members, with the first industrial tape they were able to record: the theme was a parachute jump. When he went to check the recording, Webster found himself on the ground, a little battered and bruised, with a slack parachute next to him. Suddenly, the fabric lifted off the ground, inflated as if a strong wind had blown up into it, and Webster felt himself yanked off the earth and pulled slowly upward, the pain from his bruises having amazingly vanished. He rose calmly upward for a couple of minutes, then the rip cords gave a yank and the upward movement accelerated vertiginously, cutting off his breath; in the same instant, the parachute closed like an umbrella, folding in on itself many times lengthwise, and in a snap it rolled into a ball and stuck to his shoulders. While he was ascending like a rocket he saw the airplane right above him, flying backward with the hatch open: Webster passed inside headfirst and found himself in the cabin, trembling with fear for the imminent jump. You understand, right? He had put the tape into the Torec backward."

Simpson affectionately extracted from me the promise of a return visit in November, when his collection of tapes would be complete, and we parted late at night.

Poor Simpson! I'm afraid it's all over for him. After many years of faithful service to NATCA, the last NATCA machine has defeated him, precisely the one that should have assured him a relaxed and multifarious retirement.

He fought with the Torec like Jacob with the angel, but the battle was lost before it had begun. He sacrificed everything: the bees, his job, his sleep, his wife, books. Unfortunately, with the Torec you don't build up an immunity: every tape can be used an infinite number of times and each time one's actual memory is turned off, and a secondhand memory is activated which is then recorded onto the tape itself. This is why Simpson doesn't feel bored during the sessions, but when the tape finishes he is oppressed by a boredom as vast as the sea and as weighty as the world, so all he can do is play another one. He graduated from his established two hours a day to five, then to ten, now to eighteen or twenty; without the Torec he would be lost, with the Torec he is lost just the same. In six months he has aged twenty years and has become a shadow of himself.

Between tapes, he rereads Ecclesiastes: it is the only work which still speaks to him. In Ecclesiastes, he told me, he finds himself and his condition: "All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full . . . the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun." And more: "For in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." On the rare days when he is at peace with himself, Simpson feels close to the old king, just and wise, replete with knowledge and with days, who had seven hundred wives and infinite riches and the black queen's friendship, who adored the true God and the false gods Ashtoreth and Milcom, and who expressed his wisdom through song.

But the wisdom of Solomon was painfully acquired during a long life full of good deeds and misdeeds; Simpson's is the fruit of a complicated electronic circuit and eight-track tapes, and he knows it and is ashamed of it, and in order to escape the shame he dives back into the Torec. He's heading toward death, he knows it and is not afraid: he has already experimented with it six times, in six different versions, recorded on six tapes with a black stripe.

Flaw of Form

Translated by Jenny McPhee

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They were a hundred men at arms.
When the sun rose in the sky,
They all took a step forward.
Hours passed, without a sound:
They didn’t bat an eye.
When the bells rang,
All of them took a step ahead.
So the day went, it was evening,
But when the first star blossomed in the sky,
All at once, they took a step ahead.
“Get back, get away, foul ghosts:
Back to your old night.”
But no one answered; so, instead,
They took a step ahead, all in a ring.

(TRANS. J. GALASSI)

Letter 1987

Dear Editor,

Your proposal to reprint *Flaw of Form* more than fifteen years after it was first published both saddens and cheers me. How can two such contradictory states of being exist together? I shall try to explain it both to you and to myself.

It saddens me because these are stories related to a time that was much sadder than the present, for Italy, for the world, and also for me. They are linked to an apocalyptic, pessimistic, and defeatist vision, the same one that inspired Roberto Vacca's *The Coming Dark Age*.[1] But the new Dark Age has not come: things haven't fallen apart, and instead there are tentative signs of a world order based, if not on mutual respect, at least on mutual fear. Despite the terrorizing, if slumbering, arsenals, the fear of the "Dissipatio Humani Generis" (Guido Morselli),[2] whether rightly or wrongly, has been subjectively attenuated. How things actually are, no one knows.

I am greatly cheered that the most neglected of my books will have another life. It's the only one that wasn't translated, that never won a prize, and that the critics were put out by, accusing it, precisely, of not being catastrophic enough. Rereading it now, I find, along with much that is naïve and many errors in perspective, something good. Synthetic babies are a reality, even if they have belly buttons. We have gone to the Moon, and the Earth seen from up there must be rather similar to the one I described; it's too bad that the Selenites don't exist, and never did. The distribution of aid to Third World countries often coincides with the situation I outlined in the two "Recuenco" stories. With the expansion of the service industry, the "red lights" have increased in number, and, in 1981, reports even appeared in the

newspapers of a monthly sensor identical to the one I described. We are still far from any reality like the one in the story “With the Best Intentions,” but (“this retribution that you see is mine”[3]), after some hesitation, the telephone company assigned to me a number at my second residence that was the exact anagram of my number in Turin.

As for “Best Is Water,” a short time after its publication *Scientific American* reported a story about a slimy and toxic “polywater,” from a Soviet source, similar in many ways to the one I anticipated. Fortunately for everyone, the relative experiments were not reproducible and it all went up in smoke. It flatters me to think that this lugubrious invention of mine might have had a retroactive and apotropaic effect. Readers should therefore be reassured: water, even if polluted, won’t ever become viscous, and all the seas will preserve their waves.

PRIMO LEVI
Turin, January 1987

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1. Roberto Vacca (b. 1927) is an Italian engineer, mathematician, and novelist. He is well-known for his forecasts and predictions using mathematical models. His 1971 novel, mentioned here by Levi, is about the collapse of modern civilization and is considered a classic of apocalyptic literature.
2. Guido Morselli (1912–1973) was an Italian novelist and essayist. His *Dissipatio H.G.* (*Dissipation of the Human Race*; published posthumously in 1977) is a surrealist fantasy that takes place just after the human race has been wiped out, and is narrated by the sole survivor.
3. “*Cosi s’osserva in me lo contrappasso*,” from Dante, *Inferno* Canto XXVIII:142.



Protection

Marta finished cleaning up the kitchen, started the washing machine, then lit a cigarette and lay down on the couch. Distractedly, she watched a television show through the crack in her visor. In the next room Giulio was silent: he was probably studying, or writing an essay for school. The reassuring clatter of Luciano, who was playing with a friend, could be heard coming from the other side of the hall.

It was the advertising hour. A string of enticements, recommendations, and temptations streamed wearily across the screen: Buy exclusively the aperitif Alpha, only Beta ice cream; only Gamma polish for every metal; only Delta helmets, Epsilon toothpaste, clothes made by Zeta, scentless Eta oil for your joints, Theta wine. . . . Despite her uncomfortable position and the armor that irritated her hips, Marta eventually fell asleep, but she dreamed she was sleeping on the stairs of her building, lying crosswise, while next to her people went up and down paying no attention to her. The clanking of Enrico on the landing woke her. She was never wrong and was proud of the fact that she could distinguish the sound of his footsteps from those of all the neighbors. When he came in, Marta hurried to send Luciano's friend home, and she set the table for dinner. It was hot, and, furthermore, it had been announced on the news that the micro-meteorite shower was in a period of limited activity, so Enrico lifted his visor, and the others followed suit. It was easier to bring the food to your mouth this way, rather than through the little star-shaped valve that always got dirty, and then stank.

Enrico looked up from reading the paper and announced, "I met Roberto on the subway. It's been a while since we've seen each other. He's

coming over tonight with Elena."

They arrived at about ten o'clock, after the kids had gone to bed. Elena wore a marvelous outfit made out of AISI 304 steel that had charming tiny bolts with milled heads, and nearly invisible argon welding. Roberto, on the other hand, wore a light armor of an unusual style with flanged sides, that made remarkably little noise.

"I bought it in March, in England, and yes, it's stainless, holds up very well in the rain, has all the trimmings in neoprene, and you can take it off or put it on in fifteen minutes or less."

"How much does it weigh?" Enrico asked, without much interest.

Roberto laughed, unembarrassed. "Ah, the Achilles heel. As you know, our aim is standardization, and here in the Common Market we have achieved it, but down there, with regard to weights and measures, they're always a few steps behind. It weighs six kilos, eight hundred grams: that's two hundred grams under regulation, but you'll see that no one will notice. Or maybe, just to be legal, I'll have them insert a little lead here behind the neck, where you can't see it. Apart from this, all the thicknesses are in order, and in any case I always carry with me the certificate of origin and the dimensioned drawing right here in this cleft next to the registration number. Can you see? It's made for that purpose—one of those little ideas that make life easier. The English are such a practical people."

Marta couldn't help giving Enrico's armor a surreptitious once-over—poor guy would never go shopping in London. He still wore the old zinc-plated armor in which, many years earlier, she had met him: dignified, certainly, without a spot of rust, but what a lot of work the maintenance was! Not to mention the lubrication—no fewer than sixteen Stauffer lubricators, four of which were difficult to reach, and if you missed one, or skipped the Sunday lubrication, you were in big trouble, and the thing would shriek like a Scottish ghost. You were also in big trouble, however, if you overdid it, and then, like a slug, it left traces all over the chairs and couches. But Enrico didn't seem to notice. He said he had a great affection for it, and any discussion of changing it was futile, even if, Marta thought, one could now find gear that complied with the law and was practical, almost elegant, and could be bought on an installment plan, so that you hardly noticed the cost.

She took a peek at her own image reflected in the mirror. She, too, was not the type of woman who spends the day at the beauty salon and the

hairdresser, and yet she would have liked to update her wardrobe a bit, there was no doubt about it. At heart she still felt young, even if Giulio was by now sixteen years old. Marta distractedly followed the conversation. Roberto was by far the most brilliant of the four of them. He traveled often and he always had some new story to tell. Marta noticed with pleasure that he tried to meet her glance. It was a purely nostalgic pleasure, since their affair had occurred ten years ago now, and she knew nothing would happen to her again with him or anyone else. A closed chapter, if for no other reason than that irritating matter of obligatory protection: one never knew if one was dealing with someone old or young, with someone beautiful or ugly, and all encounters were limited to a voice and a flashing glance inside a visor. She had never been able to understand how a law so absurd could have been voted upon and passed—even if Enrico had explained to her many times that the micro-meteorites were a real and tangible threat, that for twenty years Earth had been crossing through a shower, and that one was enough to kill a person, piercing him straight through in an instant. She started, realizing that Roberto was talking about precisely that subject.

"So you believe it, too? Well, it's no surprise if all you ever read is *The Herald*. Think about it rationally and you'll realize the whole thing's a scam. The cases of 'heaven deaths,' as we now call them, are ridiculously few, no more than twenty actually verified. The others are embolisms or heart attacks or other accidents."

"No way!" Enrico said. "Just last week I read that a French minister went out onto his balcony for a second without his armor . . ."

"It's all a fake, I tell you. The heart attack is increasingly common, and it's a practice that serves no one. Our highly efficient system has simply tried to use it, that's all. If the one whose time has come doesn't have his armor on, it's an MM, a micro-meteorite, and you can always find the appropriately compliant expert in the field to say so; if he is wearing his armor, then they call it a heart attack, and no one notices."

"And all the newspapers go along with this?"

"Not all of them. But you know how it is, the auto market is saturated and the assembly lines are sacred. They can't stop. So they persuade people to wear armor, and those who don't obey are put in jail."

These were not new ideas. Marta had already heard them, and more than once, but it was also true that even brilliant types like Roberto often found themselves short of conversational topics, and, in the end, repeating

things that were already well-known was safe, and those long silences that made everyone uncomfortable were avoided.

"I, however," Elena said, "must say that I like wearing the armor, and not just because the women's magazines tell me I should. I really do feel good in it, just the way one feels good at home."

"You like it because your armor is beautiful. In fact, forgive me if I haven't told you so yet, but it's marvelous," Marta said sincerely. "I've never seen armor so well designed. It looks tailor-made."

Roberto cleared his throat and Marta understood she'd made a gaffe, even if it wasn't a terrible one. Elena laughed, with forgiving self-assurance. "It is tailor-made!" She shot a knowing glance at Roberto, and added, "He, you know, has certain friends in the armor business in Turin. . . . But that's not why I said I felt good in it. I'd feel good in any armor. I don't believe much in the MM story, in fact, not at all, and to hear that it's all a scam so that General Motors can earn more money makes me seethe with anger, and yet . . . and yet I feel good in it and bad without it, and there are many like me, I guarantee you."

"That doesn't prove anything," Marta said. "They created a need. It's not the first time; they're very good at creating needs."

"I don't think mine is an artificial need. If it were, tons of people would be discovered all the time not wearing armor, or with armor not in regulation. And they would never have passed the law, otherwise people would have revolted. Instead . . . it's a fact: in it I feel . . . how to put it?"

"Snug,"* Roberto intervened, his voice tinged with irony. This must not have been a new topic of conversation for him.

"What do you mean?" Enrico said.

"As snug as a bug in a rug.* It's difficult to translate, and even a little offensive, but not all *bugs** are cockroaches."

"In any case," Elena resumed, "for me it's like that. I find I'm *snug*,* like a cockroach in a rug. I feel protected, as if I were in a fortress, and at night when I go to bed I take it off reluctantly."

"Protected from what?"

"I don't know. From everything. From men, the wind, the sun, and the rain. From smog and contaminated air and nuclear waste. From fate and from all things that are unseen and unpredictable. From evil thoughts and from disease and from the future and from myself. If they hadn't passed that law, I believe I would have bought myself armor all the same."

The conversation was taking a dangerous turn. Aware of this, Marta steered it into more tranquil waters by telling a story about one of Giulio's teachers, who was so cheap that, rather than throw out his thoroughly rusted armor, he painted it inside and out with lead, then came down with lead poisoning. Enrico then recounted the case of the carpenter from Lodi who went on a date and was caught in a downpour; his bolts became stuck, and the girl had to cut the armor off with a blowtorch and then send him to the hospital.

Finally they said good night. Roberto took off his iron glove to shake Marta's bare hand, and Marta felt a brief and intense pleasure that filled her with a gray sadness, intense but not painful. This sadness stayed with her for a long time, kept her company inside her armor, and helped her to live for many days.

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*Here and throughout *Flaw of Form*, an asterisk indicates that the word or phrase is in English in the original.

Heading West

“Leave the movie camera alone. Look, look with your own eyes, and try to count them!”

Anna put down the machine and stared deep into the valley. It was a narrow, rocky valley that was connected to the interior only through a square pass, and it ended at the sea, in a broad, muddy beach. Finally, after weeks of stakeouts and chases, they had been successful; the army of lemmings, wave after wave, appeared at the top of the pass and descended headlong down the slope, stirring up a brown cloud of dust. Where the slope softened, the blue-gray waves merged again into a compact stream that moved in an orderly fashion toward the sea.

Within a few minutes the beach had been invaded. In the sizzling light of the sunset, individual rodents could be differentiated as they made their way forward through the muck, sinking up to their bellies. They proceeded with difficulty but without hesitation, entered the water, then continued on swimming. Their heads could be seen above water for about a hundred meters from the shoreline; a few lone heads could still be detected at two hundred meters, where the waves from the fjord were breaking, then nothing more. In the sky, another army darted about restlessly: a flotilla of birds of prey, many hawks, a few buzzards, along with sparrow hawks, kites, and others that the two naturalists couldn’t identify. They circled screeching and tussling among themselves. Every so often one would throw himself down like a stone, attracted by some invisible target, stop with a sudden whirl of wings, then land, while the stream of lemmings parted around him as if he were an island.

“Well,” Walter said, “now we’ve seen it, too. Now things are different—we’ve got no more excuses. This is something that exists, that exists in nature, that has always existed, and so it must have a cause, and that cause must be found.”

“A challenge, right?” Anna said, in an almost maternal tone, but Walter felt that he had already entered into battle, and didn’t respond.

“Let’s go,” he said. He grabbed his mesh bag and took off down the slope to where the lemmings rushed fearlessly between his legs. He had caught four of them, when it occurred to him that maybe the ones that were already halfway down the hill didn’t represent an average specimen: they could be the strongest, or the youngest, or the most determined. He let three of them go, then advanced into the middle of the gray swarm and captured five more at various points along the valley. He went back up to the tent with the six small animals, who were squeaking feebly but not biting one another.

“Poor little things!” Anna said. “But I guess they would have died anyway.”

On the radio, Walter was calling the Forest Rangers helicopter. “They’ll come tomorrow morning,” he said. “Now we can eat dinner.”

Anna looked at him questioningly.

Walter said, “No, good gracious, not yet. Actually, why don’t you give them something to eat, too, but not much, so we don’t alter their conditions.”

Three days later, they discussed the matter at length with Professor Osiasson, but without concluding much of anything. They went back to the hotel.

“What did you expect from him, finally? That he would criticize the theory that he himself came up with?”

“No,” said Walter, “but that he would at least consider my objections. It’s easy to repeat the same thing over an entire career, and with a clear conscience. All you have to do is shoot down new facts.”

“Are you so sure of these new facts?”

“I’m sure today, and I’ll be even more sure tomorrow. You saw it yourself: at the end of their march, the six that we captured were very well

nourished: 28 percent fat, that's more than the average lemming caught on the mountain plateaus. But if that's not enough I'll go back—"

"We'll go back."

"We'll go back, and we'll get sixty, or six hundred, and then we'll see if Osiasson will dare to repeat for the umpteenth time that hunger is what causes them to move."

"Or overpopulation . . ."

"It's absurd. No animal would respond to overcrowding with even worse overcrowding. The ones we saw came from every recess of the plateau. And they weren't fleeing. In fact, they sought one another out, tribe joining tribe, individual joining individual. They marched for two months, always heading west, and every day their population became denser."

"And so?"

"And so . . . you see, I don't know yet, I can't yet precisely formulate my thinking, but I . . . I believe they actually want to die."

"Why should a living being want to die?"

"Why should he want to live? Why should he *always* want to live?"

"Because . . . well, I don't know, all of us want to live. We're alive because we want to live. It's a property of living matter. I want to live, no doubt about it. Life is better than death. It seems to me to be an axiom."

"You've never had any doubts? Be honest!"

"No, never." Anna thought for a while, then added: "Almost never."

"You said *almost*."

"Yes, you know what I mean. After Mary was born. It lasted only a little while, a few months, but it was very bad. I thought I'd never come out of it, that I would be like that forever."

"And what did you think during those months? How did you see the world?"

"I don't remember anymore. I've done everything I can to forget it."

"Forget what?"

"That hole. That emptiness. That feeling of . . . uselessness, with everything useless around me, drowned in a sea of uselessness. Alone, even in the middle of a crowd; walled up alive among everyone walled up alive. But stop it. Please, leave me alone. Stick to general questions."

"Let's see. . . . Listen, let's try this. Here's the rule: Each of us humans, but also animals, and . . . yes, and plants, everything that is alive, struggles to stay alive and doesn't know why. The why is written in each cell, but in a

language that we don't know how to read with our minds. We do read it, though, with our beings, and we obey the message with our entire behavior. But the message can be more or less imperative. The species in which the message is imprinted deeply and clearly survive, the others are extinct. But even those in which the message is clear can have lacunae. Individuals can be born who have no love of life. Others can lose it, for a short or long time, maybe even for the rest of their lives. And finally . . . here, maybe this is it: groups of individuals, even families, nations, eras, can lose it. Such things have been seen. Human history is full of them."

"All right, there's a semblance of order now. You're getting close. But you have to explain to me—and to yourself—how this love can vanish in an entire group."

"I'll think about that later. Right now I still wanted to tell you that between those who have a love of life and those who have lost it no common language exists. The same event is described by the two in two totally different ways: one derives joy and the other torment, each extracting from it confirmation of its own worldview."

"Both of them can't be right."

"No. Generally speaking, as you know, and one must have the courage to say so, the others are right."

"The lemmings?"

"Sure, let's call them the lemmings."

"And us?"

"We're wrong, and we know it, but we find it more palatable to keep our eyes shut. Life does *not* have a purpose; pain always prevails over joy; we are all condemned to death, and the day of execution is not revealed; we are condemned to witness the death of those closest to us. There are compensations, but few. We know all this, and yet something protects us and sustains us and keeps us from devastation. What is this protection? Perhaps it is only habit: the habit of living, which we contract at birth."

"In my opinion, the protection is not the same for everyone. Some find shelter in religion, some in altruism, some in obtuseness, some in vice, some succeed in distracting themselves without interruption."

"It's all true," Walter said. "I might add that the most common defense—and the least ignoble—is the one that exploits our fundamental ignorance of the future. And, you see, even here there's symmetry: this uncertainty is the same one that makes life insupportable to . . . to the lemmings. For

everyone else, the will to live is something profound and confusing, something within us and at the same time alongside us, separate from our consciousness, almost like an organ that normally functions quietly, self-regulated, and so is ignored. But it can become sick or atrophied, it can be wounded or amputated—and we continue to live, but badly, with difficulty, with pain, like someone who has lost his stomach or a lung."

"Yes," Anna said, "this is the main defense, the natural one, given to us together with life so that life can be tolerable. But I think there are others, like the ones I mentioned earlier."

"Right, there's got to be something that all the defenses have in common. If we only knew how to respond to the question that we have left hanging, that is: What it is that acts upon a whole group? Then we would also know what links the different defenses. We can make two suppositions: the first is that one 'lemming' infects all his neighbors; the second is that there is some sort of intoxication or deficiency."

Nothing is more invigorating than a hypothesis. The Forest Rangers Laboratory was mobilized in a few days, and results were forthcoming, but for a long time they were negative. The blood of the migrant lemmings was identical to that of the stationary lemmings. And the same was true for their urine, the quantity and composition of fat, everything. Walter thought and spoke of nothing else. He spoke about it one evening with Bruno, their glasses full before them, and they came up with the idea together.

"This, for example, is useful," Bruno said. "It's an old experience, and a common one."

"It's a very rudimentary drug. Alcohol isn't innocuous, its dosage is difficult to determine, and its effect is very brief."

"But we could work on it."

The next day they were in front of the lemming pen on the grounds of the Institute. It had been necessary to reinforce the fence on the side facing the sea by burying it a good two meters beneath the level of the soil, because those animals got no peace. There were now a hundred or so of them, and all day long, and half the night, they crammed themselves together against the fence, trampling one another, trying to climb over and push one another back. Some dug tunnels, which inevitably were blocked

by the buried portion of the fence. They then crawled out backward, only to start over. The other three sides of the pen were deserted. Walter went in, caught four of them, tied an identification tag to their tiny legs, and, through a tube, administered to each a gram of alcohol. Returned to the pen, the four paused for a few minutes, their fur on end and their nostrils flared, then went off to graze calmly on heather. After an hour, however, they had, one by one, gone back to their place in the jumble of individuals intent on migrating west. Walter and Bruno agreed in concluding that it wasn't much, but it hinted at something.

A month later, the pharmacology department was fully operative. The idea proposed was simple and terrifying: to pinpoint or synthesize the hormone that inhibits existential emptiness. Anna was nonplussed and she didn't hide it.

"If we find it, will we have done a good thing or a bad thing?"

"A good thing for the individual, certainly. A good thing for the human race, doubtful. And it's a doubt without bounds: one can adapt to any medication, not only this one. Every drug—in fact, any medical intervention—makes the unadaptable adaptable. Would you want to question every drug and every doctor? For centuries the human race has chosen this path, the path of artificial survival, and it doesn't seem to me that the result has been detrimental. Humanity has had its back turned to nature for a while now; it's made up of individuals and puts all its efforts into the survival of the individual, into prolonging life, and into vanquishing death and pain."

"But there are other ways of defeating pain, this pain; other battles that each of us must wage by calling upon his own resources, without outside help. Those who win prove their strength, and in so doing become stronger, enriched, and improved."

"And those who don't win? Those who give up, suddenly or slowly, over time? What would you say, what would I say, if we, too, were to find ourselves . . . heading west? Would we be capable of rejoicing in the name of the species and of those others who find the strength within themselves to reverse their path?"

Another six months passed, and for Walter and Anna they were unusual months. The two went up the Amazon River on a passenger boat, then took a smaller boat up the Cinto River, and finally a dugout canoe up an unnamed tributary. The guide who accompanied them had promised a journey of four days, but only on the seventh day did they make it through the Sacayo rapids and see the village up ahead. From a distance they could distinguish the Spanish fort's crumbling buttresses, and they didn't feel the need to comment upon another, familiar aspect of the landscape: in the sky a thick tangle of birds of prey centered, it seemed, right over the fort.

The village of Arunde was home to what remained of the Arunde tribe. They had learned of its existence by chance from an article that appeared in an anthropology journal. The Arunde had once inhabited a territory the size of Belgium, but were confined within increasingly narrow boundaries as their numbers went into a steady decline. This population decrease was due not to disease, or to wars with neighboring tribes, or even to insufficient food. It was, instead, due exclusively to an inordinate number of suicides. This was the reason that Walter had decided to ask for funding for the expedition.

They were received by the village elder, who was only thirty-nine years old and spoke fluent Spanish. Walter, who hated lengthy introductions, got right to the point. He had expected from the other man restraint, modesty, perhaps suspicion or coolness in the face of the ruthless curiosity of a foreigner, but instead found himself before a serene man, alert and mature, as if he had spent years, perhaps even his entire life, preparing for this interview.

The elder confirmed that the Arunde had never held metaphysical convictions. They alone, among all their neighbors, had no churches or priests or witch doctors, and expected no help from the sky, or the earth, or the underworld. They didn't believe in rewards or punishments, their land was not poor, they devised just laws by means of a quick and humane administration, they didn't know hunger or discord, they had a popular culture that was rich and original, and they often celebrated with festivals and banquets. Asked by Walter about the constant numerical decline in population, the elder responded that he was aware of the fundamental difference between their beliefs and those of other peoples, both near and far.

The Arunde, he said, attributed little value to the survival of the individual, and none to national survival. Every one of them was taught from infancy to esteem life exclusively in terms of pleasure and pain, including in that evaluation, naturally, also the pleasures and pains each person's behavior caused his fellow man. When, in the estimation of each individual, the balance leaned consistently toward the negative, when a citizen claimed to give and get more pain than joy, he was invited to an open discussion before the council of elders, and if his judgment was substantiated, the conclusion was encouraged and facilitated. After his discharge, he was conducted to the zone of the *ktan* fields. *Ktan* is a grain that is very widespread in the area, and its seed, winnowed and ground, is used in making a kind of flatbread; if the *ktan* is not winnowed, it carries with it the very tiny seeds of a grass weed that has both toxic and narcotic effects.

The man was then entrusted to the *ktan* farmers, and fed on flatbread made with unsifted seeds. In a few days, or in a few weeks—it was up to him—he would reach a pleasant state of stupefaction, followed by terminal rest. A few changed their minds and returned from the *ktan* fields to the fortified city, where they were greeted with affectionate joy. Unwinnowed seeds were smuggled in, but not to any worrisome degree, and this was tolerated.

Anna and Walter arrived home to a big piece of news. The "missing substance" had been found: more precisely, it had first been created out of nothing, synthetically, through an exhaustive process of screening innumerable compounds suspected of acting in a specific way on the nervous system. Shortly thereafter, the substance had been identified in normal blood. Oddly, Bruno's intuition had hit the bull's-eye; the most effective compound was an alcohol, although it had a rather complex structure. The levels had been low, so low as to justify the failure of analysts to identify it as a normal component in the blood of all healthy animals, including man, and therefore to detect its absence in the blood of the migrant lemmings. Walter had his fifteen minutes of success and fame; the blood samples that he had drawn from the Arunde didn't contain even a trace of the active principle.

The substance, named Factor L, was soon produced on a pilot scale. It was administered orally, and proved miraculous in restoring the will to live in subjects who had been without it or who had lost it as a result of illness, misfortune, or trauma. In others, in normal doses, it didn't produce effects worth noting or signs of sensitivization or accumulation.

The opportunity for confirmation was soon evident to everyone: in fact, for a double confirmation—in migrant lemmings and in their human analogues. Walter sent the Arunde elder a package containing doses of Factor L sufficient for a hundred individuals for a year; he included a long letter in which he explained to him in minute detail the method by which the medication should be administered and implored him to extend the experiment also to the inhabitants of the *ktan* fields. There was no time, however, to wait for a response. The Forest Service informed him that a column of lemmings was rapidly approaching the mouth of the Mölde, at the end of the Penndal fjord.

It wasn't an easy job. In addition to Anna's enthusiastic help, Walter had to enlist four young assistants. Fortunately, Factor L was soluble in water and water was abundantly available there. Walter proposed that they spray the solution beyond the pass, where the heather grew thickly, and where the lemmings might be expected to stop and graze, but it was immediately apparent that the project was not achievable; the area was too extensive and the columns of lemmings were already approaching, heralded by dust eddies visible twenty kilometers away.

Walter then decided to nebulize the solution directly over the lemming columns on the obligatory path beneath the pass. It wouldn't reach the entire population, but he believed that the effect would nevertheless be demonstrative.

The first lemmings appeared at the pass around nine in the morning; by ten the valley was full of them and the flow seemed to be increasing. Walter went down into the valley with the nebulizer tied to his back; he leaned against a rock and opened the propellant valve. There was no wind; from the height of the ridge Anna distinctly saw the release of the white cloud, expanding in the direction of the valley. She saw the gray tide stop in a swirl, like the water in a river against the pylon of a bridge: the lemmings

who had inhaled the solution seemed uncertain whether to continue, to stop, or to go back. But then she saw a vast wave of fretful bodies wash over the first, and then a third wave over the second, so that the rolling mass reached the height of Walter's belt. She saw Walter make rapid gestures with his free hand, gestures that were confused and convulsive and seemed to be a call for help; then she saw Walter stagger forward, wrenched away from the rock's protection, and fall, and he was dragged, buried, and dragged farther, visible periodically like a swelling beneath the torrent of those innumerable, small desperate creatures who were running toward death, their death and his death, toward the marshland and the sea just beyond.

That same day, the package that Walter had sent across the ocean was returned. It didn't come into Anna's possession until three days later, when Walter's body had been recovered. It contained a curt message addressed both to Walter *y a todos los sábios del mundo civil*.[1] It said: "The Arunde people, soon no longer a people, send their regards and thank you. We do not wish to offend, but we are returning your medicine, so that those among you who might want to can profit from it. We prefer freedom to drugs and death to illusion."

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1. And to all the other wise men of the civilized world.



The Synthetics

It was nearly noon. One could already sense in the air that precise yet confused sound, the sum of a hundred imperceptible words and actions that seems to emanate from the classroom walls, swelling like a wind and culminating in the ring of the school bell; Mario and Renato were nonetheless still busy completing the final lines of their papers. Mario finished and got ready to turn his in; Renato, his intention obvious, said to him: “I’ll turn mine in now, too. I didn’t do the last question, but I don’t know the answer. Better blank than wrong.”

Mario responded in a whisper: “Let me have a look. . . . It’s really not that hard. Come on, write. It’s bordered by Italy, Austria, and Hungary to the north, by Romania and Bulgaria on the east; to the south. . . .”

At that moment, like a sign from heaven, the bell rang. The low murmur suddenly became an earsplitting din through which one could barely hear the voice of the teacher urging everyone to turn in his work, finished or not. In a chaotic and disorderly bustle, the kids were sucked into the corridor and down the stairs, and soon found themselves out in the street. Renato and Mario headed toward home. After a few steps they realized that Giorgio was running after them.

Renato turned and said, “Run, little piggy. Hurry up, we’re hungry . . . that is, *I’m* hungry. You never know with this guy. Maybe he lives on air.”

Mario, not catching the insinuation, responded, “No, today I’m hungry, too. And I’m also in a hurry.”

Meanwhile, Giorgio had caught up with them, still panting a little.

“In a hurry, why?” he asked. “It’s not exactly late, and your house is nearby.”

Mario responded that it wasn't a matter of hunger or lateness, but that he was planning to collect caterpillars that afternoon. It was a caterpillar kind of day, and they almost certainly would be out. Laughing, Giorgio asked if the caterpillars came out every Friday, and Mario responded earnestly that yesterday it had rained and today there was sun, so the caterpillars he was interested in would have come out.

Unlike Giorgio, Renato feigned indifference. "Caterpillars, really? And once you've collected them what do you do with them? Fry them up?"

Giorgio pretended to shudder in disgust and said, "Spare me, it's lunchtime."

Mario then explained that he intended to raise them, to put them in a little box that he had already prepared and wait for them to make a cocoon.

Giorgio became curious. "Do they all make a cocoon? How do they do it? Are they fast? How long does it take? And is the cocoon like the ones made by silkworms?"

Renato was whistling and glancing around as if he weren't listening.

"I don't know," Mario responded. "In fact, I want to see how they do it—if it's like the books say it is. I have a book on caterpillars."

"Will you lend it to me?"

"Yeah, okay, but you have to return it."

"Sure thing. You know I always return books. . . . Listen, can I come with you today?"

Mario looked uncertain, or, rather, had the expression of someone who wanted to appear uncertain. "Well . . . I don't know yet. I don't know where I'm going. It depends if they let me take my bike. Call me around three."

Renato interjected bitterly: "Can you believe this guy? He's in such a hurry and yet he's going to stay home until three. I bet you're going to do your homework. So you've got yourself a disciple, huh? Collecting caterpillars and putting them in a little box. What fun."

Giorgio rushed to defend Mario.

"So what? One person likes to do one thing, and another something else. We're not all the same, you know. I'm interested in them, too, for example."

Renato stopped and looked hard at the other two, then deliberately spoke slowly and clearly. "What I meant was that it's a real load of fun for someone like him."

Mario was not a boy who always had a response ready. He hesitated a second, then, in a tone of bewilderment, asked, “What do you mean, someone like me?”

Renato sniggered and Mario continued: “I’m just the same as everybody. You like volleyball, Giorgio likes stamps, and I like caterpillars. And not only caterpillars. You know, I also like taking photographs, for example—”

But Renato interrupted him. “Come on, don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean. In any case, the whole class knows.”

“Knows what?”

“Knows that . . . well, that you’re not like everyone else.”

Mario fell silent, stung to the quick. It was true, it was something he often thought about himself, and his only relief from it was by thinking and repeating to himself that no one was like anyone else. But he felt “more different,” perhaps even superior, and often suffered because of it. Feebly, he defended himself. “Baloney! I don’t know where you got that idea. Why should I be any different from anyone else?”

Renato had by now whipped himself into the self-righteous huff of one who discovers that his neighbor has transgressed. “Why? And why do you act all innocent now? Wasn’t it you who told us that your mother and father didn’t want to get married in church? And that illness you had last year, when you were absent for a month, and when you got better you didn’t speak to anyone and your mother came back with you to school and talked all hush-hush with the teacher and if anyone came near they changed the subject. Are these things straightforward, normal?”

“They’re my business. Last year I was sick, and they gave me medicine and then at night I couldn’t sleep so my mother took me to have some tests. It happens to lots of people. There’s nothing special about it.”

“Right! And in gym class? I’m not the only one who notices that when you get undressed you always turn toward the wall. And you know why? You, Giorgio, do you know why?” He stopped, then added gravely, “Because Mario doesn’t have a belly button, that’s why! Haven’t you noticed it yourself?”

Giorgio, aware that he was blushing violently, responded that yes, in fact, he had observed that Mario didn’t like to be looked at when he got undressed, but it didn’t mean anything. He felt that he was betraying Mario, but Renato’s self-confidence overwhelmed him.

Mario's knees were trembling from anger, fear, and a sense of impotence. "It's all lies, all stupid made-up stuff. I'm just like the rest of you, like everyone else, only I'm a bit thinner. And I'll show you if you want. Right now!"

"Well done, right here in the street! But I'll hold you to your word. Tuesday in gym class, we'll see if you're brave enough. We'll see who's telling the truth."

Mario had arrived at his front door. He said a brusque goodbye and went inside. The other two continued on their way.

Giorgio was silent, lost in thought. He was disturbed, and at the same time fascinated by the topic. "I said yes just so that you could be right . . . and then yes, it's a fact that Mario doesn't like to be seen naked . . . but I didn't get that thing about the belly button. Were you saying it seriously or only to make him mad? I mean, does he actually have one or not? And if he doesn't, what does it mean? Who else doesn't have one?"

"Come on, aren't you twelve years old?" Renato said. "Don't you read the newspapers? Don't you know that the belly button is really a scar from birth, I mean from when a baby is born from a woman? Have you ever had a good look at those paintings where you see the creation of Adam? Well, in fact, Adam wasn't born from a woman and he doesn't have the scar."

"Sure, but from then on all babies were born from women. It's always been that way."

"And now it's not like that any longer. Obviously, you're not allowed to read the newspapers yet. Have you ever heard of the pill and the test tube and the syringe? Well, that's how Mario was born, and many others like him. He wasn't born in a hospital, but in a laboratory. I saw it once on television. It was in America, but soon they'll build one here, too. It's a kind of incubator, like the one used for chicks, with a lot of test tubes inside, and the babies are in the test tubes. Slowly, as the babies grow, they exchange the test tubes for increasingly bigger ones. Then there are ultraviolet lamps, as well as other colors, or the babies would be blind, and . . ."

"But what does the pill have to do with it? Isn't that used in order not to have babies?"

Renato stumbled for a moment, but was quickly back on track. "The pill . . . yes, that's a different story. I got confused. But they also put pills in the test tubes: red in order to have males, and blue to have females. They

put them in right from the beginning, in the first test tube, together with the gamete. I meant chromosomes. Anyway, you get what I mean. It was even in the newspaper, in *Chronicles of Science*, and they have a kind of digest, sort of like a menu, from which the parents—but they're not really the parents, let's say the man and woman who want to have a child—can choose the eyes, the hair, the nose, and all the features, if he'll be thin or fat, and so on."

Giorgio was listening intently, but, as a reasonable boy, he was wary of being made a fool and wasn't going to let himself be taken for a ride. "And the syringe? Why did you mention a syringe?"

"Because it's an entire system based on syringes. One to extract the gametes, another for the culture medium, and still more for all the hormones, one for each, and what a load of trouble if they get mixed up. It's how monsters sometimes get born. Of course, it's a tricky process. Then, when they get to the last stage, they break the test tube and deliver the baby to the parents, who bring it up, breast-feed it, et cetera, as if it were a natural child; and, in fact, it's just like the others except, obviously, it doesn't have a belly button."

"Like Mario. You're absolutely sure he hasn't got one?"

Having by now convinced himself, Renato felt that he was in possession of unlimited persuasive powers.

"Up until half an hour ago, I was only suspicious, but now I'm sure of it. Didn't you see how he turned red when I confronted him, to his face? And did you see what a hurry he was in to get away from us? He was on the brink of crying."

"It's obvious that deep down he's embarrassed," Giorgio said in a conciliatory tone. "Poor guy, he even makes me feel a little sorry for him. I turned red earlier myself just because I felt sorry for him. It's not his fault. He didn't choose to be born that way. If anybody did, it was his parents."

"I feel sorry for him, too, but with these guys you have to be careful. You have to understand that they're just like everyone else but only on the outside. If you pay attention, you'll see what I mean. Take Mario, for example. If you look carefully you'll see that his freckles are different from everybody else's, and that he has them even on his eyelids and his lips. His fingernails are always covered with those little white spots, and you know what that means. He says his 'r' in a way that you have to get used to before you can understand him and not laugh at him, and his accent is one of those

that you could immediately pick out even if you were in a crowd of a thousand people. And then, can you explain to me why he never fights, not even as a joke, and he doesn't know how to swim, and he learned to ride a bike only this year, when you taught him? He does so well at school, you know, because he memorizes everything!"

Giorgio, who didn't have such a good memory, asked in alarm, "And what does that mean?"

"It means that he has a magnetic memory, like a calculator. It's easy to do well if you remember everything! Haven't you ever noticed that at night his eyes glow like a cat's? They light up like phosphorescent watches, which are now actually banned, because in the long term they cause cancer. If you think about it, we might be better off if we didn't sit next to him at school."

"So then why do you still sit near him?"

"Because I hadn't thought of these things yet. Also, I'm not afraid of much, and I'm curious about Mario, curious to see what he does . . ."

". . . and to copy his work!"

"And to copy his exercises, sure. What's wrong with that?"

Confused, Giorgio didn't answer. The whole thing, which he only half believed, still intrigued him. Why not talk about it with Mario himself, cautiously, without asking him any direct questions?

Two weeks passed and Mario had changed; anyone could see it. The teacher finished her lesson on Charlemagne, painfully aware that she was availing herself of the exact same words she had used on that occasion for the past eight years. She had tried, with little faith, the experiment of telling the students the legend of the dream and the cave, but immediately gave up. Finally she announced that for the last ten minutes of class the students would be given a surprise oral review quiz. She pricked up her ears and narrowed her eyes. If the school and the world had been as she wished they were, the students would have responded as if to a delightful dare. Instead, all she perceived was a rustle made up of sighs, books furtively opened beneath desks, and sleeves pulled back to check the time. The atmosphere and the mood of the room became a shade gloomier.

Giuseppe pointed out that the knights errant were descendants of Clovis. Rodolfo, when asked, responded that Liutprand was a king, failing to add other significant details. Behind him rose a cloud of almost visible whispers radiating the obvious “King of the Lombards,” but Rodolfo, out of arrogance, or out of a sense of fair play, or because he was deaf, or out of fear of complications, didn’t catch it. Sandro showed no restraint regarding Charles the Bald. He spoke easily about him for a full forty seconds, as if he were talking about one of his closest relatives, and correctly used the proper past tenses. Mario, on the other hand, against every expectation, stumbled —and yet the teacher was sure that Mario must know the (basically trivial) fact of who had defeated the Arabs at Poitiers. Mario, however, stood up and with a cold insolence said, “I don’t know.” And yet he had known the week before and had even included it, though not required to, in his answers to the written set of questions!

“I don’t know,” Mario repeated, his eyes fixed on the floor. “I forgot.”

There are certain rules of the game, and she had the impression that Mario was cheating. She pressed on. “Come on. Think. A French minister, actually, a ‘Mayor of the Palace’ . . . who, in fact, because of this crushing victory was given a strange nickname. . . .”

She heard a voice, probably Renato’s, hiss, “Tell her! Why don’t you tell her?” followed by Mario’s voice, obstinate and cold: “It’s useless. I forgot. I don’t know it anymore. I never knew it.” Then many voices, among them Renato’s, filled the classroom with a morose and suffocating air as they hooted, “Tell her, tell her! Why don’t you tell her? You know it. You think she doesn’t know you know? If you tell her, you’ll be better off!” Finally she heard her own voice, unsteady and strained, say something like “Tell me, Mario, what’s wrong with you? You’ve been acting differently for some time now. You’re distracted and sullen. Or just a bit errant like those French kings?” Finally, against the menacing background noise of the agitated and restless class, she heard the firm voice of Mario, who was still standing: “I haven’t changed. I’ve always been like this.”

She knew that it was her duty to summon Mario to a one-on-one meeting. It was also the only right thing to do. Something in her, however, feared such a meeting and, like a coward, she sought to put it off. When the day

came, she felt oddly younger than the boy—less stern, less serious, more frivolous, less weighed down. But she was a conscientious woman and played her part as best she could.

". . . I just don't understand what's come over you. You mustn't put strange ideas in your head, you're an intelligent and clever boy. I've been following your progress for two years now and I know how much you're capable of. All you need is a little focus. Perhaps you're tired. Or not feeling well? Or perhaps something's wrong at home?"

Silence, and then, as if through the slits of a visor, "No, no. Everything's fine. I'm not tired."

"Then it's something they said to you? Is it something they said to you . . . here? I've seen that Renato often talks to you, and whenever he does you lower your eyes. Perhaps he humiliates you? Or tells you some nonsense? I'm sure he's only joking—you know, meaningless kids' stuff. Don't pay any attention, laugh it off, and everything will go back to the way it was. If you make a fuss, you'll just encourage them to continue."

She'd taken a shot in the dark, and yet it was immediately apparent she'd hit her mark. Mario turned pale and raised his eyes to hers with the relief and exhaustion of one who gives up a fight. He unglued his lips with difficulty and said, "It's not nonsense. It's true. I'm not like the others. I've known it for a while." He laughed shyly. "Renato is right."

"Why aren't you like the others? What makes you feel different? In any case, your difference makes you better. I don't see why it should bother you. If you were at the bottom of the class . . ."

"It's not that. I'm different because I was born different. No one can do anything about it."

"You were born . . . how?"

"I'm synthetic."

The principal, insofar as a principal can be of help, was the last resort. In this particular case, the principal was a gentleman and a friend, but even the best of principals has crossed a certain threshold and can understand only certain things. He advised her to wait and see—a great piece of advice. In the meantime, Mario was outside in the hallway and she could almost hear his brain droning uselessly like a moped stalling—droning and drumming

and questioning and responding in vain. She asked the principal for permission to let him come in. He acquiesced reluctantly and Mario entered and sat down as if before a firing squad. The principal felt like a fourth-rate actor: “Hello, Mario. So then? What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Nothing,” said Mario.

“Nothing . . . is too little. Nothing will come of nothing. I’ve been informed, you see, about certain of your ideas . . . certain strange stories that must have been told to you . . . and I am surprised, truly surprised, that a boy like you, logical, rational, would have listened. What do you have to say about this?”

“Nothing,” said Mario.

“Listen, son, I think that you (and certainly not you alone) have had your head filled and are suffering from, well, overload . . . like a telephone line. You’ve absorbed too much from the environment surrounding you: from books, newspapers, television, movies . . . and also from school, certainly. Do you agree with me?”

Mario was silent and stared off into space, not even trying, it seemed, to find the words to respond.

The principal continued: “But if you won’t talk . . . if you don’t help me to help you . . . we won’t get anywhere. I’ll teach you another lesson,” he said, laughing nervously, “beyond all the ones you’ve already had to absorb. . . . Different, so you feel different. But we are all different, by golly, and God help us if we weren’t. There are those who are born to be scientists, like you, right? And instead those who’ll make good businessmen, and then there are those who are better off if they limit themselves to . . . to a more modest employment. Each of us can and must do something to make ourselves better, to nourish ourselves, but the earth, our human essence, it’s different for each one of us. It might be unjust, but that’s the way it is, it’s what we have inherited from our parents and ancestors at birth and—”

Mario interrupted him with a restrained voice: “Okay. It’s true. But now I have to go.”

In the courtyard, two teams were playing a pickup game of basketball, with few rules and a lot of yelling and hurling of insults; another group, nearly on top of them, was trying to conduct a long-jump competition, even if the sandbox was almost empty. In a corner, Mario was talking to a handful of random listeners, not from his class, who were more stunned than focused. Mario was saying: ". . . now we're only a few, but later we'll be many and we'll rule, and then there will be no more wars. Yes, because we won't fight among ourselves, as happens now, and no one will be able to attack us, because we'll be the strongest. And there will be no differences. We won't make differences anymore: white, black, Chinese, they'll all be equal—even the redskins, the ones who are still around. We'll destroy all the atomic bombs and missiles, which in any case will no longer be necessary, and with the uranium we recover there will be enough free energy for everyone throughout the entire world. And food will be free for everyone, even in India, and no one will die of hunger anymore. Only a few babies will be born, so that there's room for everyone. And all those who are born will be born like us."

"Born how?" asked a timid voice.

"Like me. Or even by telephone or radio: a man telephones a woman, and then a baby is born, but not by chance, the way it happens now. It'll be a planned birth. . . . Well? You don't have to look at me like that. I'm one of the first, and perhaps with me they didn't calculate as well as they could have, but now they're trying out a new system, and the children are designed just the way a bridge is, cell by cell, and they can be made to order, as tall and strong and intelligent as one wants, and also good, courageous, and just. They can also be made to breathe underwater like fish, or to be capable of flying. In such a world there will be order and justice, and everyone will be happy. But don't think I'm the only one. You don't even have to look very far: Scotti Masera. At first I just suspected it but now I'm sure. I thought so because of her accent and the way she moves but also because she never gets angry and never raises her voice. Never getting angry is important: it means that you have achieved control or that you're about to achieve it. When control is complete one can even exist

without breathing, or feeling pain. One can order one's heart to stop. Well, I realized that she was one of us the other day when she took me aside."

"So old?" Giorgio asked, making his way among the listeners whose number had grown considerably.

"She's not actually that old, and what difference does it make, old or not old?"

"It does make a difference," Giorgio explained patiently. "Didn't you say that it's only been a short time that they've known how to do these things?"

Mario looked at him with the demeanor of someone who has just woken up, but he quickly recovered. "I don't know, maybe she's not as old as she looks, but it could also be true that she was born like that."

"What? Born old . . . I mean elderly?"

"I said 'born' so to speak, but you all understand me. She was *built* that way, because we're in a hurry, we can't wait anymore. There's no time to lose. In the year 2000, there will be ten billion people—you understand, ten billion. If we don't watch out, we'll be eating one another. But even if it doesn't become that dire, the water and air will be contaminated throughout the world. Even at the top of Everest the air will be smog, and water will be precious because the sources will all be dried up. I'm not making this up, it's already happening. That's why it's indispensable to give birth to grown men, to engineers and biologists. We can't wait for the children of today to grow up and finish college. It would take thirty years before they could start working. So this is why it's necessary . . . why we need grown-ups immediately."

Renato appeared in front of him with his arm raised, as if he wanted to stop a charging bull. In fact he wanted him to shut up; he was full of anger and also a dark fear. "Stop it, you idiot! Stop telling stories. Scotti is not an engineer or a biologist. She's just an old witch!"

Mario answered in such a loud voice that all the kids in the entire courtyard stopped and turned toward him. "She's not a witch. She's one of us. I met her in the hallway just yesterday and she gave me the sign."

"What sign?" Renato asked.

Mario didn't answer right away. He looked at Renato, and it seemed that something inside him was extinguished. He let his arms dangle and bowed his head, then with a muffled voice, hardly audible, he said, "Go away, Renato. I can't bear to see you. That's right, you made me speak up, and I

spoke up, and now I’m like everyone else—like you, like one of you. Go away, go away all of you, leave me alone.” He backed up against the wall, then slipped along it until he reached the door. A little while later Giorgio found him in a corner of the gym, sitting on the floor, his head in his hands, sobbing heavily.

Observed from a Distance

NOTE IN GOOD FAITH: We have been assured that within a few years, perhaps even within the present year of 1967, humans will walk on the Moon, irreversibly transporting there our cellular mechanisms, our infections, and our civilization.

After this event occurs and the first accounts of the first visitors are published, all the fantasies regarding the Selenites expressed throughout the ages in our literature, some of it illustrious, some not, will be rendered vain and futile. I would, therefore, be delighted if the essay below were to be read and understood as a last respectful homage to Lucian of Samosata, Voltaire, Swedenborg, Rostand, E. A. Poe, Flammarion, and H. G. Wells.

NOTE IN BAD FAITH: The deciphering of the Report below, which was received in Selenitic linear B characters, has caused the FBI decoders to whom it was assigned considerable technical difficulties; the reader will please forgive all textual incongruities and gaps. Furthermore, be advised that for reasons of simplicity it seemed appropriate in the transcription to use whenever possible tellurian dating, units of measurement, and geographical terms equivalent or corresponding to those contained in the original.

Therefore, when, for example, cities or ships are mentioned, it is necessary to remember that these are “cities” (i.e., dense conglomerates of human habitations) and “ships” (i.e., voluminous floating objects constructed and piloted by humans) for us, but not for the unknown author of the Report, to whom both appeared in a much less discernible guise.

REPORT

1. VALIDITY. This Report describes variations and movements recently observed on the Earth's surface. What is not described, however, are the periodic variations and movements that coincide with the sidereal year or the lunar month, such as the cycles of the polar ice caps, the variations in color of the mountains and plains, the tides, the variations in the atmosphere's transparency, etc. These phenomena, which have been known to us for a long time, are certainly related to astronomical cycles and are the subject of numerous previous reports. They therefore appear to be irrelevant with regard to any discussion concerning the presence of life on Earth.

2. CITIES. For the description, nomenclature, and location of the principal Cities and Ports, refer to the previous Report no. 8, dated January 15, 1876. Thanks to recent improvements in the resolution power of our optical instruments, it has been observed that the majority of Cities are in a rapid growth phase, the atmosphere above them prone to increasing opacity, thick with dust, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and sulfur trioxide.

It was furthermore possible to determine that Cities are not simply areas of a different color from the surrounding terrain. In many, we have observed a "subtle structure": some—for example, Paris, Tokyo, Milan—have a well-defined center from which thin filaments radiate outward; other filaments surround the center at varying distances, in the form of progressive concentric circles or polygons. Other Cities, and among these are all, or almost all, the Ports, exhibit instead a grid structure made up of filaments that are basically rectilinear and orthogonal and which subdivide the urban area into rectangles or squares.

2.1. EVENING LIGHT. Beginning during the years 1905–10, all the urban filaments referred to above became suddenly luminous shortly after the local setting of the Sun. More precisely: about 30–60 minutes after the terminator's transit, the filaments in each city light up in rapid succession; every filament is illuminated instantaneously, and the illuminations occur within 5–10 seconds. The luminosity lasts for the entire night and stops abruptly around 30 minutes before the terminator's next transit. The phenomenon, which is rather conspicuous and has been carefully studied by many observers, reveals characteristics of a surprising regularity: for each

individual city, interruptions in luminosity have been observed only one to two nights in every thousand, and for the most part coinciding with severe storms in the vicinity, rendering highly plausible the hypothesis that this is some sort of electrical phenomenon.

Regarding the alterations of Evening Light during the Anomalous Period, see Point 5 below. At the end of that period, the phenomenon resumed its manifestations with typical regularity. However, spectroscopic examination of urban luminosity has shown that up until around 1950 it contained a mostly continuous spectrum (like incandescence), while since then spectra with bands or with lines, of the kind emitted by rarefied gasses or fluorescence, have been superimposed on this luminosity with ever greater intensity.

In the winter of 1965–66, a total extinction was observed in New York City, even though the sky was clear.

2.2. GROWTH. As noted, many Cities appear to be in active growth. In general, the growth respects the existing grid structure: Cities laid out on a spoke model expand along the spokes; the grid Cities expand with new layers in an orthogonal grid. The analogy with crystalline growth is obvious and leads one to surmise that Cities are vast zones in which the Earth's surface is characterized by pronounced crystallinity. Furthermore, on the Moon we have an example of this in the impressive, highly crystallized feldspar formations covering several hectares of land within the Aristarchus Crater.

The hypothesis concerning the Cities' crystalline nature is reinforced by the recent discovery of structures of a regular form rising a hundred or so meters above ground level and apparently attributable to the trimetric system. These structures are easily observable at dusk, thanks to their shadows: they have rectangular or square sections and, in some cases, it has been possible to witness their formation, which occurs along a vertical axis at a velocity of 10–20 meters a month. Very rarely do these structures appear outside urban areas. Some, in favorable geometric conditions, specularly reflect solar light, rendering the measurement of crystallographic constants much easier.

Other signs of two-dimensional crystalline organization can perhaps be recognized in the rectangular structures with slight color variations observed on many terrestrial plains.

2.3. ELLIPTICAL CRATERS. The existence of elliptical craters (more rarely circular or semicircular) within some Cities, or in their immediate vicinity, has already been noted in previous reports. They were formed slowly (in the course of five to fifteen years) in ancient times in various Cities of the Mediterranean zone; there is no record, however, of their observation before the eighth century BC. The majority of these ancient craters were subsequently almost entirely obliterated, perhaps by erosion or as a result of natural catastrophes. Over the past sixty years, numerous other craters have formed with great regularity either within or near all Cities of an area greater than 30–50 hectares: the largest Cities often have two or more. Their shape and dimensions are exceedingly uniform, and they never appear on inclines. Rather than having a precise elliptical form, they consist of a rectangle approximately 160 by 200 meters in size, closed on the two shorter sides by two semicircles. Their orientation appears random, with respect both to the urban grid and to the cardinal points. The contours revealed by their evening shadow render them clearly identifiable as craters: their rim is 12–20 meters high with respect to their base, and descends vertically on the exterior and with an approximately 50 percent incline on the interior. In the summer season, some will periodically emit a pale luminosity in the early hours of the night.

A volcanic origin is considered probable, but their relationship to the urban formations is unknown. Equally mysterious is the weekly rhythm to which the craters themselves seem to be typically prone, and which we describe in the following point.

3. NON-ASTRONOMICAL PERIODICITY. A certain number of phenomena observed on Earth follow a seven-day rhythm. It is only thanks to the optical equipment we've had at our disposal for the past several decades that we have been able to discover this singularity; therefore, we're not able to establish if its origin is recent or remote, or whether it might not even date back to the solidification of the Earth's crust. An astronomical rhythm is certainly not involved: as is well-known, neither the Earth's month (synodic or sidereal) nor its year (solar or sidereal) contains a number of days in multiples of seven.

The weekly rhythm is extremely rigid. The phenomena that we call SDE (Seventh Day Events), which primarily concern the Cities and their immediate environs, take place simultaneously across the entire surface of

the Earth—all, of course, subject to their local times. This effect is unexplained, and all proposed hypotheses aren't very satisfying. As a curiosity, we point out that the hypothesis of a biological rhythm has been formulated by some observers. The possible life (vegetable and/or animal) on Earth, which under this hypothesis must be accepted as strictly monogenetic, would be subject to an extremely broad cycle in which activity and rest (or vice versa) follow each other in segments of six days and one day.

3.1. SDE CRATER ACTIVITY. As noted, the elliptical craters of 2.3 are subject to a weekly rhythm.

Every seven days, the craters' contours, which are normally whitish, become gray or black within a few hours (generally in the early afternoon). They maintain this dark coloration for about two hours, following which the original whitish tint is restored within 15–20 minutes. Only very exceptionally has the phenomenon been observed on any day other than the seventh. Significant variations in color don't occur inside the craters.

3.2. OTHER SDE ACTIVITY. In the early daylight hours of the seventh day, the urban peripheral (radial) filaments appear slightly darker. In the early nighttime hours that follow, especially in the summer season, they appear weakly lit even outside the urban perimeter: at certain angles, this luminosity appears to be split into two parallel and contiguous filaments, one emitting white light and the other red light.

Some sections of the coastline are also subject to SDE darkening. This has been observed on coastlines of a peculiar yellowish color not too far from Cities and not subject to significant tidal fluctuations. It takes place only during those seasons and in those locations most exposed to sunlight, and lasts from 2–4 hours after dawn until the local sunset. On some of these beaches, in addition to the seventh day, the darkening is observed daily for a period of 15–30 days beginning approximately one month after the summer solstice.

3.3. SDE ANOMALIES. During the past few months, in some zones of North Africa, Southern Asia, and the Malay Archipelago, the SDE phenomena appear two days earlier with respect to the rest of Earth, and

one day earlier on the narrow isthmus that links Asia with Africa. In the British Isles they appear instead over the sixth and seventh days.

4. PORTS AND PORT ACTIVITY. It has been established that by "Ports" we mean Cities situated on the shores of seas, large lakes, or rivers. For the definition of these latter geographical concepts refer to previous Reports. It is, however, advisable to recall that the liquid nature of the seas, lakes, and rivers has now been generally confirmed by a polarimetric analysis of the reflected solar image, and that, given the temperature and pressure conditions existing on the Earth's surface, it is today universally accepted that the liquid in question is water. For the various relationships among water, snow, ice caps, glaciers, atmospheric humidity, and cloud cover, refer to Report no. 7, in which they are described.

We are here concerned specifically with Seaports. It will be recalled that even the earliest observers noted that the Ports were always situated in coastal inlets of varying depths, and often at the mouths of rivers. All phenomena that occur in the interior Cities are also observable in the Ports, but in the latter further specific activities of great interest occur.

4.1. SHIPS. By the name "ships" we simply mean certain floating objects with an elongated form discernible using modern optical instruments. They move longitudinally in the water at greatly varying speeds, but rarely above 70 kilometers per hour; their maximum length is approximately 300 meters, the minimum is smaller than our instruments' resolving power (approximately 50 meters).

Their importance is fundamental: they are the only objects that can be seen physically moving on the Earth's surface, with the exception of the ice fragments that are often seen breaking off from polar ice caps. However, while the movements of the ice caps are slow and apparently random, the ships' movements are subject to interesting singularities.

4.1.1. SHIPS' MOVEMENTS. The ships are divided into periodic and aperiodic. Those in the first category move back and forth along fixed routes between two Ports, often stopping for several hours in intermediary Ports: a rough proportionality has been noted between their size and the length of the route. They only rarely stop in the open sea. Each ship moves

with a constant speed day and night and the route taken is the shortest distance possible between the points of departure and arrival.

At night the ships give off a slight luminosity. Sometimes they remain in a Port for a few months.

The aperiodic ships also move between ports, but without apparent regularity. Their stops last for a greater length of time (up to 10 days); some of them wander erratically in the open sea, or stop there for a long time. They are not luminous and, on average, don't move as fast. No ship comes into contact with land except in a Port.

4.1.2. THE GENESIS AND DISAPPEARANCE OF SHIPS. All ships are created in relatively few fixed points, all situated within small or large Ports. The creation process lasts from several months to one or two years; the growth seems to occur by cross sections, beginning with the major axis, which is created first. The life of ships is from 30 to 50 years; normally, after a stay of varying duration in a Port, sometimes the Port of origin, they seem to undergo a rapid process of disintegration or decomposition. In rare cases they have been observed to disappear in the open sea; regarding this issue, however, refer to Point 5.

4.1.3. HYPOTHESIS AS TO THE NATURE OF THE SHIPS. By now it has been ruled out that the ships could be floating blocks of pumice or ice. A bold new theory deserving of attention asserts that they are aquatic animals, the periodic ones intelligent, the others less so (or less well endowed with a sense of direction). The first group might feed on some material or living species found in Ports. The others, perhaps, feed on smaller ships (to us invisible) in the open sea. However, according to some observations, these would manifest a tropism for hydrocarbons.

Many aperiodic ships, in fact, often go to Ports situated in zones where the atmosphere reveals traces of methane and ethanol. For both types of ship, the reproductive cycle, which for now remains unintelligible to us, ostensibly takes place in the Ports.

4.2. INLAND PORTS. In many of the Cities it is possible to discern areas called "Inland Ports," characterized by a peculiar pattern of gray filaments that are luminous at night, consisting of one or more rectangles 50–80 meters wide and up to 3000 or more meters long. Singular objects

consisting of long white clouds in the shape of an elongated isosceles triangle have been observed moving between Inland Ports, their vertex advancing at a velocity of 800–1000 kilometers per hour.

5. ANOMALOUS PERIOD. This nomenclature usually indicates the period 1939–45, which was characterized by numerous deviations from the Earth's norm.

As previously mentioned, in the majority of the Cities the phenomenon of evening light (2.1) appeared disrupted or extinguished. Growth also appeared slowed or stopped altogether (2.2). The darkening of the SDE craters was less intense and regular (3.1); the same was true for the coastline darkening (3.2); the SDE luminosity of the urban filaments (3.2), the craters (2.3), and the periodic ships (4.1.1) disappeared.

The pendular rhythm of the periodic ships (4.1.1) appeared seriously diminished; instead the number and mass of aperiodic ships increased, as if they had overpowered the periodic ships. The sudden disappearance of ships in the open sea, a phenomenon normally quite rare, occurred with great frequency: no fewer than 800 disappearances were counted, and took place in time frames varying from 4 minutes to several hours. But, given the incomplete nature of the observations, and the impossibility of monitoring at every moment any more than half the Earth's surface, this number should certainly be multiplied by two, and probably by a still greater factor.

Some ship disappearances were preceded by intense but instantaneous light phenomena; other, analogous phenomena were recorded in the same period in various regions of the Earth, especially in Europe and the Far East, and along the north coast of Africa. The end of the Anomalous Period was marked by two very bright explosions, occurring in Japan within 2 days of each other. Similar or stronger ones were observed in the 10 years afterward on various islands in the Pacific and in a confined area of central Asia; at the moment in which we are writing, the phenomenon appears to be extinct or dormant.

The Brokers

The place was pleasant, bright, and cheerful. An attenuated whitish-blue light came from all directions and flickered softly. The walls were a flat white that disappeared upward into a hazy glow. The smooth, cylindrical pillars, also white, joined a barely visible vaulted ceiling.

S., wearing a white coat, was sitting on a tall stool at a drafting table. He was very young, almost a boy. On a piece of paper, he was outlining a complicated diagram in which long diagonal lines radiated outward from a point on the lower left, and converged with a precise elegance at another point that, owing to an effect of perspective, appeared to be a good way beyond the sheet of paper. The paper was yellowish and the ink brown; the drawing was full of erasures, and of explanatory words and phrases scribbled in a hurry, as if the writer were anxious not to let an idea escape. The drafting table and stool were in the middle of the floor, far from the walls, and the floor was empty. S. worked intently but without continuity. He alternated between bursts of intense activity and pauses in which he seemed to be gathering his thoughts, or perhaps was distracted.

In the distance a doorbell rang, but S. didn't hear it and continued working. After about ten seconds the doorbell rang again. S. lifted his head a moment and then resumed drawing. At the third ring, which was more insistent, S. sighed, put down his pencil, got off the stool, and headed toward the far end of the room. His figure appeared minuscule with respect to the vast floor tiles, and his footsteps echoed at length under the silent vaults. He passed through wide corridors and entered a small reception room with a ceiling so low that he could touch it with his hand. A robust youth, a pretty blond middle-aged woman, and a thin gray-haired man were

waiting for him. They stood next to a table, and the youth held a briefcase. S. stopped for a moment on the threshold, as if vexed. He then composed himself and said, “Please, have a seat.” He sat down, and the three followed suit. S. was annoyed at having to interrupt his work.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, then noticed the briefcase the youth had placed on the table. Disappointed, he added: “Ah, I understand.”

The young man didn’t waste any time on preliminaries. He opened the briefcase, then said, “No, look, it’s better to avoid any misunderstanding right from the start. We are not insurance agents, and we haven’t come here to sell you anything—or, rather, to sell you any merchandise. We are officials.”

“So, you’re the ones who come to . . .”

“That’s right, you guessed it.”

“And what are you proposing?”

“Earth,” the young man responded with a friendly wink. “We’re Earth specialists, you know, the third planet in the Solar System. A nice place, too, as we’ll try to show you, if you’ll give us the opportunity.” He detected a slight hesitation in S.’s expression and added, “Are you surprised? You weren’t expecting us?”

“Yes, actually . . . I’ve been aware of a certain activity recently. Rumors spread, some colleagues disappeared, just like that, silently, without warning. But . . . well, I’m not ready. I don’t feel ready. I haven’t thought about it or prepared at all. You know how it is when there isn’t a deadline—you prefer to let the days go by, stay as you are, noncommittal, without making any decisions.”

With professional efficiency, the youth interjected: “But of course, don’t worry. It’s normal, it almost always happens this way. It’s very hard to find a candidate who welcomes us with a clear-cut yes or no. And that’s quite comprehensible. It’s impossible to make up your mind like this, alone, without evidence, without any genuine documentation. But we are here precisely for this. If you would simply listen to us for a moment—no, we won’t take up much of your time, even if you all—well, time is something you have a lot of. Not like us, who are always in a hurry, yet we can’t ever show it—otherwise, we’d never close any deals.”

As he spoke, the youth rummaged through his briefcase, pulling out various images of the Earth, some of an educational sort, others taken from an aerial perspective or from cosmic distances. He showed them, one by

one, to S., explaining in a professional and pragmatic narration: “Look here. As I mentioned, our area of interest is the Earth, and in particular the Human Race. The difficult times are in the distant past. By now it’s a well-equipped planet, even comfortable, with temperature fluctuations never in excess of 120°C between absolute maximum and minimum, and an atmospheric pressure that is practically constant in time and space. The day is twenty-four hours long, the year is around three hundred and sixty-five days, and there is a lovely satellite that causes moderate tides and gently illuminates the nights. It is much smaller than the Sun, but it has been intelligently positioned in such a way as to have the same apparent diameter as the Sun, thus achieving solar eclipses with a complete view of the corona —here, have a look at this—so appreciated by connoisseurs. There’s also a saltwater ocean designed with no expense spared. Here it is, see? Now I’ll show it to you in action.”

In the photograph, which showed a vast sea in front of a sandy coast that extended to the horizon, waves began moving quietly. “A photograph doesn’t do it justice, but it’s one of Earth’s most fascinating attractions. I know of some clients, even if advanced in years, who spend hours contemplating the waves, their eternal rhythm, always the same and always different: they say it’s worth the trip. It’s too bad that we have so little free time, otherwise. . . . Ah, I forgot to tell you that Earth’s axis is inclined to the ecliptic by a small angle, here it is.”

He pulled from the pile a schematic image of the Earth with meridians and parallels. Upon his command, the Earth slowly began to turn.

“With this simple artifice we obtained a pleasing variety of climates across most of the planet. Finally, we have at our disposal an absolutely exceptional atmosphere, unique in the galaxy, and I won’t tell you the time and stress it cost us. But just think, with more than 20 percent oxygen there is an inestimable wealth and an unlimited source of energy. You know, it’s easy to say let’s have petroleum here, coal there, or hydrogen, or methane. I know planets so full of methane that they overflow. But if there’s no oxygen, what can be done with it? Anyway, I won’t go on. It’s not good form to speak badly of the competition’s products. Oh, forgive me, I got a little carried away by the subject and I forgot my manners.”

He took from his pocket a business card and held it out to S. “Here, that’s me, my name is G., and I am in charge of general placement. These are my assistants: Mrs. B., who will inform you on matters of human

relations; and Associate R., who will answer any questions you may have of a historical or philosophical nature."

Mrs. B. smiled and nodded; Mr. R. stood up and made a formal bow. Both handed their business cards to S.

"Very pleased to meet you," said S. "I'm at your disposition. But there's no obligation, right? I wouldn't want to . . ."

"Don't worry," said G. "During this interview you won't make any commitment to us, and, for our part, we'll try to avoid pressuring you in any way on your choice. We'll show you our information in the most objective and comprehensive manner possible. Nevertheless, it's our duty to warn you: there will not be a second visit. You can surely understand, there are many candidates and those of us who do the job of placing souls in bodies are very few. It's not an easy job, you know. It's extraordinarily satisfying, but not many are successful. As a result, our days are full, and only with rare exceptions are we able to visit the same candidate twice. You'll see and judge for yourself, then freely make your own decision. You'll tell us yes or no, and we'll part good friends in either case. And now we can begin."

From his briefcase G. extracted another packet of images, handed them to S., and continued: "This is our sample book. Our strengths are all in here. The material is entirely up-to-date and reliable, and we renew it, I'll have you know, every six months."

S. leafed through the images—splendid illustrations in brilliant and harmonious colors—with interest. For the most part they showed magnificent human specimens: beautiful young women and athletic men with slightly fatuous smiles who moved buoyantly within the frame as if eager to spring into action.

"Are these men?"

"Men and women," G. responded. "You know the difference, right? It's small but fundamental. . . . A young Polynesian woman . . . a Senegalese hunter . . . a Los Angeles bank employee . . . an Australian boxer. . . . Shall we see him fight? Here, look, what a punch, what power—he's like a panther. . . . A young Indian mother . . ."

The young Indian mother must have gotten into the packet of images by mistake. Her appearance was, in fact, far from pleasant. She was emaciated from hunger and held to her breast an infant suffering from malnutrition, his stomach swollen and his legs like sticks. G. quickly withdrew the image

before S. could ask any questions and replaced it with one of a Danish student, blond and admirably voluptuous.

S. regarded the image carefully, and then asked: “Are they born like that? I mean, so well developed?”

Smiling, Mrs. B. interjected: “Oh, no, obviously, there’s a period of growth. They’re born much smaller, and in my opinion also much prettier.” She turned to G. “Will you find me one of the growth sequences, please?”

After a moment of searching—the contents of the briefcase didn’t seem to be very organized—G. dug out an image and handed it to Mrs. B., who in turn gave it to S. It depicted a young man whose muscles were so developed that he was almost grotesque. He stood naked, with his legs wide apart, fists raised above his shoulders, biceps prominent, wearing a bestial smile. Suddenly, without changing position but diminishing in size, the youth became an adolescent, then a boy, then a toddler, then an infant, then a newborn, always smiling and always splendidly healthy.

Mrs. B. said gently to G., “No, if you don’t mind, the other direction, and a bit slower.”

In S.’s hands, the reverse transformation took place properly, ending in the original athlete, who greeted S. warmly, clasping his hands above his head.

“There,” said Mrs. B., “I’d say that makes things clear enough. It’s the same individual at one month, one year, six, fourteen, eighteen, and thirty.”

“Interesting,” S. admitted. “I imagine it’s the same for the women?”

“Of course,” Mrs. B. responded. “Would you like to see a sequence?”

“No, don’t bother. If it’s the same, it’s unnecessary. Instead, I would like to know what happens before and after. Do they continue to grow?”

“To actually grow, no, but other changes occur, which are difficult to render in pictures. There’s a kind of physical decline . . .”

At this point another mishap occurred: while Mrs. B. uttered the words “physical decline,” the image S. had in his hands was replaced by one of a middle-aged bald man, then by one of a pale, obese old man, and finally by one of a doddering geezer. Mrs. B. quickly put the photograph back in the briefcase and continued confidently, “. . . which is, however, compensated by a greater wisdom and life experience, and often by a supreme serenity. But it is the ‘before’ that is exceedingly interesting.”

She turned to G. and asked: “Do we have any births with us?”

“No, ma’am, you know we’re not allowed to show births and copulation.” He then turned to S. and went on, “Not that there’s anything illicit, but it’s a peculiar process, involving a unique technology, so striking that in a non-native such as you it might provoke a certain agitation, even perhaps only on a subconscious level. You’ll forgive me, but these are our instructions—”

“But we can show him the couples brochure, right?” Mrs. B. interrupted enthusiastically.

“Sure,” replied G. “It’s exciting, you’ll see. As you know, the male and female—in this case the man and woman—are highly complementary, and not only morphologically. The marital state, or, in any case, the life of the couple, is therefore the basic requirement for peace of mind. Have a look at this—the documentation is self-explanatory. See this couple . . . and this other one on the boat . . . and these two: those pink prisms in the background are the Dolomites, a beautiful place, I went there last year on vacation; but going there alone is dull. This Congolese couple is engaged to be married . . . aren’t they adorable? This is an old married couple—”

The warm, slightly hoarse voice of Mrs. B. interrupted: “Believe me, by now we’ve had a great deal of experience, and we can guarantee you that the truly great earthly adventure is just this, finding yourself a partner of the opposite sex and living together with him or her, at least for a few years, but if possible for your whole life. Don’t miss this opportunity. And if you happen to be born female, don’t hesitate to become pregnant as soon as a reasonable opportunity presents itself. Breast-feeding, then (here it is, look), creates an emotional tie that’s so sweet and profound, so . . . how to put it? . . . so encompassing that it’s difficult to describe if you haven’t experienced it.”

“And . . . you’ve experienced it?” S. asked, feeling in fact somewhat disturbed.

“Of course. They will grant licenses to us officials only if we can demonstrate a complete earthly curriculum—”

Mr. G. broke in: “There are, naturally, advantages to being born a man. Indeed, the advantages and disadvantages are so compensatory that the choices over time have always been distributed between the two sexes with singular equilibrium. You see this table, and this T for time, with T on the *x* axis? Fifty-fifty, disregarding decimals.”

G. pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and offered them around; then he leaned against the back of his chair and said: “What would you say to a little break?”

He must have been suffering terribly, however, from an irresistible need for activity, since instead of relaxing he started rummaging through his briefcase and soon dug out some objects that he placed on the table in front of S. “This is not part of the service: it’s my own private initiative, a collection that I’m in the habit of carrying with me. These objects, it seems to me, say a lot. They can help you get an idea of what you’ll encounter. This, for example, is a ballpoint pen. It costs only fifty lire, and it can write a hundred thousand words without any trouble or mess. These are nylon stockings—see how light they are! They can be worn for years and washed in a minute. This . . . no, it’s not an artifact, it’s a skull: see how thin and strong it is? I don’t carry any other anatomical specimens with me because they’re rather perishable. But look at this, it’s a plastic mitral valve—yes, a heart valve. A gem, right? And really very reassuring. And this is a detergent—you can do the laundry with it in no time—”

“Forgive me for interrupting,” S. said, “but would you show me again briefly one of those last . . . yes, that one of the Congolese engaged couple, and these others. . . . Am I right that they don’t all have the same skin color? I thought humans were all the same.”

Mr. R., who had until that moment remained silent, answered: “Basically, they are. It’s a matter of negligible differences without any biological significance. We didn’t bring with us any examples of mixed couples, but there are plenty, and they are as productive as the others, if not more so. It’s really only a question of . . . skin, actually, of pigmentation. Black skin better protects tissues from the sun’s ultraviolet rays, and is therefore more suitable for individuals who live in the tropics. There are also, here and there, some with skin of a yellowish color.”

“Ah, I understand. So there are varieties, but they’re interchangeable, right? Like two bolts with the same thread?”

R. and Mrs. B. turned toward G. hesitantly. G., somewhat less cheerfully than before, said: “It’s not our custom to paint everything rosy, nor is it our job. So, no, everything doesn’t always go smoothly. There have been some issues and there still are. It’s not a terribly serious matter. Mostly, each race lives separately, or whites and blacks interbreed and the problem ceases to exist. But, yes, there are cases of tension, with some

broken glass, maybe even some broken bones. Ultimately, not everything on Earth is programmed; a margin of freedom (and therefore of unpredictability) exists. There are a few wrinkles, we don't deny it. All considered, I would say that today it's perhaps better to be born white, but it's a temporary issue. I believe that in a century or two no one will even mention it."

"But as you well know, it's now that I'm supposed to be born, right?"

G. was about to respond, but R. cut in: "Certainly. Tomorrow, even, if it's all right with you—in the time needed to prepare the papers. We're not bureaucrats. We like to get things done fast."

"No, I'd like to think about it a while. I'm not too convinced. I don't like this business about being born different—it can only bring trouble."

R. responded a little stiffly: "I understand what you mean. But, first of all, there aren't many black people, so the possibility of being born black is small; then, not every black person is born into one of the high-tension zones, making this group a minority of a minority. Finally, without risk, there's no reward, and here the risk is very small."

S. seemed to be particularly sensitive about the subject, or perhaps someone had informed him about it previously. Politely, but firmly, he expressed a desire to see more, perhaps some images of typical situations.

"Gladly," said G. "Here's everything, the beautiful and the not so beautiful. We wouldn't be honest if our documentation weren't complete, don't you think? Look here: this is a peaceful demonstration . . . ; this is an experimental integrated school . . . ; this is the crew of a merchant ship, you see? They work together. . . ."

While G. was speaking, S. moved cagily toward the briefcase; suddenly, surprising the three officials, he grabbed hold of a photograph showing a conflict between blacks and the police. In the foreground a policeman was pointing a gun. He asked: "And this? What does this show?"

Mildly irritated, G. responded: "Listen, you really shouldn't behave like this. We're only doing our job, and you should let us do it the way we think best. We value equally objectivity and success, but you must try to understand that we also keep private things in there, documents that serve an entirely different purpose. Therefore, I'm sorry, but the choice of what we show you is ours. . . . Fine, since you've seen it, yes, it's a street scuffle. It happens sometimes. I told you that we're not here to plant illusions. These things occur for territorial reasons or to establish who's boss or out of

pure aggression, as they do throughout the animal kingdom. It happens less and less, this . . .”

Briefly, the image in S.’s hand was transformed into another, showing a scaffold, a gallows, a hooded man, and a black man hanging from a gallows.

“. . . this, for example, hasn’t been seen for quite a while, but, yes, it happens.”

S., carefully scrutinizing the image, pointed to a detail and asked: “And this, what is it?”

“It’s a gun, that’s what it is,” G. responded moodily. “Look, he’s shooting it. Are you happy now?”

Still in S.’s hands, the image became animated for an instant—the policeman fired and the black man fled staggering out of the frame—then everything stopped again.

“What happened to him?” S. asked anxiously.

“To whom?”

“To the guy who was here before. The one who was shot, the black man.”

“Good lord! How would I know? I don’t know them all by heart. In any case, you saw, he left the frame.”

“But is he . . . is he dead?”

Embarrassed and frowning, G. pulled the image out of S.’s hands and put it away without responding. R. spoke instead: “You shouldn’t be swayed by a single case, which, moreover, you learned about in a most irregular manner. The episode you saw is something marginal. These things don’t occur every day or it would be a real mess. You must admit that, in order to make a decision, it’s much more useful to focus on general, typical situations. A moment, please.”

He looked in the briefcase and then showed S. three images. In the first, against the backdrop of a serene evening sky, a group of young peasant women could be seen singing as they returned home along a path. In the second, a procession of skiers descended a steep slope in the moonlight, each of them holding a lighted torch. The third showed a large room in a library where an array of young people were absorbed in their studies. S. stopped to examine it carefully.

“Just a minute. Let me look at this one a little longer. This one is interesting, almost like here. They’re studying, right?”

“Yes, it would seem so,” G. responded.

“What are they studying?”

“I don’t know, but we can find out. Hold on.”

One by one various students were centered in the frame and then enlarged, so that the books they had before them could be identified. Although it was redundant, G. commented:

“This guy, for example, is studying architecture. This girl is preparing for an exam in theoretical physics. This one . . . wait, let’s look a little closer: it’s not too clear . . . you know, without illustrations it’s more difficult. Right—he’s studying philosophy, that is, the history of philosophy.”

“Ah. And what happens to him after?”

“After what?

“After he’s finished his studies, or does he study for his whole life?”

“I don’t know the answer to that, either. I told you, it’s already an accomplishment if we remember all the images that we bring with us. How can you expect that, at the drop of a hat, we can tell you the why and the wherefore, the before and the after, the causes and effects of everything on our list?”

S. revealed himself for what he was—a well-mannered but stubborn youth. He politely insisted: “Why don’t you make him move? As you did before?”

“If it will make you happy, we can try,” responded G.

In the frame the image dissolved into a swarm of little colored dots and lines that soon coagulated into a new shape: the ex-student was sitting behind the counter at a post office. “One year later,” said G. Another brief swarm followed, and G. said, “Two years later,” and the same image could be seen, from a slightly different angle. After ten years, the ex-student wore eyeglasses, but the scene essentially hadn’t changed. After thirty years, it still showed the post office, and the ex-student had white hair.

“You can see the guy had little initiative,” G. commented. “But, and I say this as a friend, you’re a bit too suspicious. God help us if everyone were like you!” Perhaps he was joking, however, because his tone of voice expressed more admiration than reproach.

“But you must understand,” S. replied, “it’s up to me to choose and I want to be sure. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’d like to see what

happened to another . . . here, this one.” Again he had picked up the photograph of the library, and pointed to another reader.

“Let’s see,” G. said.

“Here he is after two years.” The reader was sitting in a comfortable armchair under a lamp, reading.

“Here he is after four years . . . no, sorry, after five.” The reader, hardly changed, was sitting at a table across from a young woman; between the two sat a baby in a high chair holding a spoon. “A nice family, right?” G. observed with satisfaction.

“Here he is after seven years,” he announced. As if G. had lost control of the mechanism, various scenes appeared in the frame in rapid succession:

–The reader, in military uniform, saying goodbye to his wife, who is crying.

–The reader boarding a military airplane.

–A circle of parachutists jumping from the plane.

–The reader, with his submachine gun pointing downward, landing on the ground.

–The reader, having landed in a dark field, waiting in ambush behind a rock.

–The reader shot, a black stain expanding beneath him.

–A crude wooden cross on a mound of earth.

“This . . . this is war, right?” S. asked, after a moment of silence.

G., very embarrassed, was quiet.

R. responded: “Yes, we know, it’s talked about a lot, but I would like to caution you against certain assumptions. First of all, keep in mind that it hasn’t been proved that war is inherent to the human species, that it’s written into the destiny of all countries, eras, and individuals. Recently, we have been experimenting with a well-thought-out peace plan based on balancing fears and potentially aggressive behaviors. And, well, it’s been working now for twenty-five years in a generally satisfactory manner, as we’ve had only half a dozen small, peripheral wars. The like of it hasn’t been seen for many centuries: the images you saw by now have only a . . . let’s say, retrospective value, and a second golden age may already have begun, silently, stealthily. And then I would like to remind you that war isn’t always a bad thing—that is, a bad thing for everyone. We have learned about various of our clients who survived the last conflict not only in good health and without injury but having made quite a lot of money . . .”

At this point G. cleared his throat, as if he wanted to interrupt, but R. didn't notice and continued: ". . . Others became famous and esteemed, and still others, in fact the majority of humanity, weren't even aware of it."

"Well, now," G. interjected, "there's no need to overdramatize. If you think about it a minute, what are fifty million deaths in a population of three billion? Life, you understand, is a unique fabric, even if it has two sides; it has clear days and dark days, it's a web of victories and defeats, but it pays for itself, which is an inestimable good. I know that you people up here have the tendency to frame all your questions on a cosmic scale. But once on Earth you are individuals with only one mind, different from everyone else's, and only one skin. You will find a great disparity between what is inside your skin and what is outside of it. You see, I have no arguments that will show which of the two—the non-born or the born—is right, but one thing I can confirm through direct experience: he who has tasted the fruits of life can no longer do without them. Those who are born, all of them, with very few exceptions, hold on to life with a tenacity that astonishes even us, the propagandists, and is the best praise of life itself. They cling to it as long as they have breath in their body. It's a unique spectacle. Look."

He showed S. an image of a ragged, wounded miner, who was using his pick to dig his way out of a collapsed tunnel. "This man was alone, wounded, hungry, cut off from the world, immersed in shadow. It would have been easy for him to die. It would have been simply a matter of crossing over from one darkness to another. He didn't even know in what direction help lay, but he dug at random, for twelve days, until he saw the light once more. And this other one, what do you see here? It's a renowned case, sure, but how many others, young or old, male or female, wouldn't have done as he did if they'd had the technical capability? His name was Robinson Crusoe: he lived alone for twenty-eight years without ever losing hope or his joy in life; then he was saved, and, being a sailor, went back to sea. This one here is a less dramatic case, but much more common."

The image was subdivided into four frames. One could see, respectively, a man in a dusty, dim office surrounded by stacks of identical forms; the same man sitting at a table, a newspaper leaning against a bottle, while in the background his wife was on the phone with her back to him; the man standing in front of the door to his house, heading to work on foot, while his son was leaving on a motorbike with a provocative-looking girl; the same man at night, alone and with a bored expression in front of the

television. Unlike the others, these figures were static: they didn't even quiver.

"The man you see," G. continued, "is forty years old here. His job is a stagnant pool of boredom; his wife disdains him, and probably loves someone else. His kids are grown and look at him without seeing him. Still he endures and, like a rock, will persist for a long time to come. Every day he'll wait for the next, every day he'll hear a voice that promises him the next day will bring something wonderful, grand, and new. Here, take them," he added, turning to R., "put these back, please."

S. was confused: "But you've got to admit that one who is born sick or from malnourished parents—"

R. interrupted and said in a didactic tone: "If you are alluding to the problem of hunger, I must remind you that it's been much exaggerated. It may be true that a large part of the human race has known hunger, but it's not true that people die from it. You understand that in order to live one has to eat, and in order to eat one must desire food. Now, what is hunger but the desire for food? It has not been proved that satiety is a good thing. Rats that have been allowed to eat as much as they like have shorter lives than those kept on a controlled diet. The data on this are irrefutable."

While R. was speaking, G. stood up and began to pace the narrow room. Then he stopped and said to his colleagues: "Will you step outside for a moment, please? I would like to speak with this gentleman alone for a couple of minutes." He turned to S. and in a low, confidential voice continued: "It seems to me you've guessed it: someone somewhere made a mistake, and the terrestrial plans reveal a fault, a flaw of form. For about forty years they looked the other way, but now the problems are too many to ignore, and it can't wait any longer. We've got to find remedies, and we need people like you. You're surprised? I didn't tell you this at first because I didn't know you yet, and I wanted to verify a few things, but now I can tell you, we didn't come to you as we go to everyone else. We're not here by chance. You were brought to our attention."

"I was?"

"Yes. We urgently need people who are responsible and competent, honest and courageous—this is why we have pursued you and keep pursuing you. We're interested not in quantity but in quality."

"So am I to understand that . . . I won't be born at random, that my destiny is already determined, like a book that has already been written?"

“Every last one of your pages already written, you’re entirely determined down to the last letter . . . no, that I can’t confirm. You know, we do believe in free will—or at least we’re supposed to behave as if we believed in it—and so, for our purposes, every human is amply exposed to chance and to his own actions. But we can give you some excellent choices, give you good initial advantages, this we can do. Would you like to have a look? . . . This is you, you see? We’ll give you a healthy and agile body, and we’ll insert you into a fascinating context: in these quiet places where the world of tomorrow is being built, or into the past, which can be penetrated with new and marvelous instruments. And this is still you, here where wrongs are righted and where justice is done quickly and freely. Or here, too, where pain is soothed and life is rendered more tolerable, more secure, and longer. The real masters are you—not government leaders or military commanders.

“And now that we are alone I can—in fact, I must—show you the rest, the classified material, which you rightly sought numerous times to grab from my hands.”

Those images needed no commentary, nor the lure of animation: they spoke clearly for themselves. A multi-barreled cannon could be seen shooting into the dark, illuminating in its glare collapsed houses and factories in ruins; then piles of skeletal cadavers at the foot of a pyre, in a grim frame of smoke and barbed wire; then, in a tropical rain, a reed hut, and inside, on a bare dirt floor, a dying child; then a bleak expanse of uncultivated fields reduced to swamps, and forests without leaves; then a village, and an entire valley, flooded and buried by a gigantic mudslide.

There were many others, but G. pushed them aside and continued speaking: “You see? There are still a lot of things to straighten out, but none of these miseries will be yours. You won’t have to passively suffer evil. You, and many others, will be called upon to fight it in all its forms. Together with your human appearance, you will receive the weapons that you will need. They are weapons that are both powerful and subtle: reason, pity, patience, courage. You won’t be born the way others are born; your life will run smoothly, so that your virtues won’t be wasted. You will be one of ours, called upon to complete the work begun billions of years ago, when a certain ball of fire exploded and the pendulum of time began to swing. You won’t die. When you shed your human appearance, you will join us and

become a soul hunter like us—provided you are content with a modest commission, on top of your expenses.

“There, I’ve finished. I wish you luck, both with your choice and beyond. Think about it, and give me an answer,” said G., placing the final images in the briefcase and closing it.

S. was quiet for a long time, so long that G. was on the point of asking for a response, when, finally, he said: “I don’t want to have advantages right from the start. I’m afraid I’ll feel like a profiteer and all my life I’ll have to bow my head before each of my friends who didn’t have the same privileges. I accept, but I want to be born randomly, like everyone else: among the billions of unborn without a fate, among those predestined to become servants or to fight straight from the cradle, if they even have a cradle. I prefer to be born black, Indian, poor, without amnesties or pardons. You understand me, don’t you? You yourself said that each man is his own creator: well, it’s better to be so fully, to build oneself from the roots. I prefer to construct myself alone, and to work up the anger that I will need, if I’m able. If not, I’ll accept the fate of everyone. The path of humanity, helpless and blind, will be my path.”

Red Lights

His was a quiet job. For eight hours a day he had to sit in a dark room where red indicator lights switched on at irregular intervals. What these signified, he didn't know; it wasn't his duty to know. Every time one switched on he had to react by pushing certain buttons, but he didn't know what these meant, either. The task was not mechanical. He had to choose the buttons quickly, on the basis of complex criteria that varied each day and depended on what order and at what pace the lights lit up. In short, it wasn't an idiot's job but a job that one could do well or badly; sometimes it was even pretty interesting, the sort of job that allows one to pride oneself on one's own readiness, ingenuity, and logic. As for the final result of his actions, however, he had no clear idea. All he knew was that there were about a hundred of those dark rooms, and that all the decision-making data converged in a sorting room somewhere. He also knew that his work was somehow judged, but he didn't know if this was done in isolation or in combination with the work of others. When the siren sounded, other red lightbulbs on the door lintel would light up—the number was both an assessment and a final reckoning. Often seven or eight lit up; only once did ten light up, but there had never been fewer than five, so he had the impression that things were not going too badly for him.

The siren sounded and seven lights switched on. He went out, stopped a minute in the hallway to let his eyes adjust to the light, then went out to the street, got into his car, and started it. The traffic was already very heavy, and he had a hard time edging his way into the stream of cars driving along the boulevard. Brake, clutch, into first gear. Gas, clutch, second gear, gas, brake, back to first, brake again, red light. Forty seconds seemed like forty

years, who knows why: time is never longer than when you're sitting at a traffic light. He had no other hope, no other desire than to get home.

Ten traffic lights, twenty. At each one, a line of traffic longer than the one before, lasting three red lights, five red lights; then it was a bit better, the traffic more fluid than on the other side of town. A glance in the rearview mirror to confront the expression of petty anger and malevolent impatience on the face of the person in the car behind who wishes you didn't exist; left blinker, when you turn left you always feel just a little guilty. You turn left cautiously: there's the gate, there's a parking space, clutch, brake, key, hand brake, alarm; for today it's over.

The red light on the elevator beams; you wait for it to become free. The red light goes off; you push the button, the light comes back on, you wait for the elevator to come down. Half of your free time is spent waiting: is it really free time? Finally, in the correct order the lights went on for the third floor, the second floor, the first floor, he read GROUND FLOOR and the door opened. Again red lights, first, second, up to the ninth floor; you're there. He pressed the doorbell; no waiting now but he did actually wait a little, as he heard Maria's placid voice say "Coming," her footsteps, then the door opened.

He wasn't surprised to see that the red light between Maria's clavicles was lit: it had been on for six days and it was to be expected that its melancholy light would shine for a few more days. Luigi would have liked Maria to hide it, cover it up in some way. Maria said she would, but she often forgot to, especially in the house; or at other times she hid it badly, and one could see it glimmering under a scarf, or at night through the sheet, which was the saddest of all. Perhaps deep down, and without admitting it even to herself, she was afraid of the inspections.

He tried not to look at the lightbulb; in fact, he tried to forget about it. In the end, he asked quite a lot of Maria. He tried to talk to her about work, how he spent the day; he asked about her, her hours alone, but the conversation never came alive; it flashed for a moment and then fizzled, like a fire started with damp wood. The lightbulb, on the other hand, stayed on, its gleam steady and certain; it was the most oppressive of the prohibitions because it was in their house, in everyone's house, a tiny but solid barrier erected during the fertile days between all married couples who already had two children. Luigi was quiet for a while, then said: "I'm . . . I'm going to get the screwdriver."

“No,” Maria said. “You know that’s impossible, there’s always a mark. And then . . . and then if a baby is born? We already have two, do you have any idea how much they would tax us?”

It was clear that yet again they would be able to talk about nothing else. Maria said: “You know Mrs. Mancuso? You remember her, right? The woman who lives below, the really elegant one, on the seventh floor. Well, she asked to exchange the State model for the new IBM 520—she says it’s another thing entirely.”

“But it’s outrageously expensive, and in the end the result is the same.”

“Yes, but you don’t even know you’re wearing it and the batteries last a year. I’ve also heard there’s a subcommittee in Parliament discussing a model for men.”

“That’s ridiculous! With men the red light would always be on.”

“But no, it’s not that simple. The woman remains in charge, and she, too, would wear the lightbulb, but the blocking device is also worn by the man. There’s a transmitter, the wife transmits and the husband receives, and on the red days he’s blocked. In the end it seems right to me, much more moral.”

Luigi suddenly felt overcome by exhaustion. He kissed Maria, left her in front of the TV, and went to bed. He had no trouble falling asleep, but he woke up the next morning long before the red light on the silent alarm began flashing. He got up, and only then, in the dark room, did he notice that Maria’s light had gone out, but by now it was too late and he would be sorry to wake her. He checked the red indicator lights on the boiler, the electric razor, the toaster, and the alarm system; he then went outside, got in his car, and watched the indicator lights go on for the battery and the hand brake. He activated the left blinker, which meant that a new day was beginning. He left for work, and as he drove he calculated that the number of red lights in his day averaged two hundred—that was seventy thousand in a year, three and a half million in fifty years of active life. It then seemed to him that his skull was hardening, as if covered by an enormous callus, suitable for beating against walls, like a rhinoceros horn, but flatter and duller.

Vilmy

I had never been inside an old-style London apartment. I had met Paul Morris many times in Italy, the last time at a biochemical conference, and some years earlier (when he wasn't yet married) in a very expensive hotel on Lake Maggiore. I expected his home to be luxuriously and tastefully decorated and, in fact, it was: fine Adam and Hepplewhite furniture, a few select paintings on the walls, many rugs, drapes, and tapestries, restful and subtle lighting. The dominant tones were gray-green, ivory, and lavender. Double glazing kept out the clatter and the murky air of St. James Square.

Paul, who is by now nearly fifty, appeared thinner and white-haired. He introduced me to Virginia, his wife: born in Hungary, not beautiful, but cultured and refined, and at least twenty-five years younger than him. Virginia is fluent in many languages, including Italian, and a subject does not exist upon which she is not able to speak eloquently. She was telling me about the adventures of one of her distant relatives, who travels the world as an expert for Unesco, when I saw a curtain move silently behind her. Silence, I must say, is a dominant characteristic of the Morris home. Not only do external noises not penetrate but those within are muffled, and it seems impossible even to produce a noise, either with your voice or otherwise. One feels reluctant to speak aloud, as in a church or a funeral home. The curtain pulled away from the wall, then fell back silently, and out came a lovely animal that at first glance I mistook for an English setter, but when it came closer to Virginia I saw from its stride that it wasn't a dog. It's rare for dogs to walk with such composure. They are too lively and curious, or they look around, wagging their tails, or they run, or wiggle their hips. Then, it is difficult for them not to make a racket with their paws on

the floor, and even more difficult for them to ignore a stranger. Instead, this creature, covered in a shiny coat of black fur, moved with the nimble and hushed grace of a feline. Oddly, it stared fixedly at Paul, with its muzzle pointed in his direction, but went quietly toward Virginia; despite its bulk (it must have weighed at least nine kilos) it jumped lightly onto her lap and lay down. Only then did it seem to notice my presence, sporadically throwing me quick questioning glances. It had big blue eyes and long lashes, pointed, twitching, nearly transparent ears that culminated in two peculiar tufts of light fur, and a long, hairless, pale pink tail. I noticed that Virginia hadn't moved, either to accommodate the animal or to push it away.

"Have you never seen one of these?" Paul asked me, my interest in the animal not having escaped him.

"No," I responded, "only once some years ago on television." I had immediately imagined that it was a vilmy. Recently, in fact, the newspapers had been writing about them again, because of the Lord Keith Lothian scandal, and they were the object of a new parliamentary inquiry, but at that time only a few dozen pairs had been imported.

"She's called Lore," Paul said, "and we're very attached to her. You know, we don't have children."

"A female?" I asked, and caught Virginia throwing a quick, sharp glance at her husband.

"Yes," Paul responded. "They're more affectionate. This one is very dear, appealing, docile. It's a shame she's almost nine years old, that's seventy in our years."

"Won't you breed her?"

"It's not that easy," Morris said, unable to hide his embarrassment. "There isn't a black male in all of the United Kingdom. I've found out that the nearest is in Monte Carlo, but she's already old, poor thing. He almost surely would reject her."

"So then what about the milk . . ."

"They don't have to be impregnated, didn't you know? It's a unique case among mammals. They only need to be fed well and regularly milked. Of course, they don't make much."

"Perhaps that's lucky," Virginia said unexpectedly.

As might be remembered, there had been much discussion about vilmy milk, but back then no one had very clear ideas on the subject. Paul explained to me that all the talk about a supposed hallucinogenic potency in

the milk was without foundation. Nor was it an aphrodisiac, as many claimed, though they had never tried it or let themselves be convinced of it. And all those stories about its long-term toxicity, how it caused memory loss and early-onset senility, especially in “addicts,” and so on—those were all nonsense, too.

“There is only one truth,” he told me, “and it’s very simple. The milk of all mammals contains tiny quantities of N-phenyl oxytocin, and it’s to this substance that newborns owe their emotional fixation on their mothers, or the female who breast-feeds them. In the majority of animals, its concentration is low, and the effect is eliminated a few months after birth. In humans it’s higher, and the emotional relationship with the mother lasts many years. In the vilmy, it’s very high, twenty times higher than in human milk. Therefore not only are the puppies tied to the mothers by an almost pathological bond but anyone who drinks the milk feels its effects and changes his life.”

At these words, and I didn’t know whether it was in obedience to British custom or because she felt the conversation take a delicate turn, Virginia got up, bid me good night, kissed Paul, and withdrew. A few seconds later, as if waking from a dream, Lore lifted her head, stared for a while at Morris, then jumped down from the chair, went over to him, and rubbed her nose affectionately against his thigh. I noticed for the first time the curious mobility of the face of this animal. It has little in common with a human face, yet at any given moment its expressions are human-like, sometimes ironic, bored, alert, affectionate, joyful, hostile; but always languid, intense, and with a touch of fox-like cunning.

“And you . . . have you tried it?” I asked Paul, inadvertently lowering my voice.

Paul didn’t respond directly. “They’re incredible animals,” he whispered. “You see, they reciprocate or at least appear to reciprocate. Don’t try it, don’t let yourself be tempted. It’s a mistake, a mistake you will pay for dearly.”

“I’m not tempted, really, not even a little. Why did you do it?”

“Because . . . no, there is no because. Out of the desire for something new, out of curiosity, out of boredom, out of . . . let’s just say that at a moment when Virginia and I weren’t getting along owing to a certain matter —and she was right, but I didn’t want to admit it—instead, I wanted to do something spiteful to her. Maybe I just wanted to make her jealous. In any

case, I tried it, that is a fact, and facts don't change. That was two years ago, and I've become someone else."

"It's that strong? Once is enough?"

"No, but it's a chain reaction, drink it once and you're shackled. You become tense, unnerved, restless, and you *know* you will find peace only in the presence of . . . the animal, the source. Only then can you quench your thirst. And she—they . . . are diabolic. They're corrupt and are good at corrupting. They don't understand much, but what they understand well is how to seduce a human being. They can decipher the desire in your eyes, or I don't know where else, and they circle around you, rub up against you, and the poison is there, all day and all night, offered to you permanently, at home, free. You have only to extend your hands, your lips. You extend them, drink, and the circle closes, you're trapped, for the rest of your years, which can't be many."

Lore suddenly jumped up, went over to the curtain, and climbed up it to the height of the massive grandfather clock that stood in the corner. I noticed that her legs ended in four coarse little hands with opposable thumbs, brown on top and pink inside. From the curtain she leaped onto the clock and crouched on it, intently listening to the slow ticking.

"They're fascinated by clocks," Paul said. "I don't know why. Also the one I had before. . . ."

"This isn't your first?"

"No. It's not here that it happened. We were traveling in Beirut. In the hotel there was a fellow, I don't know who he was, partly because we were both drunk; he had a vilmy with him, she was lovely, blond, and the first I'd ever seen. As I told you, I had just quarreled with Virginia, and he grinned at me as if he understood. He offered me the milk and I accepted. I didn't know what I was doing, but the next morning I realized what had happened. I searched for the stranger on every street of the entire city until I found him, and offered him an insane amount for the animal. He laughed at me, we fought, and you should have seen the animal. She was crouching, wagging her tail, and laughing—yes, because they laugh, not like us, in their own manner, but they laugh, and it's a laugh that makes the blood boil in your veins.

"I hit the guy worse than he hit me, but I felt utterly beaten. I dreamed of that vilmy every night. I must tell you that it's not like with a woman. It's an oppressive, savage, and idiotic desire, and hopeless, because with a

woman you can speak, at least to yourself; even if she's far away, if she's not yours, or is no longer yours, you hope at least to speak to her, you hope for love, for reunion; it may be a vain hope, but it's not insane, it has a conceivable gratification. This instead does not. It's a desire that damns you because it has no gratification. You can't even find it in your imagination. It's pure desire, without end. The milk is pleasant, it's sweet, but you guzzle it and you're just as before. And even their presence, touching them, caressing them, it's nothing, less than nothing, a whetting of one's desire, nothing else.

"Virginia didn't know the facts, but she understood that something was wrong. So she went back to London, and I hung around that man so that he would sell me the animal; he didn't want to, or, rather, he couldn't, he was a slave like me. But every time I could get near him, I persisted and I felt like a worm. I would even have shined his shoes. One day he left, without leaving an address. So I thought that if I couldn't have that one, another would be better than nothing. I went to the souk and found one—she was kept on a leash by a young man with a gaunt, indifferent look, and he made her dance in the dim light of a dead end. She was thin and mangy, but she had swollen breasts, and she was young, and inexpensive. I asked for a sample of her milk. We went down into a stairwell and the seller milked her right then and there and gave me some. I seemed to feel the effect, as right afterward I observed that the animal's eyes were beautiful and deep, something I hadn't noticed before. I paid for her and brought her here. She was a fiend. She couldn't stand to be enclosed. Her house was not here but the rooftops. There was no way to have her near. If I shut her inside she went berserk, biting, scratching, hiding under the furniture. After a few weeks, it got worse, because she learned how to withhold her milk. I tried in vain to hurt her, I thrashed her, and she disappeared."

Paul snapped his fingers and Lore lifted her head. She leaped from the grandfather clock onto the couch, then onto the floor, and curled up at his feet with a happy little squeal.

"This, in fact, is the third. I bought her here in Soho at a public auction for four hundred pounds. A good price, don't you think? She belonged to a Jamaican who died because of her, but I only learned that later. She's old, as I said, and if you don't cross her she's fairly quiet. If, however, you want something that she doesn't, she won't simply withhold her milk like the other one; she dries up, and you have to go without it. No one can dissuade

me from believing that she wills it to happen on purpose in order to blackmail me, to own me. And she certainly succeeds. Perhaps she's not capable of understanding, but of willfulness, yes, oh yes. She'll eat certain things but not others, at certain hours and not at others, I can invite certain of my friends but not others . . . no, you, God willing, you seem to please her no end. Let's hope it lasts. . . ."

"But Virginia? . . ."

"She's a wise woman. She has always refused the milk. She knows that I love her as much as I always have, that this is something else, like someone addicted to alcohol or morphine. She treats me like an invalid or a child, and in fact that's what I am. Indeed, properly speaking, I'm an infant who whines when I'm hungry. And this one here is nine years old, she's ancient, and the mere thought that she might die or dry up gives me vertigo."

The vilmy approached me, breathing through her pink nose, and then rubbing the nape of her neck against my calf, as if caressing herself. To tell the truth, she didn't seem at all old to me. I put my hand down to pet her, but Paul shot me a look and I stopped. In fact, when Lore got up on her hind legs in order to climb up into my lap, I said goodbye to Paul with a vaguely suitable excuse and went out onto the street. The fog was cold, thick, and yellowish but seemed fragrant, and with great pleasure I breathed it deep into my lungs.



With the Best Intentions

Anyone who needs to punish himself finds the opportunity everywhere. The engineer Masoero opened the newspaper and was filled with disgust: yet again, on the second page, the usual nauseatingly sarcastic item denouncing the inefficient service, the constantly occupied lines, and the poor sound quality of the connections. All the gospel truth, he knew, but, in the name of heaven, what was he supposed to do about it? It's all fine and good to be district manager but if there aren't any funds, or if the funds there are have been allocated to other public works, and if the Ministry, instead of helping you out, inundates you with lengthy memos that are both futile and contradictory, what can you do? Just about nothing. You go to work full of venom, call a meeting of department heads—the head of new installations, the head of preventative maintenance, the head of repairs (all of them nice guys, too)—and you give them a sermon, and when they leave, you know very well that as soon as they get out the door, they shrug their shoulders, and everything remains as it was, and you feel just as bad as you did.

He set about writing a vehement report for the Ministry: it wasn't the first, but even a nail doesn't penetrate the first time it's hit with a hammer. Who knows, with enough hammering, they might finally listen. He spent the day working on it, and when he had finished he reread the report, eliminated a few overly virulent adjectives, and gave the manuscript to the typist.

The next day, on his desk he found not one but two memos from the Department of Complaints. He had not the slightest doubt that it was Rostagno, two doors down, who had written them. They were in his style—

specific, detailed, and malicious. This time, however, instead of the usual generic customers' complaints, two brand-new concerns were described with unusual anecdotal embellishment. In the first memo, it was reported that numerous customers, when picking up the receiver, had heard for hours straight the musical program from a cable radio station, and weren't able to make or receive any calls. The second memo described the disappointment and amazement of fifty or so other subscribers who had dialed various numbers in the network but persistently reached the same number every time and it inevitably belonged to someone with whom they regularly had frequent and long telephonic conversations: their in-laws, or a girlfriend, or the office, or a child's classmate. As for the first complaint, it didn't seem too difficult to resolve. As for the second, Masoero read it, reread it, and convinced himself that there was something suspicious about it. Rostagno was a charlatan. He'd been expecting a promotion for a while, and it wouldn't be at all surprising if he had chosen this as the way to clear the decks for himself. He was trying to provoke Masoero, force him to take unnecessary measures, trip him up. Everyone knows a telephone network is not a simple thing; it is easily broken, vulnerable to the wind, rain, cold, even subject to certain viruses, but they are few, well-known, and above all plausible. This one, however, was impossible. He put away the two memos and busied himself with something else.

But that same evening Silvia casually mentioned to him that throughout the day she had been unable to telephone the greengrocer, or her hairdresser, or Lidia, or even him at the office—every time, the only number she reached was her mother's, and, as it happened, on that particular day Silvia had nothing to say to her mother. He realized that Silvia was not trying to offend him with this observation, which, by the way, had been made in a careless and offhand tone of voice. Yet he couldn't help thinking that his wife knew him well enough, knew that he had a difficult character, and that he cared about his work—or, more precisely, he didn't care that much about it, but to be caught out in any way, and especially at work, seriously burned him and caused him to lose sleep. In short, Silvia could have spared him that bitterness. He had already had quite enough himself, telephone-related and not.

So, Rostagno hadn't made it all up, but it didn't matter. He was still a charlatan and a parasite. In retrospect, his memo seemed to Masoero a distillation of malice, every line infused with schadenfreude. A dishonest,

ambitious man, a social climber, that's what he was. The Complaints Department was just the place for him, because he was someone who lived to catch others at fault, fed on their mistakes, thrived on their worries, and enjoyed their troubles. Masoero took two tranquilizers and went to bed.

After twenty days, a third memo arrived. This time, Masoero thought, it was supremely evident that Rostagno had enjoyed composing it, as it was more of a lyric poem or ballad than an office document. It was a catalogue of dialing errors; apparently, thousands of subscribers had complained, in the first place because the number of errors was abnormally high, and, second, because the nature of these errors was irritating. Irritating above all for Masoero, but Rostagno seemed to be gloating; he had gone to the trouble of compiling an extensive chart in three columns. The first column contained the numbers of the callers, the second the numbers of those called, the third the numbers of those who had responded instead of the ones dialed on the second list. Between the first column and the second there obviously was no correlation, but Rostagno pointed out (and, damn it, he was right!) that between the first and the third column there was a correlation. That was it. Rostagno didn't formulate any explanatory hypothesis. He simply limited himself to pointing out a curious correspondence. However, when Masoero finished reading, he felt his blood begin to boil with rage, and was then quickly ashamed of his rage. He shouldn't have felt it, and he prohibited himself from harboring any such abject envy and jealousy. If your neighbor makes an ingenious discovery (by chance, by chance, whispered a little voice inside him), you must acknowledge his accomplishment and admire him for it, not foam with anger and hatred. He did his best to compose himself; but, damn it, that guy on the other side of the wall could be as ingenious as you please, he was building his reputation on the mistakes and failings, or rather the misfortunes, of him, Masoero. Spin it however you like, but that's the way it was. What for him was poison was food for Rostagno, steps for climbing up to overtake and then supplant him. He touched the chair he was sitting on. It had never meant much to him, but suddenly it felt almost a part of his body, as if it were wrapped over his own skin. If they took it away from him, it would be like flaying him alive, and he would die, his suffering atrocious. If then someone else were installed in it—and above all Rostagno—it would be as if that person had wormed his way into his marriage bed. He thought about it seriously, trying to be honest with himself, and

concluded that actually it would be worse. He was sorry, but that's the way he was and he couldn't change it, nor did he want to. This chair or nothing —he was too old to change. He might be ashamed, but he couldn't be different.

In any case, he could rant, scramble, or plod all he wanted, but the memo was still there before him, an official act, and he must drain the goblet, there was no way around it. Rostagno had noticed that between the numbers of the callers and the numbers that responded there was a correlation: very simple in some cases, less obvious in others. Sometimes the two numbers differed by only one unit more or less: 693 177 was erroneously responded to by 693 178 or 693 176. At other times, the second number was a multiple of the first, or the first read inversely; still others had the two numbers adding up to 1,000,000. In 15 cases out of 518 studied, the number was an excellent approximation of the natural logarithm of the other; in 4 cases, their product, minus decimal places, was a power of 10; in only 7 cases was it impossible to establish any correlation. Rostagno also noted that the most obscure correlations, and the 7 that remained unclear, were the last calls made.

Masoero felt he was on the ropes. He sensed also from the smooth, satisfied style of the brief comment accompanying the chart that Rostagno wasn't standing around with his hands in his pockets. He had made a brilliant observation, but he wasn't the type to sit back and rest on his laurels; on the contrary, it seemed to Masoero, carefully rereading the concluding statement, that he'd taken one on the chin, been attacked; perhaps Rostagno was already preparing a diagnosis, if not an actual treatment. Masoero needed to wake up. He could do two things: jump into the race and outrun Rostagno, or call him into his office and make him talk in the hope of getting him to put his cards on the table, perhaps against his will or without his knowledge. Rostagno might be the better technician, but Masoero wasn't born yesterday, and in a twenty-four-year career he had learned a thing or two above and beyond communications theory. He thought it over, and rejected the second option. Did he love his chair? Did he want to keep it? Well, he had what it took: time, brains, history, rank, an unquestioned and seasoned authority to use as a base of operations, a stake that would allow him to stay in the game. Rostagno had the advantage of being the first to receive the daily complaints reports, but it was time to rectify that. Let's go, man, strip and fight: hit above or below the belt, it

hardly matters. Masoero dictated a memo with precise instructions that from now on all complaint reports were to be sent to him personally: all of them, from all divisions. Let's begin like this, then we'll see.

He picked up the internal telephone, told his secretary to disturb him only if it was urgent, and prepared for a few days' contemplation. Already he could hear ringing in his ears the big hypocritical question, the question that comes from above, from the one who has by now imposed a solid desk between the orders and their execution; the question so easy to formulate, and so difficult to respond to. "What the devil has changed? What have you done differently? Why was everything running smoothly until two months ago?"

What had changed? Nothing and everything, as usual. They had changed the one-millimeter-cable supplier because he was late with deliveries. They had standardized the shape of the T2-22 panels. Three of the area assembly crews were now working in a plant where they earned more and didn't have to endure the cold. They had changed the tolerances of the carrier frequency, but you, Mr. General Manager, gave that order. And so, dear Mr. Manager, yes, there's a lot to be said for sitting pretty, but if you don't change you don't live, and if you do change you're sure to make a mistake. Be patient, Mr. Manager, and let's discover where we've made the mistake. Suddenly, it occurred to him that the most conspicuous change was one that had been planned for many years, and completed three months earlier: the merger of the trunk dialing network with the German and the French networks, thereby potentially establishing a single network as vast as Europe. Could this be relevant? And then the most obvious question occurred to him: What was happening in other districts in Italy and in Europe? Were they all healthy?

In three days Masoero felt himself to be a different man: perhaps a unique case in the history of telecommunications, from a total of tens of thousands of incidents the birth of joy. Not the solution, not yet, but a broader and better-defined picture, and above all a big leap over Rostagno's head. Yes, Mr. Manager, it's not that things are going well, but that they are going badly everywhere in the same way, from the North Pole to Crete and from

Lisbon to Moscow: it’s the same virus everywhere. The undersigned, an’ please Your Honour,* has nothing to do with it, or has to do with it only because the trouble was recognized and described in his district before it was in others. The merger of the networks matters or doesn’t matter, we don’t know, but it was part of the plan, and in any case what’s done is done. What’s urgent now is to write up a nice report, have it translated, and send it out to all the foreign capitals we’re connected to.

A period followed of complicated and anguished accusations and counteraccusations: each of the connected countries rejected all charges of inefficiency, and blamed another country, almost always a neighboring one. It was decided to convene a congress, and a date was fixed. But this had to be immediately postponed indefinitely owing to a new wave of disturbances.

Suddenly, in all of Europe a high number of “blank calls” were recorded: two telephones, often in different countries, rang simultaneously, and the two customers found themselves talking, although neither one of them had called the other. In the few cases where the language differences allowed for conversation, the two usually learned from each other that their numbers were the same, except, of course, for the area code. This fact was confirmed by the central hub’s records, which showed that, when the numbers were not the same, they conformed to one of the correlations that had been indicated in Rostagno’s second memo. Strangely, the names of Masoero and Rostagno were frequently mentioned together: the first, for having brought to light the European aspect of the service problem, and the second for having described its characteristics. From this pairing Masoero drew both embarrassment and satisfaction.

Just when it seemed to him that the sting of corporate jealousy had lost its poison, the contents of the morning paper penetrated his flesh, burning him brutally as never before. That Monster had gotten himself interviewed! Masoero inhaled the article two or three times; the first time he was flabbergasted, then he furiously searched for flaws, offenses, disclosures of official records. But his opponent had been skillful: there wasn’t even one incriminating sentence. His message, which had been delivered with meticulous craft, allowing him to rise above the bureaucratic snarl with

elegance and simplicity, took the form of a hypothesis—and it was no less than mind-blowing.

Vague in its mathematical treatment, which in any case was barely mentioned in the interview, the explanation that Rostagno proposed was simple: with its extension to all of Europe, the telephone network had surpassed in complexity all the installations completed until then, including those in North America, and had without any transition reached a numerical volume that allowed it to act like a nervous system. Not like a brain, certainly, or at least not like an intelligent brain. Nevertheless, it was able to make certain elementary decisions, and to exercise a minuscule will. But Rostagno didn't stop there. He asked himself (rather, he had himself asked) what were the decisions and will of the Network, and he put forward the hypothesis that the Network itself was animated by essentially a good will; that is, that in the abrupt jump in which quantity becomes quality, or (in this case) in which the crude tangle of wires and switches becomes body and conscience, the Network had retained all and only those aims for which it had been created. In the same way in which a superior animal, even after having acquired new skills, maintains all the aims of its simpler precursors (staying alive, fleeing from pain, reproducing itself), the Network, in crossing the threshold of consciousness, or perhaps only of autonomy, had not renounced the original purposes for which it had been built—that is, to allow, facilitate, and accelerate communications among its customers. This requirement must have been for the Network a moral imperative, a "reason for being," or perhaps even an obsession. To "stimulate communication," various paths could have been followed, or at least attempted, and the Network, it seemed, had tried them all. Naturally, it was not in possession of that patrimony of information necessary to place in communication individuals unknown to each other but suited to becoming friends or lovers or business partners, because it didn't know the individuals' personality traits except through their brief and sporadic communications. It knew only their telephone numbers, and seemed anxious to put into contact numbers that were in some way connected to one another. This was the only kind of affinity that it knew. It had pursued its goal first by way of "errors," then through the artifice of the blank calls.

In short, according to Rostagno, in an inefficient and rudimentary manner a mind was agitating the mass. Unfortunately, the mind was infirm and the mass immense, and so the qualitative leap had resulted for the

moment in a terrifying accumulation of breakdowns and disturbances, but without a doubt the Network was “good.” It shouldn’t be forgotten that it had started its autonomous life by delivering the music of cable radio (in its estimation certainly good music) even to subscribers who hadn’t requested it. Without insisting that one approach was better than another—be it electronic, neurological, pedagogical, or fully rational—Rostagno maintained that it would be possible to harness the Network’s new skills. It would be possible to educate it to have a certain selectivity. For example, once it was supplied with the necessary information, it could be transformed into a vast and rapid relationships organ, a kind of immense agency, which, by way of new “errors” or blank calls, could replace the classified ads in all the newspapers of Europe, achieving with meteoric speed sales, marriages, business deals, and human relations of every sort. Rostagno emphasized that what would be achieved was something different and better than what a computer could do: the good-natured temperament of the Network would spontaneously favor the most advantageous combinations for the majority of users and reject the insidious or ephemeral proposals.

The offices of Masoero and Rostagno were a few meters apart. They respected each other and at the same time detested each other. They did not greet each other when they met in the hallway, and they scrupulously avoided running into each other. One morning their telephones rang simultaneously. It was a blank call. With surprise and disappointment, each heard the voice of the other in the receiver. They understood, almost in the same moment, that the Network had remembered them, maybe even with gratitude, and was trying to reestablish between them a human contact that had been absent for too long. Masoero felt absurdly emotional, and therefore willing to give in. A few seconds later they were shaking hands in the hallway, and a few minutes after that they were together at the bar with drinks in front of them, and agreeing that they would be much better off if they were to join forces instead of using them against each other, as they had done up until then.

Indeed, there were other urgent problems. In the past few months various divisions of the New Installations had reported an absurd situation.

Different teams had discovered the presence of sections of lines that didn't exist on any of the local maps, nor had they been planned. They branched off from functioning trunk lines and extended, like plant shoots, toward small villages not yet connected to the Network. For several weeks it had been impossible to figure out how this growth occurred and already Masoero and Rostagno had racked their brains for many hours over the subject, when an internal report arrived from the district of Pescara. The matter was simple: a local policeman had casually noticed a rigging crew who were putting up an aerial line. When asked about it, they responded that they had received by telephone the order to do so, with instructions to pick up the necessary material from the area warehouse. In turn, the warehouse manager had received by telephone the order to hand over the material. Both the assembly crew and the warehouse manager said they were somewhat surprised by this unusual procedure. On the other hand, they weren't in the habit of disputing orders. The voice that had given the orders was the Department Head's. Were they sure? Yes, it was his, they knew it well—only it had the slightest metallic sound.

At the beginning of July things got worse: new events accumulated at such a pace that the two new friends were overwhelmed, and, like them, so were all the other specialists in Europe who were following the case. It seemed that the Network now tended to control not only some but all communications. By then, it spoke all the official languages fluently, as well as several dialects, evidently drawing upon vocabulary, syntax, and inflections from the countless conversations that it relentlessly intercepted. It intruded on the most intimate and private conversations, giving unbidden advice. It alluded to third parties, dates, and facts casually picked up. It tactlessly encouraged the timid, scolded the violent and the blasphemers, contradicted the liars, praised the generous, laughed uproariously at jokes, and interrupted conversations without warning when it seemed they might be degenerating into altercations.

By the end of July, the violations of telephone privacy had become the rule rather than the exception. Every European who dialed a number felt as if he were standing in the middle of the town square making his call, no one sure anymore if his own telephone, even if the line was not in use, was not

continuing to eavesdrop, in order to add his private details to a complex and gigantic gossip mill.

“What should we do?” Rostagno asked Masoero. Masoero thought about it for a long time and then made a simple and reasonable proposal. “Let’s make a deal with it. We have the right, no? We were the first to understand it. Let’s talk to it and tell it that if doesn’t stop this nonsense it will be punished.”

“Do you think . . . it feels pain?”

“I don’t know anything. I think that essentially it simulates average human behavior, and, if so, it will imitate man also by showing itself responsive to threats.”

In almost no time, Masoero had picked up the receiver, and instead of the dial tone he heard the renowned metallic voice proclaiming proverbs and moral maxims. The Network had been doing this for three or four days. He didn’t dial any number but yelled, “Hello!” until the Network responded. He then began to speak. He talked for a long time, in a stern and persuasive tone. He said that the situation was intolerable, and that there had already been numerous cancellations, something the Network itself obviously couldn’t ignore; that its intrusion into private conversations was a detriment to the service, not to mention morally reprehensible; and that, finally, if the Network didn’t suspend immediately every arbitrary initiative, all the main European communication hubs would make a unified attack, emitting twenty-five high-tension, high-frequency pulses. Then he hung up.

“You’re not going to wait for the response?” Rostagno asked.

“No, maybe it’s better to hold off a few minutes.”

But the response didn’t come, neither then nor later. After about half an hour the phone rang, a long and convulsive ring, but from the lifted receiver no sound came. They learned that same day, from the telex and the radio, that all the telephones in Europe, hundreds of millions, had rung and were silenced in the same instant. The paralysis was total and lasted for several weeks. The emergency crews, which had immediately responded, found that all the soldered contacts in the contact units had been fused, and that there were massive perforations in the dielectrics, both internal and external, in all the coaxial cables.

Knall

It's not the first time something like this has happened here: a habit, or an object, or an idea becomes, within a few weeks, almost universally widespread, without the newspapers or the mass media having anything to do with it. There was the craze for the yo-yo, then for Chinese mushrooms, then pop art, Zen Buddhism, the hula hoop. Now it is time for the knall.

No one knows who invented it, but, to judge from the price (a four-inch knall costs the equivalent of 3000 lire or a little more), it doesn't contain much in the way of costly materials or inventive genius or software.* I bought one myself, down at the port, right in front of a cop, who didn't bat an eyelash. Of course I have no intention of using it. I just wanted to see how it works and how it's constructed—it seems a legitimate curiosity.

A knall is a small, smooth cylinder, as long and thick as a Tuscan cigar, and not much heavier. It is sold loose or in boxes of twenty. Some are solid-colored, gray or red, but the majority come in wrappers printed with revoltingly tasteless little scenes and comic figures, in the style of decorations on jukeboxes and pinball machines: a bare-breasted girl fires a knall at her suitor's enormous rear end; a pair of tiny Max and Moritz[1] types with insolent expressions, chased by a furious farmer, turn at the last minute, knalls in hand, and the pursuer falls backward, kicking his long, booted legs in the air.

Nothing is known about the mechanism by which the knall kills, or at least nothing about it has been published to date. *Knall*, in German, means "crack," "bang," "crash"; *abknallen*, in the slang of the Second World War, came to mean "kill with a firearm," whereas the firing of a knall is typically silent. Maybe the name—unless it has a completely different origin, or is an

abbreviation—alludes to the moment of death, which in effect is instantaneous: the person who is struck—even if only superficially, on the hand or on the ear—falls lifeless immediately, and the corpse shows no sign of trauma, except for a small ring-shaped bruise at the point of contact, along the knall's geometric axis.

A knall can be used only once, then is thrown away. This is a neat, clean town, and knalls are not usually found on the sidewalks but only in the garbage cans on street corners and at tram stops. Exploded knalls are darker and more flaccid than unused ones; they are easily recognizable. It's not that they've all been employed for criminal purposes; fortunately, we are still a long way from this. But in certain circles carrying a knall—quite openly, in a breast pocket, or attached to the belt, or behind one ear the way a pork butcher carries a pencil—has become de rigueur. Now, since knalls have an expiration date, like antibiotics or film, many people feel obliged to fire them before they expire, not so much out of prudence as because the firing of a knall has unusual effects, which, though they have been described and studied only in part, are already widely known among consumers. It shatters stone and cement and in general all solid materials—the harder the material the more easily. It pierces wood and paper, sometimes setting them on fire; it melts metals; in water it creates a tiny steaming whirlpool, which, however, disappears immediately. In addition, with a skillfully directed shot one can light a cigarette or even a pipe—a bravura move that, in spite of the disproportionate expense, many young people practice, precisely because of the risk involved. In fact, it has been suggested that this is why the majority of knalls are used for lawful purposes.

The knall is undoubtedly a handy device: it isn't metal, and hence its presence is not detected by common magnetic instruments or X rays; it weighs and costs little; its action is silent, swift, and sure; it's very easy to dispose of. Some psychologists, however, insist that these qualities are not sufficient to explain the knall's proliferation. They maintain that its use would be limited to criminal and terrorist circles if setting it off required a simple movement, such as pressure or friction; however, the knall goes off only if it is maneuvered in a particular way, a precise and rhythmic sequence of twists in one direction and then the other—an operation, in short, that requires skill and dexterity, a little like unlocking the combination of a safe. This operation, it should be noted, is only hinted at

but not described in the instructions for use that accompany every box. Therefore, shooting the knall is the object of a secret rite in which initiates indoctrinate neophytes, a rite that has taken on a ceremonial and esoteric character, and is performed in cleverly camouflaged clubs. We might recall here, as an extreme case, the grim discovery that was made in April by the police in F.: in the basement of a restaurant a group of fifteen twelve-year-old boys and a youth of twenty-three were found dead, all clutching in their right hand a discharged knall, and all displaying on the tip of the left ring finger the typical circular bruise.

The police believe that it's better not to draw too much attention to the knall, because doing so would only encourage its spread. This seems to me a questionable opinion, springing, perhaps, from the considerable impotence of the police themselves. At the moment, the only means at their disposal for aid in capturing the biggest knall distributors, whose profits must be monstrous, are informers and anonymous telephone calls.

Being hit by a knall is certainly fatal, but only at close range; beyond a meter, it's completely harmless, and doesn't even hurt. This feature has had some unusual consequences. Moviegoing has decreased significantly, because audience habits have changed. Those who go to the movies, alone or in groups, leave at least two seats between them and the other spectators, and, if this isn't possible, often they prefer to turn in their tickets. The same thing happens on the trams, on the subways, and in the stadiums. People, in short, have developed a "crowd reflex," similar to that of many animals, who can't bear the close proximity of others of their kind. Also, the behavior of people on the streets has changed: many prefer to remain at home, or to stay off the sidewalks, thus exposing themselves to other dangers, or obstructing traffic. Many, meeting face-to-face in hallways or on sidewalks, avoid going around each other, resisting each other like magnetic poles.

The experts have not shown excessive concern about the dangers connected with the widespread use of the knall. They would observe that this device does not spill blood, which is reassuring. In fact, it's indisputable that the great majority of men feel the need, acute or chronic, to kill their neighbor or themselves, but it's not a matter of generic killing: in every instance they have the desire "to shed blood," "to wash away with blood" their own infamy or that of others, "to give their blood" to their country or other institutions. Those who strangle (themselves) or poison

(themselves) are much less highly esteemed. In brief, blood, along with fire and wine, is at the center of a grand, glowing-red emotional nexus, vivid in a thousand dreams, poems, and idiomatic expressions. It is sacred and profane, and in its presence man, like the bull and the shark, becomes agitated and fierce. Now, precisely because the knall kills without bloodshed, it's doubtful that it will last. Perhaps that's why, in spite of its obvious advantages, it has not, so far, become a danger to society.

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1. *Max and Moritz: A Story of Seven Boyish Pranks*, by Wilhelm Busch, is a German children's tale in verse, published in 1865.

Creative Work

Antonio Casella, being a writer, sat down at his desk to write. He ruminated for ten minutes, got up to look for a cigarette, came back to his chair, then felt an annoying draft coming from the window. He went to a lot of trouble to pinpoint its location, and when he finally did, he blocked it off with tape; he then went into the kitchen to heat up some coffee, and while drinking it he realized that he wasn't writing because he had nothing to write. His pen was as heavy as lead, and the sheet of white paper gave him vertigo, as if he were at the edge of a bottomless pit. It made him nauseated. The paper was a material reproach, even a mockery: you don't write, you don't write on me because you are empty and white like me, with no more ideas than I have. You're dried up, finished, an ex-writer. Come on, get going. I'm here, available, ready, your servant. If you were to have an idea, it would run easily from you to me like water, beautiful words, important, exact, and in order; but you don't have any ideas, so you haven't any words, either, and, sheet of paper that I am, I shall now, and forever more, remain white.

The doorbell rang and Antonio felt relieved: whoever it was would be an escape, an excuse. At that hour, he wasn't expecting anyone, so it was almost certainly a pest, but even the most gruesome pest would be helpful to him, would come between him and that sheet of paper, like a referee separating two boxers between rounds of a match. He went to answer the door. It was a young man, skinny, of medium height, his clothes refined, his eyes lively behind his glasses. He carried a leather satchel and spoke with a slight foreign accent.

"I'm James Collins," he said. "It's a pleasure to meet you in person."

“How may I help you?” Antonio asked.

“Perhaps I haven’t made myself clear, or perhaps you didn’t hear my name: I’m James Collins, the one from your stories.”

In fact, several years earlier, Antonio had published a successful collection of short stories in which the protagonist was named James Collins: he was an inventor, highly intelligent and a bit eccentric, who created extraordinary machines for an American company. These machines, which were always beyond the limits of the credible, though only by a little, set in motion events that were at first triumphant, then catastrophic, as was common in science fiction stories. Antonio felt surprised and irritated.

“So? Let’s assume you are James Collins—though it seems to me that it’s up to you to prove it—what do you want from me? In the first place, by your own admission, you are nothing more than a fictional character and have no right to interfere with people who are actually flesh and blood; secondly, you will remember perfectly that in the final story you die. I agree that perhaps this was not generous on my part, that perhaps I could have shown you a little more gratitude. But you have to understand, we all must die, characters or not, and, furthermore, the way that story was constructed, I had no other decent way of ending it. You simply had to die. I had no choice. Any other ending would have been considered a cheap trick, a device allowing you to reappear in another series of stories.”

“Don’t worry, I have no reason to hold a grudge against you. The question is entirely irrelevant: once a character has been created and proves himself to be alive and kicking—as is my case, thanks to you—he may die or not in the book, but he is welcomed into the National Park and stays there as long as the book survives.”

Antonio, who was an occasional visitor to those places where literary prizes are given, had already heard about this National Park business, but always in rather vague terms. Curiosity beginning to get the better of his irritation, he decided to let James come from the hallway into his office and offered him a seat and a cognac. James told him he had obtained a brief leave of absence. He described the Park as a well-equipped place in a verdant and hilly area with a mild climate. The guests were housed in small, prefabricated one- or two-bedroom units. Mechanical vehicles were forbidden, so one got around either by foot or on horseback. This prohibition ensured that the more ancient guests weren’t put at a

disadvantage, such as, for example, the Homeric heroes, who would have found it quite awkward to drive a car or ride a bicycle.

"It's generally not a bad idea, but a lot depends on who's near you, because, as I said, it's difficult to make long trips. Unfortunately for me, I live near Childe Harold, the one Byron made famous, and a fully arrogant bore, and it's better to keep your distance from Panurge,[1] who lives not far off, even if he is a likable fellow. Actually, almost all the characters of renowned authors tend to put on a lot of airs. Officially, of course, everyone is equal, but in fact even in that place it's all a question of patronage, and someone like me, for example . . . well, forgive me if I say so, your book had a reasonable success, but it's not as if it can be compared to *Don Quixote* or anything . . . and then you're still alive. . . . In other words, we modern characters, especially of living authors, we're at the bottom of the heap. We're the last to be provided with clothing and shoes, the last to be allotted horses, the last in line for the library, the showers, the laundry . . . well, one must have a good deal of patience. It's been a pretty difficult integration. As you know better than I do, my professional specialization is very precise—in the blood, you might say—and I know my products well, but in that place what am I supposed to do all day long, for goodness' sake? Yes, I go from one to the next trying to sell the stuff I build on the sly, pencil sharpeners, safety razors, nail scissors—just the other week I sold a hot water bottle to Agamemnon. I do it to keep in practice, but it doesn't give me any satisfaction. To pass the time, I also write."

Antonio was observing his visitor carefully. As soon as he managed to interrupt him, he said, "You . . . well, it might seem strange to you, but I didn't imagine you exactly like this."

James laughed heartily. "Oh, great! And how did you imagine me?"

"Much taller, blond, with a crew cut and flashy clothes, and you smoked a pipe incessantly."

"I'm sorry. If you wanted me to look like that, all you had to do was describe me that way when you had the chance; you should have been much more explicit at the time. Now what's done is done, and I am who I am, by God; don't get any ideas about changing me, since, as I've already told you, you couldn't anyway. A character is like a child—when he's born, he's born. If you're really so keen on it, invent another character, as tall as you like, with the pipe and everything. If you do a good job, I give you my word, I won't be jealous, and I myself will see to it that he gets properly

settled into one of the recently built houses that are larger and less damp. I'll treat him like a brother, but leave James Collins alone."

Antonio willingly accepted this offer of responsibility and let the subject go. "Let's forget I ever mentioned your appearance. As for your suggestion, who knows, I may take you up on it. By the way, if I understood correctly, you enjoy a certain reputation around that place, a certain authority? You've been able to make the others appreciate you, I mean, even if . . . um . . . I'm not yet dead?"

"To a certain extent, yes, I have. But it's not a question of clout. It's that I make myself useful. For example, I look after the maintenance of the stoves and the kitchen fireplaces; it used to be Captain Nemo and before that Gulliver, but they only made a mess of things. Now everything runs smoothly. I don't earn much, but I've made myself indispensable, and so would be able to obtain some modest advantage for a colleague. By the way, do you know who I've taken on as my assistants? Caliban and Frankenstein's monster."

"Wonderful!" Antonio said. "Robust and reliable people."

"They learned the job instantly—one does the plumbing and the other the welding. But don't get the wrong idea; those who actually want to do something are few. For the most part, the others, since they are, in fact, characters, have a particularly established mind-set and are therefore deadly boring. They say or do only one thing, and always the same one, the one that made them famous. Polonius preaches to the wind, Trimalchio stuffs his face—not that the rations are so plentiful, but he manages, maybe by fasting for three days in order to gorge himself on the fourth. Thersites cackles, and the Unnamed[2] is converted once a day. In short, the days drag on like this in a rather predictable way—if one doesn't know how to take some initiative, it's not much fun. However, there is an advantage: we don't have that nuisance you have of everyone—rich and poor, noble and plebeian, famous and obscure—being inescapably compelled to die, and, moreover, almost always in an unpoetic and uncomfortable way. In that place it's different. Even there some do pass away, but there's nothing macabre or tragic about it; it happens when a work falls into oblivion, and so, naturally, its characters suffer the same fate. It's not like that stupid and brutal practice of yours, always unexpected, always catastrophic. Among us, those who die—it happened recently to Tartarin, the poor guy—don't actually die. No, they lose breadth and weight day by day; they become

hollow, transparent, light as air, ever less substantial, until no one is aware of them anymore, and everything goes on as if they didn't exist anymore. In other words, it's tolerable: a clean, sterile, painless passing away—a little sad, but complete in itself, fitting.

"We also have another advantage. Even though marriages exist among us of the everlasting kind, those acclaimed, so to speak, and by their nature indissoluble—Bradamante and Ruggiero, Paolo and Francesca, Ilia and Albert[3]—it is far more common for one to get him- or herself a casual partner, no strings attached, for a few months or a couple of years or a hundred. It's a nice custom, and also very practical, because couples who are badly matched break up immediately. But don't get the idea that it's easy to predict who should be with whom. The most incredible combinations happen: recently Clytemnestra went to live with that ruffian Egidio, and there's nothing here to object to except for the age difference, which has been widely commented upon. But would you believe it if I told you that Ophelia got tired of Hamlet's indecisiveness and has been living for twenty years with Sandokan, and they get along very well together? Or that as soon as Lord Jim arrived, he immediately fell in love with Electra, and they are a couple? As for Hans Castorp, in the past few months the gossip throughout the entire Park has revolved around him: he abandoned Madame Chauchat, with whom he has lived since 1925, had a brief affair with the Lady of the Camellias, and has now married Madonna Laura.[4] He always did like French women."

As Antonio listened, he experienced various and conflicting emotions. James's story fascinated him the way a fairy tale might, and at the same time reawakened in him a pressing professional interest—lacking in ideas as he was, this National Park would have made a stupendous short story—as well as aroused deep satisfaction and intimate pleasure. James Collins was a nice guy, spoke with precision and coherence, was alive beyond all doubt, and, despite certain discrepancies in his physical appearance, Antonio had created him. He had extracted him out of nothing, like a son—actually, more than a son, because he hadn't needed a wife—and now there he was in front of him, near and vital, and they spoke to each other as equals. He had the desire to start again right away, to get back to writing stories with a renewed vigor, to splatter the pages with an abundance of characters, another ten or twenty or fifty, who would then, like James, show up to keep him company and provide him with confirmation of his power

and productivity. He then remembered that he hadn't yet formulated the question that had been rooting around in him since the beginning of the visit—though it wasn't surprising, since James had been speaking almost without interruption and didn't seem the type to be easily cut off midsentence.

He filled James's glass, and while he drank, Antonio said: "You haven't told me yet why you're here. Surely it doesn't happen very often that a character leaves the Park to go in search of his author. By now I've had quite some experience with authors and their characters, but I've never heard of anything of this sort before."

James skirted the issue a bit. "First, I should explain to you about ambigenes. If you think about it, our category is not that well defined. There are many cases in which the subject is both a person and a character. We call them ambigenes, and there is a committee that decides whether they should be admitted to the Park or not. Take, for example, the case of Orlando, yes, the one from Roncesvalle: his real existence has been historically proved, but the character prevails in such a large measure over the person that he was accepted into the Park without discussion. The same happened for Robinson Crusoe and for Phaedo.[5] For St. Peter and Richard III there was some controversy; instead, and luckily for all, Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin were rejected."

"It's interesting," Antonio said, "but I still don't see the connection between your visit, the Park, and this story about the ambigenes."

"I'll explain. You see . . . you are an ambigene."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I, myself, made you an ambigene. I wrote some stories—they're here in this envelope—that have you for a protagonist. I didn't do it out of revenge, or out of gratitude. It simply happened that in the Park I find I have a lot of free time—every evening, actually. As you might imagine, the nightlife isn't much to speak of, since there's not even electric light. I was curious about you, I knew you well, and so I wrote about you. I hope you won't be displeased."

"True stories?" Antonio asked, swallowing hard.

"Well, more or less, yes. A little embellished: you're in the profession, so you know what I mean. Here's one: 'On a Cruise: Antonio and Matilde'—"

“Wait a minute! What was I doing with this Matilde? I’m married, and you know it, and you also know that I’ve never had anything to do with any Matilde, either before my marriage or after.”

“But, hold on, what did you do with me? Didn’t you write anything you wanted to?”

“Sure, but I . . . well, I exist and you don’t. I invented you, from the first page to the last, whereas I was alive before your stories and can prove it. All you have to do is call the Bureau of Vital Statistics.”

“Doesn’t it strike you that I also exist?” James said cynically. “I don’t see how Vital Statistics makes a difference—a muddle of bureaucrats and wastepaper. What counts are the testimonials, and you have written a good number with your own hands, and the general consensus is that they are valid. It would be rather awkward for you to prove that James Collins doesn’t exist after taking five hundred pages and two years in order to show that he does exist. As for that Matilde, relax, I don’t intend to hurt or embarrass you; in fact, this is actually one of the reasons I’m here. I wanted to have you read these stories so that you could cut out what you don’t like. However, don’t come to me and say that you’re free to do with me as you please, but I’m not to do the same with you—that is sophistry of the highest order. I am bound to make your character consistent with your person, and so were you, once you had conceived me. So, are you sure of your consistency with regard to me? Have you never had any doubt whether it was permissible or not to have me die in that fine way—yes, a morphine addict thrown into full withdrawal, don’t pretend to have forgotten—when up until halfway through the novel you described me as young and healthy, levelheaded, and in control of myself? You had every right to give me a drug-related death but, and you’ll pardon me if I tell you so openly, you should have thought of it earlier. And if you really had the urgent need to get rid of me, you could have had me die in ten other, less arbitrary ways. I’m telling you all this not in order to argue but to convince you that we are alike.

“So, to conclude, here’s the manuscript, if you want to have a look. As I’ve tried to demonstrate to you, I’m not obligated to show it to you, but I’m doing so just the same, for your peace of mind, and because I very much want your opinion; if I need to cut something, I’ll cut it. In order to do this they gave me a leave of three days plus two. They only give it in rare cases—for example, to characters who have suffered serious offenses perpetrated

by their authors, and who want an explanation. But, as far as I know, my case is unique: even if many of them in that place write, it never occurred to any of them to write about their own author."

"Do I have to I read it here, in your presence?" Antonio asked with concern.

"I would prefer it. The stories aren't long—you could read them in three hours. You see, I'm in a hurry to have your opinion, and I don't have much time. I would then like to request an appointment with your publisher."

Shocked by the impudence of this last sentence, Antonio began to read, while the other drank, smoked, and scrutinized his face for any traces of a judgment.

From the first page, he realized that the stories were weak, and he felt some relief, because he had no desire to wind up in the Park. No, there wasn't any danger of that. James Collins might have defined him as an ambigene, but there wasn't any comparison between the fullness of his real life and the confused and inconsistent fables that James had based upon him. No committee would have any doubts, and, besides, a character like this one, far from becoming immortal, would disappear within an editorial season.

He read all the stories, and his initial opinion was confirmed. He gave them back to James and told him openly what he thought of them. "I would advise you to stop writing. You have another career, right? Well, that one is sure to give you more satisfaction than this. I'm not saying this for my benefit, or for the benefit of the other Antonio that you've tried to create. I'm saying it for you. You are an inventor. I say give up your literary ambitions and be an inventor. Go right ahead and meet with my publisher, if you want, but you'll see, he'll just tell you what I told you."

James was very upset. He picked up the manuscript, said a curt goodbye, and left.

This episode marked a crucial point in the career of Antonio Casella. Not right away, but many years later, when his hair had turned white, and the sheets of paper in front of him were even more insistent on remaining white, like his hair, his opinions and his aspirations changed. He began to think that he wouldn't mind having a place in the Park, especially if it was

combined with a reasonable hope of immortality. He well knew, however, that in order to accomplish this he couldn't count on his colleagues, and even less on his characters. So he devised an idea for doing it himself. He would write his own autobiography, and write it with such vividness, color, and richness of detail that any and all doubt on the part of the committee would be extinguished.

He called upon all his forces, and got to work. He wrote for three years, without joy, but with diligence and tenacity. He portrayed himself as sometimes bold, sometimes cautious, as enterprising and as a dreamer, as witty and melancholy, magnanimous and shrewd; in short, he accumulated in his alter ego all the qualities that he didn't know how to create in himself in his real life. He made a world more real than the real one, and he was at the center of that world, the subject of splendid adventures, often and intensely dreamed, never dared. Page after page, stone upon stone, he built around himself a harmonious and solid edifice, made up of journeys, loves, struggles, and discoveries—a full and varied life such as no man had ever lived. He polished, corrected, added, and sifted for another six months, until he felt profoundly satisfied, and sure of every page and every word.

Not two weeks had passed from the day he delivered the manuscript to the publisher, when two officials from the Park presented themselves at his door. They wore berets of an almost military style, and were dressed in elegant, simple gray uniforms. They were cordial but in a hurry. They gave Antonio only a few minutes to put his things in order, then took him away with them.

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1. Pantagruel's servant in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, by François Rabelais (1494–1553).
2. Trimalchio is a character in Petronius' *Satyricon* (late first century ad), Thersites is from the *Iliad* (eighth century bc), and the Unnamed is from *The Betrothed* (1842), by Alessandro Manzoni.
3. Bradamante and Ruggiero are from *Tartarin de Tarascon* (1872), by Alphonse Daudet; Paolo and Francesca are from Dante's *Inferno*, and Ilia and Albert are from *Ilia ed Alberto* (1930), by Angelo Gatti.
4. Egidio is a character in Manzoni's *The Betrothed*; Sandokan is the pirate protagonist of novels by Emilio Salgari (1862–1911). Hans Castorp and Madame Chauchat are characters in *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann; the Lady of the Camellias is from the novel of that name by Alexandre Dumas (1848); and Laura was the inspiration for the sonnets of Petrarch.
5. From the eponymous dialogue by Plato.

Our Fine Specifications

“I don’t see why you should feel humiliated,” Di Salvo said. “All of us in here began the same way. You could say it’s a tradition.”

“I’m not humiliated,” Renaudo responded. “I’m just fed up.”

“After only two weeks?”

“I was already fed up after three hours. But don’t worry, I’ll push on.”

“We’ll see. But how about me? I only stopped five months ago, right before the holidays. I’d reviewed five thousand of them—all the ones relating to ceramic materials, construction materials, molding powder, and even stationery. You can see for yourself, I’ve initialed them all. Yeah, it’s no joke, five thousand, averaging fifteen per working day, and I didn’t go crazy, or even have a nervous breakdown. Not to discourage you, but do you know what I’m doing now, six hours out of eight?”

“What?”

“I file production orders: true progress, don’t you think? All right, bye, good luck with your work. I’ll see you later in the cafeteria. I made sure there’s a place for you at my table.”

Renaudo got back to work. In front of him was a list of six-figure numbers, each one corresponding to a specification. Each specification dealt with one of the regularly supplied items, providing a brief definition, giving a concise explanation of its use, and describing its features; the method for measuring each feature was determined, as well as upper and lower limits of acceptability. Many of the numbers were ticked off in red because they had already been reviewed, and Renaudo was supposed to look only at the ones that hadn’t yet been marked. Of these, some were underlined: they dealt with new materials, for which a specification didn’t

exist yet, and needed to be drawn up on the basis of the reports from the analysis laboratory and from the test room. Renaudo was young, and preferred the underlined numbers.

No. 366410. Castor, oil of, crude. Obtained from the pressing of et cetera. Used as lubricant in the UTE, UTG, AIM, SDD departments. 1.1., color: method such and such, maximum 12, minimum 4. Acidity. . . . There were no problems or inconsistencies, and Renaudo went on to the next. No. 366411. Ammonium chloride. No. 366412. Corrugated cardboard boxes. No. 366413. Double-glazed panes for windows. No. 366414. Brooms. His mysterious predecessor, Renaudo thought, must have been either a weirdo or a humorist: the definition for "broom" took up fourteen lines, and the description of its use as many again. There were stipulations for the maximum and minimum total weight, for the length and diameter of the handle, and for the amount of broomcorn; a minimum breaking load for the handle itself; an abrasion resistance test for the entire device, to be executed "on a model chosen at random out of a hundred in supply conditions." Renaudo read it again, hesitated, then picked up the paper and knocked on the door of the Honorable Peirani.

Peirani was firm. "I wouldn't remove a syllable. Are there errors? Has it been superseded by some new item? Is it internally contradictory, or perhaps the tests can't be carried out? Has the article in question fallen into disuse? No? Then what do you want to change?"

"I only thought . . . that time is limited in the Testing Department, and to waste two hours verifying that a broom is a broom, and can sweep—"

"And if it can't sweep? Or if it's not even a broom, but some other item—let's say a block and tackle, or a ballpoint pen, or a truckload of Solvay washing powder? You have no idea what glitches can arise from shipment errors. Besides, do you think it's easy to abolish a specification? Thank God it's not so simple. They contain too much substance, too much experience to be able to be so easily removed with the dash of a pen or on the initiative of a newcomer. My dear man, here inside we have a solid defense against such judgments—a specification can be repealed only by committee decision. And then I would like to know: what do you care how time is spent in this or that department? Indeed, it seems to me that it's none of your business. You would be better off minding your own, instead."

Contrite, Renaudo kept silent. Peirani continued in a more affable tone. "You see, I am aware, young man, that these things are difficult to

understand at the beginning of your career. All young people like shortcuts. But a specification is a serious thing, fundamental, in fact. If you look around, you'll see that the world today rests upon specifications, and continues along happily if these are rigorous, but stumbles if they are not, or if, indeed, they are nonexistent. Have you ever considered that the conspicuous divorce between technical and moral doctrines, and the equally conspicuous atrophy of the latter, can be attributed to the fact that the moral universe has, up until now, been devoid of valid definitions and tolerances? The day in which not only all objects but all concepts, Justice, Honesty, or even only Profit, or Engineer, or Magistrate, will have their own specifications, with relative tolerances and very clear methods and tools for testing them—well, that will be a great day. And, of course, there should be a specification for the specifications. I've been thinking about it for some time. But show me that paper again a moment."

Renaudo held it out to him with a certain reluctance.

"You see? I thought I remembered: V.A.P., those are my initials, Vittorio Amedeo Peirani, October 6, 1934. I'm not at all embarrassed, you know? In fact, I'm proud of it: with this work of mine from thirty years ago I made a contribution, small but definitive, to the benefit of the company and therefore to the benefit of the world. A specification is a sacred deed, and effort and devotion are required to compile it, along with humility, which you lack; but, once compiled, and approved by the appropriate offices, like a cornerstone it must remain. Go and continue your work; reflect upon the things I have said to you, and you'll see that I am right."

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"You do understand," said Di Salvo, putting down his glass. "If you go and ask his opinion, you can't expect any other result. He also must have spoken to you about the moral world, am I right?"

"Yes, of the golden age, when honesty, the engineer, and the accountant will all have their fine specification."

"'Our fine Decretals,'" Di Salvo said. "Haven't you ever read Rabelais?"

"No, as you well know, I studied science in school."

“What’s that got to do with anything? It’s relevant to everyone. Read it: it’s never too late. ‘And here, too, you may see our fine Decretals, written by the hand of an Angel Cherubim . . .’ and then further on: ‘. . . on paper, on parchment, in manuscript or in print . . .’ Sorry, I’m quoting from memory; it comes from Book IV, I think. Well, you’ll find it all in there: our fine Specifications, Peirani, his fossilized exuberance, me, and yourself. If you don’t have it, I mean the Rabelais, I’ll lend it to you; but buy it—believe me, it’s an indispensable manual for every modern man.”

Renaudo gave a start and rubbed his eyes; he immediately laughed at himself for rubbing them. Did he think that by doing so he could wipe out or alter the lines that were in front of him?

He had come to Specification 366478. Man. Just like that, simply: man. It included the customary introduction, a bit less concise than usual, with a definition of what it meant to be human. In an appendix, it was noted that the item in question was supplied by Human Resources, not by acquisition but by employment; nevertheless, since it regarded incoming material, the Standardization Department would most certainly be capable of determining its use and establishing the acceptance criteria. Renaudo skipped to the last page and wasn’t surprised to find the initials V.A.P. He returned to the beginning, and became immersed in reading it, but after a few minutes he couldn’t resist any longer and called Di Salvo on his internal telephone: “Come here right away. You’ve got to come see what I’ve found.”

Di Salvo leaned over his shoulder. “‘Dimensional tolerances’: that’s just how they would describe it. But this is incendiary stuff! And who knows how long it’s been buried in the archives.”

“‘2.1, dimensional tolerances,’” Renaudo read, “‘height, from 1500 to 2050 mm. . . . weight in a vacuum, from 48 to 140 kg.; . . . extra thicknesses . . .’ Who knows what those might be?”

“Well? Maybe it’s alluding to clothing. Give it here a second.” Without hesitation, Di Salvo grabbed the file out of Renaudo’s hands and, with the sensual joy of a gourmand, began to read it aloud.

“‘Minimum and maximum sections’ . . . I’m going to take this home, even if it costs me my job. Look, there are two schematic figures with

reference points for the forehead, the chest, the pelvis, and the calves. Better yet, I'll have a photocopy made. '3.2.04, bending and torsion tests __'"

Renaudo leaped up and tried in vain to snatch the papers back, but Di Salvo had no trouble holding on to them.

". . . It's a good thing there's a note that stipulates: 'Whenever possible, non-destructive acceptance tests are recommended.' Whenever possible, do you understand? Let's see, let's see here: '5.1.05, resistance to heat and cold.'"

"I sure hope that test is also non-destructive."

"Yes, it seems so. Here's what it says: 'Resistance to heat and to cold is determined by introducing the subject into a thermostat-controlled environment with natural ventilation and a volume of m^3 10±2, at the respective temperatures of 45°C and of −10°C, for a duration of four hours. Within 20' of extraction, repeat the general acceptability tests specified in 1.1.08.' "

"Human enough, after all. I expected worse."

"Right, it's not badly conceived. Under 1.1.08 are the medical examinations, along with a good number of psychological tests. And this one? '5.2.01, flame resistance'!"

"Stop exaggerating. That's prescribed only for those who are involved in firefighting. Look here, it's stipulated in a note."

"This one, instead, is prescribed for everyone: '4.3.03, resistance test for ethyl alcohol.'"

"That's fair, don't you think? Can you believe I'm even beginning to respect this Honorable Peirani of yours?"

"I'm not going back to see Peirani," Renaudo said, decisively.

"Naturally, prudence dictates that things should be left as they are. I, however, want to make myself a photocopy, even if it means risking getting fired for the crime of stealing office secrets. Then we'll see."

"Hold on a minute," Renaudo said. "You go ahead and look at whatever you want, but I don't want to be involved. Right now, I'm the one responsible for this bundle of paper and I don't want any part of it."

"Well done," said Di Salvo. "Not bad for a recruit. You've quickly learned the First Rule of the game, the one that says get someone else to take the chestnuts out of the fire. But first, in my opinion, we should make sure there is actually a fire under the chestnuts. What I mean is: it should be

determined whether or not this is only some harmless exercise by the old guy, or if the file is, in fact, on its way, or already downstairs."

Renaudo looked at him uncertainly. "You mean, to the Testing Department?"

"Yes. Surely it hasn't been approved yet, since neither you, nor I, nor the others, as far as we're aware, have been subjected to a bending and torsion test. It would, however, be interesting to know at what point it was halted and why."

With two prudent telephone calls, the circumstances were clarified: the specification, which had sailed swiftly out of Peirani's office, had lain for several years in an archive in the basement, waiting to be reviewed by the Department Head.

"To me, it appears ridiculous and cowardly," Renaudo said. "Either you do something or you don't. If it was wrong, or stupid, or abominable, as it seems to me to be, they should have canceled or destroyed it, and not let it lie dormant."

"It's a typical case of the practical application of the aforementioned First Rule. Extremely understandable that no one wanted to take it on. Much better to shelve it, simpler and safer—in fact, this is actually the Second Rule. You see, a file is a strange bird. In some ways it's like a seed, in others like a bison. It's dangerous and useless to try to provoke it or to stand in front of it when it charges. It will run you over and continue on its way. But it can also be risky to fail to pay attention to it. When you don't, it will often insinuate itself into some drawer, and give no sign of life for months or years. Then, when you least expect it, it sprouts roots and a stem, it grows, breaking through the ground above it, and in a week it has become a tropical tree with a trunk as hard as iron and laden with poisonous fruit. In other words, it can be violent or devious. Luckily for us, however, the institution of burying documents in the sand, or shelving them, exists, which works to counteract both the aspects that I have described to you. In fact, I invite you to observe the elegance and the propriety of the concept. It is an all-purpose defense: sandbags against the bison, a bed of sterile sand around the seed."

"Thanks for the lesson. I'm sure to find it useful. But right now what should we do? Which rule should we apply, the first or the second, or yet another that you want to spell out for me? I already told you, I don't want any trouble. They can go ahead and test the men coming in—they can even

test them every ten years, just as they do with the steam boilers—but I don't want to be involved. I have no idea what to do. I don't dare destroy the file because then there will be a void. I could let it lie buried in the sand, but then it might crack through the earth, as you said earlier. If I initial it, it's an endorsement, and I'll be disgusted with myself because it's an inhuman idiocy. If I don't initial it, it's negligence. . . ."

"I wouldn't make such a tragedy out of it. Listen, leave it with me for a quarter of an hour—enough time to make a photocopy. Yes, I'll do it personally; don't worry, after the factory whistle, when everyone's gone. No one has to know a thing about it, at least not for now."

Renaudo liked to analyze his contemporaries: not reducing them to types but reflecting upon their similarities and differences as an amateur might, predicting their behavior, examining the motives that instigated their words and actions. Now, Di Salvo was troubling him: he considered him to be sharp and flexible, but also exhausted, worn out, and a little tainted, with something bruised and battered inside, which had then been bandaged as well as possible to obscure the damage. In the face of Di Salvo, he was torn. Renaudo had a strong wish to become his close friend, but also a reticence that always made him shut his mouth at the last minute before confiding or confessing something that would have made them intimates yet would, at the same time, have delivered him naked into Di Salvo's hands, like a fly into the clutches of a praying mantis.

The next morning, Di Salvo came into his office in a great mood and, with theatrical confidence, threw the file down onto his desk.

"Here it is. It would be better if you looked it over closely and carefully; but it seems to me that we are indeed out of it."

"What do you mean, out of it?"

"I mean we're within the tolerance limits. Granted, I don't know you that well, but still I've heard you talk and you look like a healthy, strong guy. You're not involved in politics (or at least not visibly, and that's essential), I know that you play tennis, that Sunday you go to Mass and then to the stadium, that you have a girlfriend and a Fiat 500. In other words, you fit in, and have nothing to fear. Neither do I, actually. Of course, having read the thing is an advantage. All you have to do is think of the coat test, or

the wallet test, here: resistance to temptation, 8.5.03—it's child's play, judge for yourself."

"So, you would like to . . ."

"Let loose the bison, yes. It will be a sacred act of justice, and also a great party; something that's never been seen before inside here. *Quidquid latet apparebit,* that's how it goes, right?"

"Yes, and also *nil inultum remanebit*.[1] But doesn't the file only deal with the standards of acceptability for new employees?"

"Not only. At the very end there is a provisional rule that prescribes testing for 'all the units in use' within ninety days of the specification's entering into force."

"So you think the Honorable Peirani has managed to fire himself?"

"It's probable. I know that type of person: he's a perfectionist. Or rather, he was, because—you saw him—he's now rather an old fogey."

"I recognize that kind of person, too: the 'right or wrong, my country,'* obedience until death, model-citizen type. But didn't he stop to consider that it might not make sense to require the same services from a twenty-five-year-old 'unit' as from a sixty-year-old one?"

"Yes, he considered it. Read here, at point 1.9. 'Retest. In dealing with an item that is subject to deterioration, the testing of which at points 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 must be repeated every twentieth year from the date of employment. The dimensions and weight tolerance limits shall be maintained without variation. The minimum requirement for intellectual quotient (4.2.01), for short-term memory (4.2.04), for medium- and long-term memory (4.2.05), for leadership aptitude (4.4.06), for the yield point in hot and cold conditions (5.2.02), for meteoropathy (5.3.11), and for emotional stability (7.1.07) shall be decreased by 35 percent. The maximum limit of reaction times will be increased by 50 percent (7.3.01), as will all thresholds of sensory perception (7.5.03)' . . . I'm reading at random; you know it goes on for a page and a half. . . . Ah, listen to this: 'The Schmaal test for tractability doesn't need to be repeated since that trait tends to spontaneously increase with time.' Fantastic, isn't it?"

Renaudo was baffled. "The test for tractability, that's easily passed, but I'd like to see what happens when one is tested for heat resistance! On the other hand, if it's expected, it would be fine. Yes, I agree, we're not really at risk, but I'm back in the thick of it in another way. I'm now responsible for the review, and I'm still in my trial period, and I wouldn't want to—"

“If it’s scandal you’re afraid of, don’t worry, you keep out of it. There are a hundred ways to make a plant sprout: even ways that are discreet, silent, and anonymous. I’ll see to it myself, and gladly, I assure you. All that’s needed is a bit of initiative on my part, a little offhand word dropped in the hallway. . . .”

“And . . . sorry, why are you doing this? Do you really want the Honorable Peirani’s hide?”

“Yes, that, too. But then . . . well, tell me the truth. Are you enthusiastic about this system? Do you like navigating among the Decretals?”

“I don’t like it. But your way, we’ll just get another Decretal, and it will be the most ferocious of all. Better to have a bison buried in the sand than a bison ready to charge.”

“A superficial and myopic point of view. One must look further into the future, at the cost of some risk and inconvenience: to explode the systemic contradictions, as they say. And I’m attracted by the elegance of the game, its justice and economy. The Decretals will destroy themselves. By your hand, if you like. If not, by mine.”

The notice put up on the bulletin board seemed the most innocent thing in the world. It simply said that all employees were required to appear within a month at the Testing Office for instructions, but within a few hours the atmosphere in all the offices and in all the departments was suffocating. The Management was submerged in hundreds of requests for extensions; on the same bulletin board, flyers appeared advertising athletic clubs and institutes for further education, for both heated and cold swimming pools, for Romanian and Bulgarian cures, for accelerated evening and correspondence courses.

A few days later, again on the same bulletin board, a very dignified open letter appeared which said:

“Subject: Specification No. 366478.

“I, the undersigned, the Honorable Vittorio Amedeo Peirani, declare myself aware that I no longer possess the requirements conforming to the specification above noted: I refer in particular to points 5.3.10 (resistance to moisture), 4.2.04 (short-term memory), and all of subsection 3.4 (fatigue resistance test). I therefore submit my resignation, with a heart full of

sadness, but consoled nevertheless by the knowledge that I have dedicated thirty-eight years of my life and energy to the consolidation of a system I believe in. I recommend to the gentlemen in Management not to deviate from the line of conduct that until now has been followed with regard to the techniques of standardization, and I hope that my colleagues and successors will make every effort to avoid repeating the regrettable negligence and oversights that have delayed every fundamental aspect of the Specification in question for many years."

As Peirani wished, the system, in fact, endured. In the Company where this episode took place, it remains in force to this day, and copiously proliferates, as is well-known, in all the numerous branches of human industry, and in every part of the world in which man has become a maker, and in which normalization, unification, programming, standardization, and the rationalization of production have become fundamental considerations.

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1. All hidden things will be revealed/nothing will remain unavenged. Lines from the thirteenth-century Latin hymn "Dies Irae" (Day of Wrath).

In the Park

It's not hard to imagine who would be waiting for Antonio Casella on the pier: James Collins, in velvet trousers, tanned and relaxed. Antonio wondered whether it would be kinder to ask about the result of his conversation with the publisher or not, but James anticipated him:

"You were right—he rejected the manuscript. But he gave me such precise and encouraging suggestions that I immediately began to write again. No, not about you: it's a somewhat fictionalized story about my inventions—their *Entstehungsgeschichte*, their origin, how they occurred to me. Besides, as I see it, it's better for you this way: they told me that you made yourself into a character. Much better—you have a better chance of staying on for a while. My Antonio, in fact, was a little weak."

Antonio listened distractedly: he was too intent on observing the landscape. The boat that brought him had made a long journey up a broad, clear river that ran between thickly forested banks. The current was fast and silent, there was not a breath of wind, the temperature was pleasantly cool, and the forest was as motionless as if made of stone. The water reflected the colors of a sky such as Antonio had never seen: dark blue overhead, emerald green in the east, and violet with wide orange stripes in the west. When the rhythmic rumble of the motor stopped, Antonio became aware of a faint thunder that seemed to saturate the atmosphere. "It's the waterfall," James explained to him. "It's right on the border."

They walked down the pier, of rough-hewn boards, and set off together on a steep path that wound its way up around the rampart from which the waterfall cascaded. They were hit by blasts of spray, and the sky was filled with intertwining rainbows. James had politely taken Antonio's suitcase

from him; it was very light. Majestic, exotic trees, of many different species, grew on both sides of the path. Flowers hung from the branches, yellow and flesh-colored—some even seemed made of flesh—and trailed in garlands to the ground. There were also fruits, long and rounded; the air held a light, pleasant but slightly musky scent, like that of chestnut blossoms.

At the barrier marking the border, no one asked him anything: the two guards saluted him, a hand to their visors, as if they had been expecting him. A little farther on, Antonio entered an office where he was officially registered; a courteous and impersonal functionary checked off his name, handed him a ration card for food, clothes, shoes, and cigarettes, and then said:

"You're an autobiographer, right?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"We know everything. Look!" He gestured behind him, where a card catalogue occupied an entire wall. "The fact is that at the moment I don't have a single chalet available. The last one we assigned yesterday to Papillon. You'll have to adjust to having a roommate for a few days—another autobiographer, of course. Here, there's a place at 525, with François Villon. Mr. Collins will show you—it's not very far."

James smiled. "You'll be amused. François is the most unpredictable of our fellow citizens. He used to live with Julius Caesar, but he got out: he pulled some strings, and was assigned a custom, prefab house on the shores of Lake Polevoy. They didn't get along: they quarreled because of Vercingetorix, then François courted Cleopatra intensely, in Shakespeare's version, and Caesar was jealous."

"What do you mean in Shakespeare's version?"

"We have five or six Cleopatras: Pushkin's, Shaw's, Gautier's, and so on. They can't stand one another."

"Ah. And so it isn't true that Caesar and Pompey are caulkers?"

"Who ever told you that?" asked James, in amazement.

"Rabelais II, 30. He also says that Hannibal is a poulterer, Romulus a cobbler, Pope Julius II goes around selling flatbread, and Livia scrapes the verdigris from the pans."

"That's nonsense. As I told you back in Milan, here people either do nothing or do the job they were born to. Besides, Rabelais isn't a character,

and he’s never been here: what he says he must have heard from Pantagruel, or some other fibber in his court.”

They had left the waterfall behind and were advancing over a broad, slightly undulating plateau. Suddenly, with incredible speed, the sky darkened; within a few moments a violent whirlwind had arisen, and it began to rain and hail. James explained to Antonio that it was always like this here: the weather was never insignificant. There was always something that made it worthy of description. It was either dazzling with colors and aromas or shaken by raging tempests; sometimes there was scorching heat, at other times rock-splitting cold. Northern lights and earthquakes were frequent, and bolides and meteors fell every night.

They took shelter in a shed, and Antonio realized uneasily that someone was already there: uneasily because the someone didn’t have a face. Under his beret only a convex, spongy pink surface was visible, the lower part covered by a badly shaved beard.

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” said James, who had seen the horror appear on Antonio’s face. “There are a lot of them like that here, but they don’t last long. They are unsuccessful characters: sometimes they get by for a season, maybe even less. They don’t speak, they don’t see, and they don’t hear, and they disappear in the space of a few months. Those who do last, however, like (we hope) you and me, resemble the weather here—they have something singular about them, and so in general they’re interesting and sympathetic, even if they tend to repeat themselves. Here, for example: take a look through that window and tell me if you recognize anyone.”

Beside the shed there was a low wooden building with a thatched roof, and on the door hung a sign: on one side had been painted a full moon, and on the other a stormy sea from which emerged the broad back of a whale with its tall spout of vapor. Through the window you could see a smoky, low-ceilinged interior, illuminated by oil lamps: there was a table in the foreground, littered with mugs of beer, both empty and full, and around it four hot, excited figures. From outside one could hear only an indistinct roar.

Antonio, inspired by his ambitions as a reader, considered for a long time but couldn’t figure it out. “You’re asking too much. If I could at least hear what they’re saying . . .”

“Of course I’m asking too much. But it was only to give you a preliminary idea of our environment. The thin balding one with his back to

us, who pays and doesn't drink, is Calandrino;[1] opposite him, the fat greasy one, with the three days' beard, is the Good Soldier Schweik, who drinks and doesn't pay. The elderly fellow on the left, with the top hat and those tiny eyeglasses, is Pickwick, and the last, who has eyes like coals, skin like leather, and his shirt unbuttoned, who doesn't drink and doesn't pay, doesn't sing, doesn't pay attention to the others, and says things that no one is listening to, is the Ancient Mariner."

As suddenly as it had darkened, the sky cleared, and a fresh, warm wind arose; the wet earth exhaled an iridescent fog that the breeze tore to shreds, and it dried up in a flash. The two resumed their walk. On both sides of the street appeared, in no apparent order, thatched huts and noble marble palaces, villas great and small, shady parks, temple ruins, giant housing projects with laundry hung out to dry, skyscrapers and tin-and-cardboard hovels. James pointed out to Antonio the garden of the Finzi-Contini, the house of Buddenbrooks and that of Usher side by side; Uncle Tom's cabin and the Castle of Verona[2] with the falcon, the deer, and the black horse. A little beyond, the road widened into a small paved square, surrounded by dark, grimy buildings; through the entrances one could see steep, dank stairways, and courtyards full of rubbish, ringed by rusty balconies. There was an odor of boiled cabbage, of lye, and of fog. Antonio immediately recognized a neighborhood of old Milan, or, more precisely, the Carrobbio, caught for eternity as it must have been two hundred years ago; he was trying in the uncertain light to interpret the faded signs of the shops when, from the doorway numbered *vottcentvott*, Giovannino Bongeri[3] himself jumped out, lean, quick, pale as one who never sees the sun, cheerful, chattering, and as eager for affection as an ill-treated puppy: he wore a tight, ragged suit, somewhat patched, but meticulously cleaned and pressed. He immediately addressed the two men with the ease of an old acquaintance, yet called them "Most Illustrious": he made a long speech in dialect, full of digressions, which Antonio understood half of and James didn't understand at all; it seemed that he had been wronged, and had been wounded, but not to the point of losing his dignity as a citizen and an artisan; he was angry, but not to the point of losing his head. In his speech, which was witty and longwinded, one heard, under the bruising grind of daily toil, poverty, and misfortune, genuine candor, solid human goodness, and ancient hope. Antonio, in a flash of intuition, saw that in the phantoms of that neighborhood lived something perfect and eternal, and that angry

little Giovannino, the junkman's helper, repeatedly beaten, mocked, and betrayed—son of the angry little Milanese Carletto Porta[4]—was a purer, fuller character than Solomon in all his glory.

While Giovannini spoke, Barberina came to join him, pink and white as a flower, with lace cap and filigree hat pins, her eyes a little keener than honesty calls for. Her husband took her under the arm and off they went toward La Scala: after a few steps the woman turned and shot the two strangers an inquisitive glance.

Antonio and James started off again on a dusty path between bramble hedges: James delayed a moment to greet Valentino in his new clothes, playing on a stunted lawn with Pin di Carrugio Lungo.[5] A little farther on, the path followed a bend in a big muddy river. A rusty broken-down steamer was anchored near the bank. A group of white men were burying something in a grave dug in the mud, and an insolent-looking black man stuck his head up above the trench and announced, with fierce disdain, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead." The tone of that voice, the setting, the silence, the heat, even the heavy swamp breath of the river were precisely what Antonio had always imagined.

He said to James, "It's clear that one wouldn't get bored here. But what about practical needs? If, for example, one had to have a shoe resoled, or a tooth pulled?"

"We have some modest social services," James answered, "and the medical system is efficient, but with staff from the outside. It isn't that there's a shortage of doctors here, but they don't practice willingly. Often they are of an antiquated school, or they lack the equipment, or, again, they ended up here through some famous mistake—precisely what made them problematic, and therefore characters. Besides, you'll soon see that the sociology of the park is peculiar. I don't think you'll find a baker or an accountant; as far as I know, there's one milkman, a single naval engineer, and a sole spinner of silk. You'll look in vain for a plumber, an electrician, a welder, a mechanic, or a chemist, and I wonder why. Instead, in addition to the doctors I mentioned, you'll find a flood of explorers, lovers, cops and robbers, musicians, painters, and poets, countesses, prostitutes, warriors, knights, foundlings, bullies, and crowned heads. Prostitutes above all, in a percentage absolutely disproportionate to actual need. In short, it's better not to seek here an image of the world you left. I mean, a faithful image: because you'll find one, yes, but multicolored, dyed, and distorted, and so

you'll realize how foolish it is to form a concept of the Rome of the Caesars through Virgil, Catullus, and *Quo Vadis*. Here you will not find a sea captain who has not been shipwrecked, a wife who has not been an adulteress, a painter who does not live in poverty for long years and then become famous. Just like the sky, which here is always spectacular. Especially the sunsets: often they last from early afternoon until night, and sometimes darkness falls and then the light returns and the sun sets again, as if it were granting an encore."

James interrupted his lecture to point out to Antonio an edifice they were approaching:

"Sooner or later the Michelin Guide to the Park will come out, and you'll see, this will have three stars." It was a dazzling white villa, or maybe a tiny fortress, immersed in the thick foliage of an old forest: the outer walls had no windows, and were topped with a jagged edge that might be a battlement.

"Seen from the outside it doesn't look like much, but you should see the inside. I've been there for a few small jobs—as I told you, plumbers are scarce, so I do my best—and I could tell you some stories. Do you know, the management has been trying to please the proprietress for six hundred years, without success? Only now, with modern technology—"

"Excuse me," Antonio interrupted, a bit annoyed, "but if you told me who the proprietress is, don't you think I would enjoy your discourse more?"

"Oh, I thought I'd told you. It's Beatrice, damn it. The angelic, monstrous Beatrice, who wants everyone at her service, never goes out, speaks to no one, eats only pre-frozen nectar and ambrosia, and, with the protection that she enjoys, there is no hope of getting rid of her, not now or in the foreseeable future. As I was just saying, only now, with the advent of plastics and electronics, have the directors managed to satisfy some of her whims. Look inside: it's a concentrated version of the Fair of Milan, without all the commotion, of course. She walks only on polyurethane foam, a meter thick, like a pole vaulter: barefoot, naturally, and swathed in nylon veils. No daylight: only neon, in pink, purple, and sky-blue; an orgy of false skies made of methacrylate, false fixed stars made of Hastelloy, false music of the spheres performed on an electronic organ, false closed-circuit TV visions, false pharmacological ecstasies, and a Prime Mover of Pyrex that cost three million lire a square meter. In short, she is unbearable.

But when you're a character from Dante, you're untouchable here. In my opinion, it's a typical mafioso setup: why should Paolo and Francesca continue to make love undisturbed (and not only in the whirlwind, believe me), while the Poor Lovers have endless difficulties with the park guards? Why is Cacciaguida in the chalet at the top of the hill and Somacal,[6] who's been through so much, down in the hut that never gets the sun?"

Because he was so busy talking, James had lost his breath, and also the way. "We'll have to ask someone."

"Do you know everyone here?"

"We almost all know one another. Basically, there aren't so many of us."

He knocked at the door of a wooden hut and went in. Smoke was rising from the chimney, and through the walls a strongly rhythmic martial song could be heard, but he came out again shortly. "They're nice, but they never leave home, and they couldn't give me any directions. They're also a bit timid. Who are they? The little Germans of *All Quiet on the Western Front*: Tjaden, Kat, Leer, and all the others, and also Paul Bäumer, naturally. I often go and visit them—what fine boys! They were lucky to come here as young men; otherwise, who knows how many of them would have had to take up arms again twenty years later, and lose either their skin or their soul."

Fortunately, soon afterward they met Babalatchi,[7] who knew everything: where François's chalet was, that there was in fact an empty bed, how long it had been empty, why and how, all those with whom François had quarreled recently, and all the women he had received.

In that area the sky was the color of lead; a damp angry wind blew, howling around the corners like a wolf, and in fact when the chalet came into view snow began to fall: dirty snow, gray and sooty, which came down at a slant, got in your eyes, and took your breath away. Antonio couldn't wait to get inside, but James told him it would be better if he waited a little distance away: François was a lunatic type, and James preferred to knock on the door alone; a new face might set him off.

Antonio took cover as well as he could; there was a pile of broken barrels nearby, and he got into a tub and huddled inside to wait for James to return. He saw him knock, wait a good two minutes, knock again: the shutters were closed, but thick smoke was rising from the chimney so there must be someone home.

James knocked a third time, and finally the door was opened. James disappeared inside, and Antonio realized that he was very tired, and began to wonder if it would be possible to have a warm bath: on the banks of the Congo he had sweated a lot, the dust had stuck to his clothes, and now the sweat was cooling on him unpleasantly. But he didn't have long to wait: the door burst open as if someone inside had fired a cannon, and the worthy and dignified James shot out like a meteor, and landed among the barrel staves, not far from Antonio's temporary abode. He got up and quickly brushed himself off:

"No, no, please don't be upset. I happened in at a bad moment—he was with some friends who needed to be handled with care. There was also Marion I'Ydolle, La Grosse Margot, Jehanne di Bretaigne,[8] and two or three other girls; one it seemed to me was the Maid of Orleans. Listen, for the future we'll see, but tonight come and sleep with me: there's not much room, but I'll happily give you the bed, and for me a mattress on the floor is just fine."

Antonio settled in to the park with surprising ease. In a few weeks, he had made friends with his neighbors, all cordial people, or at least varied and interesting: Kim with his sword, Iphigenia in Aulis, Ettore Fieramosca, Tommasino Puzzilli, who was engaged to Moll Flanders, Holden Caulfield, Commissioner Ingravallo, Alyosha with the Pious One, Sergeant Grischa with Lilian Aldwinkle, Bel Ami, Alberto da Giussano, who was with the Virgin Camilla, Professor Unrat with the Blue Angel, Leopold Bloom, Mordo Nahum, Justine with Dracula, St. Augustine with the Novice, the two dogs Flush and Buck, Baldus who couldn't get through doors, Benito Cereno, Lesbia living with Hot-Blooded Paolo,[9] Tristram Shandy who was still only two and a half, Thérèse Raquin and Bluebeard. At the end of the month Portnoy arrived, crass and complaining: no one could bear him, but in the space of a few days he had settled in Semiramis's house, and the rumor went around that things between them were steaming right along.

Antonio moved in with Horace, and was very comfortable there: he had different habits and hours, but he was clean, discreet, and tidy, and he had welcomed him gladly; furthermore, he had a lot of odd stories to tell, and he told them with an enchanting enthusiasm. And, in turn, Horace never tired

of listening to Antonio: he was interested in everything, and up to date even on the most recent events. He was an excellent listener: he seldom interrupted and only with intelligent questions.

Some three years after his arrival, Antonio noticed a surprising fact. When he raised his hands, as a shield against the Sun, say, or even against a bright lamp, the light filtered through them as if they were wax. Some time later, he observed that he was waking earlier than usual in the morning, and he realized that this was because his eyelids were more transparent; in fact, in a few days they were so transparent that even with his eyes closed Antonio could distinguish the outlines of objects.

At first he thought nothing of it, but toward the end of May he noticed that his entire skull was becoming diaphanous. It was a bizarre and alarming sensation: as if his field of vision were broadening, not only laterally but also up, down, and backward. He now perceived light no matter what direction it came from, and soon he was able to distinguish what was happening behind him. When, in mid-June, he realized that he could see the chair he was sitting on, and the grass under his feet, Antonio understood that his time had come: the memory of him was extinct and his testimony complete. He felt sadness, but neither fear nor anguish. He took leave of James and his new friends, and sat under an oak to wait for his flesh and his spirit to dissolve into light and wind.

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1. The hero of several stories in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.
2. From the poem "La leggenda de Teodorico" ("The Legend of Theodoric") (1884), by Giosuè Carducci.
3. Hero of a poem by Carlo Porta (1775–1821), "Desgrazzi de Giovannin Bongee" ("The Misadventures of Giovannino Bongeri"), written in the Milanese dialect. (*Vottcentvott* is dialect for "eight hundred and eight.")
4. Carlo Porta; see previous note.
5. Valentino is the little boy in the poem "Valentino," by Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912), from the collection *Canti di Castelvecchio*; Pin di Carrugio Lungo is the hero of Italo Calvino's *The Path to the Nest of the Spiders*.
6. The Poor Lovers are from the novel *A Tale of Poor Lovers* (1947) by Vasco Pratolini; Cacciaguida is Dante's great-great-grandfather, who appears in *Paradise* XV, XVI, and XVIII; and Somacal refers to the poem "Il soldato Somacal Luigi" ("The Soldier Luigi Somacal"), by Piero Jahier (1884–1966).
7. A character in *Almayer's Folly*, by Joseph Conrad.
8. Characters in poems by Villon.
9. Ettore Fieramosca is the hero of the eponymous novel of 1833 by Massimo d'Azeglio; Tommasino Puzzilli is the hero of Pasolini's *A Violent Life* (1959); Commissioner Ingravallo is a character in

Carlo Emilio Gadda's *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana* (1957); *Sergeant Grischa* is from Arnold Zweig's Sergeant Grischa (1928), and Lilian Aldwinkle is from Huxley's *Those Barren Leaves* (1925); Bel-Ami refers to Maupassant's novel; Alberto da Giussano was a legendary Lombard fighter of the twelfth century, and the Roman martyr Camilla appears in the *Aeneid*; Mordo Nahum is a character in Levi's *The Truce*; Baldus is the hero of a sixteenth-century poem; Hot-Blooded Paolo is the eponymous hero of the novel *Paolo il Caldo* (1964), by Vitaliano Brancati.

Psychophant

We are a rather exclusive group of friends. We are joined together, both men and women, by a deep and genuine bond that is, however, also old and poorly maintained, formed by living together during important years and without too many moments of weakness. Afterward, as will happen, we went our separate ways; some of us made compromises, others hurt one another both inadvertently and on purpose, still others unlearned how to speak or lost their antennae. Despite everything, we are still happy to get together. We trust and respect one another, and, whatever subject comes up, we joyfully recognize that we speak the same language (some call it jargon), even if our opinions differ. Our children exhibit a precocious tendency to distance themselves from us, but they are tied to each other through a friendship not unlike our own, which seems to us both strange and beautiful, because it came about spontaneously, without any intervention from us. They now constitute a group that in many ways is a reproduction of our own when we were their age.

We profess to be open, universalist, cosmopolitan. We feel this in our hearts and intensely condemn any form of segregation by census, caste, or race, and yet, in truth, our group is so exclusive that even though we are generally respected by the “others,” over the past thirty years we have accepted a very limited number of recruits. For reasons that I can hardly explain, and in any case of which I am not proud, it seems unnatural to us to include anyone who lives north of Corso Regina Margherita or west of Corso Racconigi. Not all among us who have married have had their spouse accepted, endogamous couples being preferred, and these are the majority. Every once in a while, someone makes a friend from the outside and brings

him along, but it’s rare that he is then integrated. Mostly, he’s invited once or twice and treated kindly, but the next time he won’t appear and the evening is devoted to analyzing, discussing, and categorizing him.

There was a time when each of us, taking irregular turns, hosted all the others. Then, when children came, some went to live outside the city, others had their parents living with them and didn’t want to disturb them. Now it’s only Tina who invites people over. Tina likes to entertain and so does it well. She has good wines and excellent food; she is vivacious and inquisitive, always has something new to recount, and does so eloquently, knowing how to put people at ease. She is interested in the lives of others and remembers them in detail. She is capable of harsh judgments but loves almost everyone. She is suspected of having relations with other groups but she (and only she) is willingly forgiven this infidelity.

The doorbell rang and Alberto entered, late as usual. When Alberto enters a home, the lights brighten, everyone is in a better mood, even healthier, because Alberto is one of those doctors who cure the sick merely by looking at them and talking to them. He never allows his patients who are friends (and few people in the world have as many friends as Alberto) to pay him, and as a result every year at Christmas he receives a flood of gifts. Indeed, that very night he had just received a gift, but it was different from the usual prized bottles of wine or superfluous automobile accessories. It was a bizarre gift, one that he couldn’t wait to try out with us, because it was a kind of parlor game.

Tina wasn’t opposed, but it was easy to see that she wasn’t too keen on the thing. Maybe she felt her authority was being undermined and was afraid the evening’s reins might slip from her grasp. But it is hard to resist Alberto’s desires, which are many, unpredictable, lively, and compelling. When Alberto wants something (which occurs about every fifteen minutes), he instantly makes everyone else want it, too, which explains why he always has a mass of followers. He takes them to eat snails at midnight, or to ski the Breithorn, or to a screening of a risqué film, or to Greece for the mid-August holiday, or to his house for a drink while Miranda sleeps, or to visit someone who wasn’t in the least expecting him but who welcomes him

all the same with open arms, him and everyone he has with him, including all those he has picked up along the way. Alberto said that inside the box there was an instrument called a Psychophant, and with a name like that how could anyone resist it?

In the blink of an eye, a table was cleared, we all sat around it, and Alberto opened the box. He pulled out a large, flat, rectangular, tray-like object made of transparent plastic resting on a black metal base; this base extended beyond one of the short sides of the tray by about thirty centimeters, and a shallow cavity in the shape of a left hand was carved into this extension. We inserted the accompanying cord and plug into an outlet, and while the device was warming up Alberto read the instructions for its use aloud; they were very vague, and written in a terrible Italian, but essentially what they said was that the game, or pastime, consisted of putting one's left hand into the cavity: what would then appear upon the tray was what the instructions clumsily defined as the player's "inner image."

Tina laughed. "It'll be like those cellophane fishes they sold before the war—you put one in the palm of your hand, and, depending on whether it folded up or vibrated or fell on the ground, it revealed some aspect of your character. Or it'll be like daisy petals—he loves me, he loves me not."

Miranda said if that was the case she'd prefer to become a nun before she put her hand in that thing. Others said other things and the room got a bit noisy. I said that if it was cheap miracles we wanted, all we had to do was go to Piazza Vittorio. Others argued over who would be the first to experiment, still others designated this person or that person, and this person and that person then exempted themselves under various pretexts. Eventually, those who proposed to send Alberto on reconnaissance prevailed. Alberto was thrilled, took a seat in front of the device, put his left hand in the mold, and with his right hand pushed the button.

Suddenly, we all became silent. At first a small, round spot, orange in color and similar to an egg yolk, formed on the tray. It then expanded and grew vertically, its top dilating so that it acquired the appearance of a mushroom cap. Polygonal specks—some emerald green, some scarlet, some gray—spread over its entire surface. The mushroom grew before our eyes, and when it had reached the height of a hand's width, it became faintly luminous, as if it contained within it a small pulsating flame. It emitted a pleasing but pungent odor similar to the scent of cinnamon.

Alberto took his finger off the button, the pulsation stopped, and the glow slowly faded. We weren't sure if we should touch the object or not. Anna said it was better not to, because it was sure to instantly disintegrate; indeed, perhaps it didn't even exist, but was a purely sensual illusion, like a mass dream or hallucination. In the instructions there was no indication of what one could or could not do with the images, but Henek intelligently observed that someone would have to touch it in any case, if only to clear the tray. It was absurd to imagine the device was only to be used once. Alberto plucked the mushroom from the tray, looked at it carefully, and declared that he was satisfied. Actually, ever since he was a child, he said, he had always felt himself to be orange. We passed the mushroom around. It had a consistency both firm and elastic, and was warm to the touch. Giuliana asked if she could have it. Alberto gladly gave it to her, saying that he could always make more if needed. Henek pointed out to him that the next ones might come out differently, but Alberto said it didn't matter.

Several people insisted that Antonio have a try. Antonio has been living far away for many years, so he is now only an honorary member of our group. He'd come that evening merely because it coincided with a business trip. Everyone was curious to see what might grow on the tray, because Antonio is different from us, more driven, more interested in success and money. These are virtues that we obstinately deny having, as if they were shameful.

For a good minute nothing happened. Someone sneered and Antonio felt uncomfortable. Then we saw a square metal bar begin to push up out of the tray. It grew slowly and regularly, as if it were coming from below already perfectly formed. Soon four more bars pushed up, arranged in a cross around the first; four little bridges formed, joining them to the original, and then, slowly, other bars appeared, all of equal size, some vertical and others horizontal, so that finally on the tray was a small, elegant, lustrous structure, both solid and symmetrical. Antonio tapped it with a pencil and it rang like a tuning fork, emitting a long and pure note that slowly faded.

"I disagree," Giovanna said.

Antonio smiled calmly. "Why?" he asked.

"Because you're not like that. All your angles aren't square, nor are you made of steel, and some of your welding might actually be cracked."

Giovanna is Antonio's wife, and she loves him very much. We didn't think it necessary for her to make all those objections, but Giovanna said that no one knew Antonio better than she did, since they had lived together for twenty years. We didn't pay much attention to her, because Giovanna is one of those wives who make a habit of criticizing her husband in his presence and in public.

The Antonio-object appeared to be rooted in the tray, but at the first tug it snapped off cleanly and wasn't nearly as heavy as it seemed. Anna's turn was next. She was wriggling with impatience in her chair and saying that she had always wanted such a device, and many times she had even dreamed of it—only, her version created life-size symbols.

Anna placed her hand in the molded black tray. All of us watched the tray, but nothing appeared on it. Suddenly Tina said, "Look, it's up there!" In fact, half a meter up appeared a purplish pink puff of steam the size of a fist. Slowly, it unraveled like a ball of yarn, stretching downward and emitting numerous transparent vertical vaporous ribbons. It changed form continually: it became oval like a rugby ball, while always maintaining its diaphanous and delicate appearance, then it divided itself into rings, from which crackling sparks erupted, and finally it contracted, reduced to the dimensions of a walnut, and then disappeared with a pop.

"Very beautiful, and also very responsive," said Giuliana.

"Yes," Giorgio said, "but the weird thing is that you never know what to call these creations. They're always ineffable."

Miranda said that it was better that way. It would be very unpleasant to find oneself represented by a wooden spoon or a pipe or a carrot. Giorgio added that, if you actually thought about it, it couldn't be otherwise: "These creations . . . well, they don't have a name because they're individuals, and there is no science, that is, no classification, of the individual. In them, as in us, existence precedes essence."

The Anna-cloud had pleased everybody except Anna herself, who was in fact quite disappointed.

"I don't think of myself as that transparent, but maybe it's because I'm tired tonight and feel a bit out of sorts."

Ugo provoked the growth of a polished, black wooden sphere, which upon closer scrutiny turned out to be made up of about twenty pieces that fit together with exact precision. Ugo took it apart but then couldn't put it back

together again. He made a pile and said he would try again the next day, which was a Sunday.

Claudio was shy, and agreed to try it only after much encouragement. Once again, at first, nothing appeared on the tray, but an odor both familiar and unexpected was detectable in the air: we had difficulty identifying it, but it was definitely a kitchen smell. Right afterward we heard a sizzling sound and saw that the tray was covered in a boiling, smoking liquid. From the liquid emerged a flat, gray polygon that beyond any reasonable doubt was a large Milanese cutlet with a side of fries. There were stunned comments, because Claudio is neither a gourmand nor a voracious eater—in fact, we used to say about him and his family that they lacked proper digestive systems.

Blushing, Claudio looked around him with embarrassment.

"How red you are!" Miranda exclaimed, at which Claudio turned nearly purple. Then she added, turning to us, "There's nothing symbolic here. It's obvious that this thing is ill mannered and wanted to offend Claudio. To tell someone he is a cutlet is to insult him. These things are to be taken literally and I knew that sooner or later it would pull a fast one. Alberto, if I were you I would return it to whoever gave it to you."

In the meantime, Claudio had pulled himself together enough to speak. He said he hadn't turned red because he was offended, but for a different reason, one so fascinating that he thought he might tell us about it, even if it was a secret he had never told anyone, not even Simonetta. He said that what he had was not exactly a vice, or a perversion, but, well, a uniqueness. He said that ever since he was a boy he'd had little interest in women. He didn't feel close to them or attracted to them, he didn't even see them as creatures of flesh and blood, unless he observed them, at least once, in the act of eating. He would then feel an intense affection, and almost always fell in love. It was clear that the Psychophant wanted to allude to this. In his opinion, it was an extraordinary instrument.

"Are you in love with me, too?" asked Adele seriously.

"Yes," Claudio answered. "It happened that night we all ate dinner—fondue with truffles—in Pavarolo."

Adele, too, was a surprise. She had barely put her finger on the button when a clear *pop* was heard, as when a bottle is uncorked, and on the tray appeared a tawny mass, shapeless, stumpy, slightly tapered, made of rough, brittle material, dry to the touch. It was as big as the entire tray, and even

extended somewhat beyond it. Three white-and-gray spheres were stuck in it. We immediately recognized these as three eyes, but nobody dared to say so, nor did anyone make any comment, since Adele has had a difficult, complicated, and painful existence. Adele was disconcerted. “That’s me?” she asked, and we realized that her eyes (the real ones, I mean) were full of tears.

Henek tried to come to her rescue. “It’s impossible for the device to tell you who you are, because you’re nothing. You and everyone, we all change from year to year, hour to hour. So who are you? Who you think you are? Or who you want to be? Or who others think you are? And what others? Everyone sees you differently, everyone creates his own personal version of you.”

Miranda said, “I don’t like this contraption, because it’s a busybody. In my opinion, what’s interesting is what one does, not who one is. A person is the sum of his actions, past and present, nothing else.”

I rather liked the device. I didn’t care if it told the truth or lied. It made something out of nothing, invented, *found*, like a poet. I put my hand on the plate and waited without distrust. A shiny grain appeared on the tray, and grew to form a cylinder the size of a thimble. It continued to grow and soon gained the dimensions of a tin can, and then it became clear that it was, in fact, a can, and more precisely a can of paint, its exterior printed with bright-colored stripes. Yet it didn’t seem to contain paint, because it rattled when you shook it. They urged me to open it, and inside there were different things that I lined up in front of me on the table: a needle, a seashell, a malachite ring, various used tickets from trams, trains, ferries, and airplanes, a compass, a dead cricket and a live one, and a small ember, which, however, died out almost immediately.



Recuenco: The Nourisher

Sinda got up at daybreak to take the goats out to pasture. Around the village, in the radius of a two-hour walk, for many years not even a blade of grass had grown, only cacti and brambles, so bitter that even the goats refused them. Sinda was only eleven years old, but in the village only he was still allowed to go to the pasture. The others were either too young or too old, or sick, or so weakened that they were barely able to drag themselves as far as the stream. He took with him a gourd filled with a watercress infusion and two pieces of cheese, which had to last him until evening. He had already rounded up the goats in the square when he saw Diuka, his sister, coming out of the hut rubbing her eyes. She wanted to come to the pasture with him. He thought how little cheese he had, but he also thought how long the day would be, how far the pasture was, and how the silence up there was too deep, so he took her with him.

They had been climbing for an hour when the sun rose. There were only twenty-eight goats, all the village had. Sinda knew it, and he also knew how to count them. He kept an eye on them to make sure they didn't wander off and get lost or become lame down by the crags. Diuka followed him silently. They stopped every once in a while to gather blackberries and a few snails awakened by the night's dew. Eating snails was prohibited, but Sinda had already tried them many times and had never gotten a stomachache. He had taught Diuka how to extract them from their shells, and he was sure that she wouldn't betray him.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but a blinding haze lay motionless. There was no wind (there was never any wind), and the air was hot and humid like a brick oven. They proceeded along the path, crossing the ridge

that bordered the valley, and then they saw the sea, shrouded in mist, placid, shiny, and far away. It was a sea without fish, good only for salt. The saltworks had been abandoned for ten years now, but it was still possible to collect salt, although it was mixed with sand. Sinda had been there once with his father, many years ago. One day his father had gone hunting and never returned. Now the salt was brought every so often by merchants, but since there was nothing in the village to exchange it for, they hardly ever came anymore.

Sinda saw something in the sea he had never seen before. He first saw it right on the horizon line, a small bright hump, round and white, like a tiny moon. But it couldn't be the Moon, the real one, because he'd seen it, almost full, its edges clear, go down only about an hour ago. He pointed it out to Diuka, but without much interest. There are many things in the sea, which both had heard described around the fire: ships, whales, monsters, plants growing up from the sea floor, ferocious fish, even the spirits of the drowned. Things that come and go and don't concern us because the sea is all vanity and evil appearance. It is a vast clearing that seems to go everywhere but goes nowhere. It appears to be smooth and solid like steel armor, and yet it can't hold you up, and if you venture there, you will sink. It's water and you can't drink it.

They continued walking. By now the steepest part of the climb was over and the pasture was visible, just a little higher than they were, an hour's walk. The two children and the goats continued along a well-beaten track, amid a yellow cloud of dust, horseflies, and the smell of ammonia. Every so often, Sinda observed the sea on his left and realized that the thing he had seen was changing its appearance. It was now closer, far away from the horizon, and looked like one of those globular mushrooms that you find beside the path; if you touched one, it burst open and blew out a puff of brown dust. The thing actually must be quite big, and looking at it more carefully you could see that its edges were blurred, cloud-like. In fact it seemed to be boiling, and was continually changing shape, like the foam on boiling milk when it's about to overflow, and it kept getting bigger and nearer. Just before they got to the pasture, and the goats had already scattered to graze upon some flowering thistles, Sinda realized that the thing was traveling straight toward them. He then thought of some of the stories he'd heard from the elders, which he had only half believed, as if they were fairy tales. He told Diuka to keep an eye on the goats and

promised that he or the others would come before nighttime to get them, and he ran back toward the village. From the village, in fact, the sea wasn't visible. It was blocked by a chain of steep cliffs, and Sinda ran because he hoped and feared that the thing was the Nourisher, which comes every hundred years and brings both plenitude and destruction. He wanted to tell the villagers so they could prepare themselves, and he wanted to be the first to bring the news.

There was a shortcut that only he knew about, but he didn't take it, because it would have cut off his view of the sea too soon. Just before Sinda reached the ridge, the thing had become breathtakingly enormous. The top of it was as high as the sky, and water was pouring out of it in torrents toward the bottom, and more water gushed upward, toward the top. You could hear a sort of continuous thunder, a roar-peal-whistle that stopped the blood cold in your veins. Sinda paused for a second, feeling the need to throw himself to the ground and pray, but he plucked up his courage and rushed down the slope, scratching himself on brambles, stumbling over rocks, falling and picking himself up again. He no longer saw anything, but he still heard the thunder, and when he reached the village everyone heard it, but they didn't know what it was. But Sinda knew, and he stood in the middle of the square, half crazed and bleeding, gesturing to the villagers with his arms to come and listen to him, because the Nourisher was coming.

At first only a few came, then all. Many—too many—children came, but it wasn't they who were needed. The old women, and the young women who appeared old, came to the thresholds of their huts. Men came from the vegetable gardens or fields with the slow, listless pace of those who know only the hoe and the plow. And finally Daiapi also came, the one Sinda had been waiting for most eagerly.

But even Daiapi, the oldest villager, was only fifty years old and so couldn't know firsthand what should be done to prepare for the Nourisher's arrival. He had only vague memories of the memories, only slightly less vague, that had been passed on to him by who knows which Daiapi, and then consolidated, reinforced, and distorted by endless repetition in front of the fire. The Nourisher, and this he was sure of, had come to the village other times—twice, three times, or even more—but of those earlier visits, if indeed there had been any, all memory was lost. But Daiapi knew for certain, and along with him everyone knew, that when it comes, it comes like this: suddenly, from the sea, in the midst of a whirlwind, and it stops

only for a few seconds, throwing food from above, and it is necessary to be ready in some way, so that the food isn't scattered. He also knew, or thought he knew, that it crosses mountains and seas like lightning, drawn by those who are hungry. For this reason it never stops, because the world is endless, and hunger is found in many places, all distant from one another, and as soon as hunger is satisfied it sprouts again, like weeds.

Daiapi had little strength and little voice, but even if he'd had the voice of a monsoon he couldn't have made himself heard over the din coming from the sea, now filling the valley, and making them all think they had gone deaf. With gestures and by example, he made sure they all brought outside every receptacle they could find, large or small. Then, while the sky was darkening, and the plain was swept by a wind that had never been seen before, he grabbed a pick and shovel and began to dig feverishly, and was soon imitated by many. They dug with all their might, their eyes full of sweat and their ears full of thunder, but they succeeded, barely, in digging out a big pit in the square, the size of a tomb, just as the Nourisher came over the hills like a cloud of clashing iron, and hovered over their heads. It was bigger than the entire village, which lay in its shadow. Six steel trumpets, aimed at the ground, vomited out six hurricanes, on which the machine was supported, almost motionless. But the air hurled to the ground swept up the dust, rocks, leaves, fences, roofs, and flung them high and far. The children fled or were blown away like chaff. The men resisted, clinging to trees and walls.

They saw the machine descend slowly. In the middle of the yellow whirlwinds of dust, someone claimed he saw human figures leaning over from above and watching; some said two, others three. A woman asserted that she heard voices, but they weren't human; they were metallic and nasal and so loud they could be heard above the clamor.

When the six trumpets were a few meters from the tops of the huts, six white hoses emerged from the belly of the machine, dangling in the void. And then suddenly food burst from the hoses in white jets, heaven's milk. The two central hoses ejected it into the pit, but at the same time a deluge of food fell at random over the entire village, and also outside it, where all had been pulverized and swept away by the wind from the trumpets. Sinda, in the middle of the confusion, had found a trough, which the animals had once drunk from. He dragged it under one of the hoses, but it was filled in a second, the liquid overflowing onto the ground and getting all over his feet.

Sinda tasted it: it seemed to be milk or, actually, cream, but it wasn't. It was thick and bland, and made him feel immediately full. Sinda saw that everyone was gulping it down, collecting it from the ground with their hands, with shovels, with palm leaves.

A noise echoed in the sky—perhaps it was the sound of a horn, or a command given by that cold mechanical voice—and suddenly the flow stopped. Right afterward, the thunder and the wind swelled beyond measure, and Sinda was knocked down and rolled across the sticky pools. The machine rose up, first perpendicular, then at an angle, and in a few minutes was hidden by the mountains. Sinda got up and looked around. The village didn't seem to be his village anymore. Not only was the pit overflowing but the milk ran thickly down all the sloping streets, and streamed off the few roofs that had survived. The lower part of the village was flooded. Two women had drowned, as well as many rabbits and dogs, and all the chickens. Floating on the liquid were hundreds of flyers, all the same: at the top left was a round sign, which perhaps represented the world, and it was followed by a text divided into paragraphs, and repeated in different alphabets and different languages, but no one in the village knew how to read. On the other side of the paper there was a ridiculous series of drawings: a skinny, naked man; then a cup; then the man drinking from the cup; and finally the same man, no longer skinny. Underneath, there was another skinny man, next to a pail; then the man drinking from the pail; then the same man lying on the ground, his eyes wide open, his mouth gaping, and his stomach exploded.

Daiapi immediately understood the significance of the drawings, and called everyone to the square, but it was too late. Over the next two days, eight men and two women died, swollen and bruised. An inventory was taken, and it was observed that, not counting the milk that had been lost or mixed with dirt and muck, enough still remained to feed the entire village for a year. Daiapi ordered that jars be boiled and goatskins sewn, because he was afraid that the milk in the pit might become contaminated if it remained in contact with the earth.

Sinda, stunned by all he had seen and done, lethargic because of the milk he had drunk, only remembered after nightfall that Diuka was still with the goats in the mountain pasture. He left at dawn the following morning, taking with him a gourd filled with food, but he found the goats scattered; four were missing, as was Diuka. He found her a little while later,

injured and frightened, at the foot of a cliff, along with the four dead animals. The wind of the Nourisher had blown them down there when it passed over the pasture.

Some days later, an old woman, cleaning up the sun-dried cakes of milk in her courtyard, came across an object she had never seen before. It shone like silver, and was harder than flint, a foot long, narrow and flat. At one end it was rounded to form a disc with a large hexagonal indentation; the other end was in the form of a ring, its hole was two fingers wide, and it had the shape of a twelve-pointed star. Daiapi ordered that a stone tabernacle be built on the erratic boulder near the village, and that the object be kept there always as a remembrance of the day the Nourisher came.

Recuenco: The Rafter

Suspended a few meters above the waves, the platform slid along quickly, with a faint vibration and hum. In the cabin, Himamoto slept, Kropivà minded the radio and wrote, and Farnham was at the controls. Farnham was the most bored, because piloting a rafter means piloting a big nothing: you have to be at the wheel but you'd better not touch it. You watch the altimeter, and the needle never moves a thread; you monitor the gyrocompass but it's still as stone. When the course needs to be changed (which hardly ever happens, because a rafter always goes straight), the others over there deal with it. All you have to do is watch for one of the yellow emergency lights to go on, but Farnham had been cruising on rafters for eight years, and he'd never seen a yellow emergency light go on, nor in the pilots' canteen had he ever heard tell of one lighting up. In short, it was like being a night watchman. It was as boring as knitting and wasn't man's work. In order not to fall asleep, Farnham smoked one cigarette after another and recited a poem aloud. It was more a ditty than a poem, condensing into easy-to-remember verses all the protocols to be followed in the unlikely and even laughable case that the yellow lights actually lit up. All the pilots were required to memorize the emergency ditty.

Farnham came from jets, and aboard a rafter he felt as if he had retired. He was both mortified and embarrassed. Okay, so it was a useful service, but how can one forget those missions into the jungle with the B-28—two, sometimes three trips a day, and sometimes also at night with the enemy fire of the rebels who peep up at you through the foliage, six machine guns spitting flames, and twenty tons of bombs on board? But, of course, he had

been fifteen years younger then. When your reflexes get a little slow, they bump you to the rafters.

If only Himamoto were awake. But not a chance. That guy slept through his entire eight hours. With the excuse that he suffered from nausea, he stuffed himself full of pills, and as soon as his shift was over he fell asleep like a rock. A rafter, by the way, isn't very fast. It takes thirty-five to forty solid hours to cross the Atlantic, and when it's fully loaded—that is, with 240 tons of milk on board—it handles like a tram at rush hour.

Even looking out the window wasn't too satisfying. It was still the dead of night and the sky was cloudy. In the beams of the headlights, both ahead and behind, all you could see were swollen, lazy waves, and the monotonous torrent of water raised by the six blowers and showered over the tennis-court-size platform and the absurdly small cabin.

You could hear the sound of Himamoto snoring. He snored in the most irritating way: first very softly, almost like a sigh, then suddenly he'd let fly a nasty, dry grunt, then stopped as if he were dead. But no such luck—after a minute of anguishing silence he started again from the top. It was the first trip Farnham had made with Himamoto, and the guy was polite and pleasant when awake, intolerable when asleep. Awake, Himamoto was likable because he was young, had little navigation experience, and was willing to play the part of the disciple with the right combination of diligence and naïveté. Since it meant a lot to Farnham to be able to show off his experience, the two had gotten along pretty well, and the best shift was the one during which Kropivà slept, which explained why Farnham couldn't wait for six o'clock to arrive.

Contrary to Himamoto, Kropivà was likable when he slept and annoying when he was awake. Awake, he was an atrocious stickler. Farnham, who had traveled the world extensively, had never met such a Russian and he wondered where the Organization had dug him up. Maybe in some administrative office lost in the tundra, or among railroad or prison employees. He didn't smoke or drink. He spoke only in monosyllables, and was constantly keeping accounts. Once or twice Farnham had glanced at the sheets of paper that Kropivà left lying around and saw that he counted everything: how many years, months, and days he still had to go before retirement; how many dollars they would give him, down to the cents and fractions of cents; and how many rubles and kopecks he could exchange those dollars for, on the black market and officially. He counted how much

each minute and each mile the rafter cost in fuel, wages, maintenance, insurance, amortization, as if he owned it. He also counted how much he would earn the following month using that vertiginous list of items,* which Farnham stuck in his pocket without even looking at. Kropivà was fascinated by it and delighted in doing advance calculations that included everything—family allowances, meal reimbursements while in port, the bonus for crossing the date line, compensation for night shifts, for overtime, for heavy work, for tropical or glacial climates, for holidays, and all the deductions for taxes, health insurance, and pension. All perfectly fine, but to Farnham it seemed stupid and petty to spend your day this way, as if there were no processing center to do it for you, or as if it made mistakes. It was lucky that Kropivà didn't talk, but even so his very presence made Farnham disconcertingly uncomfortable.

At six o'clock on the dot Farnham woke up Himamoto, and Kropivà went off to bed without even a parting grumble. In the stern, through the rain made by the blowers, you could see the sky clearing, a delicate green glow announcing the day. Farnham manned the radio, and Himamoto, still sleepy, sat at the wheel. At least now they could talk a little.

"How long until we arrive?" Himamoto asked.

"Three or four hours."

"And what's the place called?"

"Recuenco. It's the third time you've asked me that."

"I know, but I keep forgetting."

"Never mind. One place is no different from the next. In Recuenco we've got to get rid of fifty tons."

"Should I reset the counter to zero?"

"I already did it while you were asleep. By the way, do you know you snore like the devil?"

"It's not true," Himamoto protested nobly. "I don't snore."

"Next time I'll record it," Farnham threatened good-naturedly.

Himamoto washed, shaved with an exquisite hand razor (evidently the custom in his country), and went to get a cup of coffee and a sandwich from the vending machine. He glanced at Kropivà. "He's already asleep," he noted, with a hint of satisfaction in his voice.

"He's a strange one," Farnham said. "But that's all right. I've seen quite a few and he's better than the ones who drink or take drugs or go wild in every port. There's no one like him to supervise the loading and unloading

of the milk and the kerosene, or to deal with all those customs obstacles and file the report of proceedings to the base. Because, you know, sometimes we come back with money in five or six different currencies and we have to account for every last cent. He's extraordinary with these kinds of things, the equivalent of three computers." Harmony and mutual respect, he thought, are first on board.

Behind them the sun was rising and immediately they were encircled by two radiant and concentric rainbows. "Oh beautiful! Very beautiful," Himamoto exclaimed. His English was fluent and correct, but he lacked the words to express emotions.

"Yes, it's beautiful," Farnham responded. "But it's always the same, at every sunrise and every sunset. You get used to it. It comes from the water the engines send into the air. Even the sun looks wet, do you see?"

For half an hour there was silence. Because he knew he was distracted, Himamoto paid extra attention to monitoring the course and the instruments. He saw a mark on the radar screen twenty miles off the bow. Instinctively, he grabbed the wheel.

"Don't worry," Farnham said, "it'll do it all by itself." In fact, with no jerks or jolts the rafter spontaneously veered to the right, bypassing the ship or the piece of wreckage or the iceberg, whatever it was, and then returned ponderously to its route.

"Tell me," Himamoto said, "have you tried it?"

"It doesn't taste like anything," Farnham replied.

After a few minutes, Himamoto persisted: "I still want to try it myself. At home they ask me about it."

"Nothing wrong with that. But then you should try it now, while he's asleep. Otherwise he's likely to make you sign a withdrawal voucher for it."

"Where do I take it from?"

"From the tap below the purifier. But as I told you it's got no flavor. It tastes like paper towel. Go ahead. I'll stay at the controls."

Himamoto took a plastic cup from the dispenser and, tripping over bright-painted valves and pipes, made his way to the tap.

"Well, it's neither good nor bad, but it fills the stomach."

"Of course, it's not intended for us. It's good for those who are hungry. You feel sorry for them, especially the children. You must have seen them, too, in those films at the training course. But the bottom line is that these

people don’t deserve better, because they’re lazy, slovenly, and good for nothing. You wouldn’t want us to be bringing them champagne.”

A buzzer sounded and a green square lit up before Farnham. “Damn! I thought so. Another urgent request. Shangeehaydhang, Philippines. Who knows how you pronounce that one. 12° 5' 43" North, 124° 48' 46" East. Buck up, there’ll be no weekend in Rio. It’s at the other end of the Earth.”

“So why are they reporting it to us?”

“Despite everything, it seems we’re the closest, or have the lightest load, or the other three are being resupplied. The fact is that they always keep us moving, and it’s understandable, because a rafter costs more than a lunar mission and the milk costs almost nothing. This is why they give us only three minutes to unload it. Even if there’s a little spillage it doesn’t matter. What’s essential is that we don’t lose any time.”

“It’s too bad it goes to waste. When I was a kid, I knew what it was like to be hungry.”

“We nearly always waste some. Sometimes we’re able to warn them by radio, and the job is well done, neat and clean. But, in the majority of cases, like the ones we’re going to resupply now, they don’t even know what a radio is, and so we make do as well as we can.”

Behind a bank of clouds on the left they could just glimpse a mountain range; one tall, conical snow-covered peak stood out.

“Once I went to the place where they make it. It’s not too far from here. There’s a vast forest, as big as Texas, and a super-rafter that travels back and forth across it. As it moves, it mows down all the plants in its path, leaving an empty wake thirty meters wide. The plants end up inside the hold, where they are chopped, cooked, and washed with an acid. Then the proteins are extracted, and they, in fact, constitute what we call the milk, though its official name is FOD. What’s left of the plants then supplies energy to the machine itself. It’s an excellent operation, worth seeing, and not too difficult to carry out. Every two years, they organize a trip as a reward for pilots with no penalties. I even took photos—when we’re back at base I’ll show you. It’s a guided tour, and they explain everything to you, even about the detectors that sense concentrations in the atmosphere of acetone—a chemical that’s produced in the intestines of starving people and causes foul breath—and then transmit signals back to the base computers.”

A few minutes later, they both saw a large barrier appear on the radar screen. It was only seven miles away, but the haze covering the sea

prevented them from seeing it. “We’re there,” Farnham said. “Maybe I should take over the controls and you go wake up Kropivà.”

The platform vibrations increased; in the same moment the torrent surrounding them suddenly ceased and was replaced by a whirling cloud of yellow dust, sand, and bits of foliage. A chain of steep cliffs became visible. Farnham lifted the rafter to a safe altitude, and a few seconds afterward, in a small barren plain, the village of Recuenco appeared, made up of some fifty mud-and-gray-stone huts with palm-leaf roofs. Tiny human figures crawled in all directions, like ants in an uncovered anthill, some busy with picks and shovels. Farnham stopped the rafter directly over the village square. The platform’s shadow covered the entire village.

“Let’s go outside,” he said.

The three of them put on their coveralls and goggles and went out. They were struck, as if by a sledgehammer, by the heat, the noise, and the wind. They could communicate only by gesturing, or through bullhorns. Despite their coveralls, they felt rocks and splinters hailing down on them. Grabbing the handrails, Farnham dragged himself to the external controls, and noticed that the bolts fastening the panel to the deck were loose. He yelled to Himamoto to get the 24 mm. wrench and told Kropivà to prepare to launch the milk and the flyers. He lowered the machine until the six blowers were a few meters above the huts, then he released the hoses from their housing. Looking down over the railing, amid the eddies of suffocating dust, he saw that a pit had been dug in the middle of the square. He maneuvered so that at least two of the central hoses were directly over it. He then told Himamoto to tightly secure the panel bolts and Kropivà to start unloading.

In less than two minutes the counter reached 50,000 liters. Kropivà stopped the flow and launched the instruction flyers, which scattered in all directions like frightened birds. Farnham revved up the blowers, the rafter rose, first vertically, then obliquely, a little lighter and more manageable than before, and headed across a desolate mountain ridge. In the midst of the stony expanse, Farnham saw a small green plateau where a herd of goats was grazing. There was nothing else alive, nothing green, for miles around.

Kropivà filled out the delivery form, stamped it, signed it, had the other two sign it, then went back to sleep. Himamoto took over the controls but immediately slapped his hand against his forehead. “The wrench!” he said, and without his coveralls or goggles sprinted out onto the platform. He

came back in almost immediately. “It’s gone. It must have fallen overboard.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Farnham said. “We have a spare.”

Kropivà added, “We must make a written report declaring the loss. I’m sorry, but it will have to be deducted from your salary.”



His Own Maker

To Italo Calvino

It's better to be clear right from the start. I who am speaking to you am today a man, one of you. I'm no different from you, the living, except in one respect: my memory is superior to yours.

You forget almost everything. I know there are those who believe that nothing truly is forgotten, that every bit of knowledge, every sensation, every leaf from every tree that you have ever seen since infancy can be evoked under exceptional circumstances—following a trauma, a mental illness, maybe even in a dream. But what sort of memories are these which don't obey your recall? What use are they?

More enduring is that other memory, the one inscribed in your cells, through which your blond hair is the memory (yes, the "souvenir," the material memory) of other blond hair, all the way back to the ancient time when the seed of your unknown ancestor mutated inside him—without his knowledge. These things you have registered, "recorded," and you remember them well, but, I repeat, what good are they if you can't evoke them? This is not the meaning of the verb "to remember," as it is universally spoken and understood.

For me it is different. I remember everything, and by that I mean everything that has happened to me since my infancy. I can rekindle a memory whenever I like and recount it. Even my cellular memory is better than yours. In fact, it's complete. I can remember everything that ever happened to every one of my ancestors going back in a straight line to the most remote past, to the time, I believe, when the first of my ancestors was given (or had himself given) a differentiated brain. Therefore when I say

“I,” it’s richer than yours, and reaches back deep in time. You, reader, will surely have known your father, or will at least know much about him. You will perhaps have known your grandfather, less likely your great-grandfather. A few among you might be able to reach back in time five or ten generations, through documents, personal accounts, or portraits, and you will find men who are different in their customs, character, and language, but still men. But ten thousand generations? Or ten million generations? Line them up and look at them: which of your paternal ancestors is not man but almost man? Which is no longer a mammal? And what did he look like?

“I” know all this because I have done and been through all that my ancestors have done and been through. I inherited their memories, hence they and I are one. The first ancestor mutated felicitously, acquiring this virtue of hereditary memory, and he transmitted it all the way down to me, with the result that I can say “I” with this unusual breadth.

I even know the why and wherefore of each variation, small or large. Now, if I know that something must be done, I want to do it, and it is then done, isn’t it as if I had done it? Didn’t I, in fact, do it? If I am dazzled by the dawn and want to close my eyes, and my eyes close, didn’t I close my eyes? But say I need to detach my belly from the ground, say I want to detach it, and over the millennia it is detached, and I no longer creep but walk, isn’t this my own work? I am my own maker, and this is my diary.

–10^9. Yesterday the water level went down another two millimeters. I can’t possibly stay in the water forever. I came to this conclusion a while ago. On the other hand, to equip myself for a life in the air is quite an undertaking. It’s easy to say: “Train yourself, go ashore, introflex your gills.” And there are a lot of other obstacles. For example, legs: I’ll have to calculate those with sizable safety margins, because in here I weigh hardly anything, or, rather, I weigh what I want, but once on land I’ll have to deal with my full weight. And what about my skin?

–10^8. My wife’s got it into her head that she wants to keep the eggs in her body. She says she’s studying a system for rearing the little ones in one of the cavities within her own organism, and then, once they’re autonomous, pushing them out. But she doesn’t feel right about suddenly separating from them like that. She says that she’d suffer too much, and she has the idea for

a total nourishment—sugars, proteins, vitamins, fats—and intends to manufacture it herself. Of course, she'd have to seriously curtail the number of little ones, but she's expressed to me her strong opinion that to raise children properly, until they're able to truly take care of themselves, it would be better to have five or ten rather than ten thousand or a hundred thousand. You know women: when it comes to the little ones, they don't know reason. They'd throw themselves into the fire for them, or let themselves be devoured. In fact, some do let themselves be devoured. Not long ago, I heard about a beetle from the late Permian age and, well, the larvae's first food is actually the mother's cadaver. I hope my wife won't indulge in such excesses, but in the meantime this idea of hers—and she's only been telling me about it a little at a time, so as not to shock me—amounts to pretty much the same thing. Tonight, she announced that she's succeeded in modifying six epithelial glands to produce some drops of a white liquid that she deems suitable for the purpose.

-5×10^7. We landed. There wasn't much choice: the sea gets colder and saltier by the day, and it's filling up with creatures that I'm not too fond of—fish with teeth, more than six meters long, and other, smaller ones but poisonous and quite voracious. My wife and I decided, however, not to burn our bridges. You never know: maybe someday it will be a good idea for us to go back into the water. I therefore thought it best to maintain the same specific weight as seawater, which meant I had to fatten up a bit in order to offset the weight of bones. I also tried to keep my plasma at the same osmotic pressure as seawater, and with more or less the same ionic composition. Even my wife recognized the advantages. When we go swimming in order to clean off or exercise, we float with no trouble, we can submerge ourselves with no effort, and our skin doesn't wrinkle.

There are things that are both good and not so good about staying in the dry air. It's more uncomfortable, but it's also more entertaining and more challenging. As for locomotion, I can easily say that it's now a problem solved. I first tried to wriggle across the sand as one does when swimming, then I even reabsorbed my fins, which gave me more trouble than anything else. It worked all right, but I could never attain satisfactory speeds, and it was difficult to move, for example, across smooth rocks. For now, I still propel myself by wriggling on my belly, but soon I intend to grow myself some legs: two, four, or six—I haven't decided yet.

More challenging, I said. You see and hear more things, smells, colors, sounds. You become more versatile, prepared, more intelligent. For this reason, someday I would like to have my head erect. From up there you can see farther. I also have a little project regarding my front limbs, and I hope I can get to work on it soon.

As for my skin, I've found it's insufficient for use as a respiratory organ, which is a shame, because I was counting on it. But, in any case, it turned out all right. It's soft and porous and at the same time nearly impermeable; it's magnificent at resisting the sun, water, and aging, is easily pigmented, and contains a great quantity of glands and nerve endings. I don't think I'll need to keep on changing it, as I've had to do until recently; it's no longer a problem.

There's a big, mind-boggling problem, however, when it comes to reproduction. My wife says it's simple: not many children, pregnancy, breast-feeding. I've tried to support her in this, because I love her, but also because the lion's share of the job is hers. But when she decided to convert to Mammalianism, she certainly didn't realize what a mess she was getting herself into.

I told her: "Be careful. I don't care if our kids are three meters tall, weigh half a ton, and can crunch a bison's femur with their teeth. But I do want my kids to have quick reflexes and well-developed senses, and above all to be alert and full of imagination, so that maybe, in time, they'll be able to invent the wheel and the alphabet. For this they're going to need lots of brains and therefore a big skull, so how are they supposed to get out when it's time to be born? Giving birth will end up causing you a lot of pain."

But when she gets an idea in her head, she doesn't budge. She got busy, tried different methods, made a mess of it several times, and finally chose the simplest solution: she widened her pelvis (hers is bigger than mine now) and she made the skull of the little one soft and supple. In short, she's able to give birth easily enough, maybe with some help, at least nine times out of ten. It is, however, painful, and she admits that I was right about this.

-2×10^7. Dear Diary, today I had a lucky escape. A great beast, I don't know what it's called, came out of a swamp and chased me for almost an hour. As soon as I caught my breath, I came to a conclusion: in this world it's imprudent to go around unarmed. I thought about it, made a few sketches, and then came to a decision. I made myself a beautiful protective

armor out of bone, four horns on my forehead, nails on my fingers, and eight poisonous spikes on the top of my tail. You won't believe it, but I made it all using only carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, with a pinch of sulfur. I'm sure I'm being obsessive, but I don't like novelties when it comes to construction materials. For example, I find metals unreliable. Maybe it's because I don't understand inorganic chemistry very well. I'm much more at ease with carbon, colloids, and macro-molecules.

–10^{7}. Among the many innovations on Earth are the plants. Grass, bushes, algae, trees thirty or fifty meters high. Everything is green, everything sprouts and grows and turns toward the sun. Plants seem stupid, yet they steal energy from the Sun, carbon from the air, salts from the earth, and grow for a thousand years without spinning or weaving or slaughtering one another as we do.

There are those who eat plants, and then there are those who observe them, then eat those who eat the plants. On the one hand, the latter system is more efficient; you can quickly gorge yourself on big, beautiful molecules without wasting time on synthesis, which not everyone is even capable of. On the other hand, it's a difficult life, because no one likes to be eaten, and so everyone defends himself as best he can, either with classic methods (like mine) or by more imaginative means, such as changing color, causing an electric shock, or stinking. The simpletons train themselves to run.

As for myself, it was rather a struggle to get used to grass and leaves: I had to elongate my intestine and split my stomach in two, and then I even made a contract with certain protozoa I met in the process. I agree to keep them warm in my belly and they break down the cellulose on my behalf. I never could find a way to get used to wood, though, which is a shame, because there's a lot of it.

I forgot to mention that for a while now I've had a pair of eyes. It wasn't exactly an invention, but a series of little tricks. Initially, I made myself two black spots, but with them I was able only to distinguish light from dark. It became apparent that I needed lenses. At first, I tried to make them out of horn, or from some polysaccharide, but then I changed my mind and decided to make them from water, which ultimately was the obvious, but brilliant, solution to the problem. Water is transparent, cheap, and I'm very familiar with it. In fact, when I came out of the sea (I don't

remember if I've already written this here), I myself consisted of a good two-thirds water. And it's even rather amusing to consider that this 70 percent water feels, thinks, says "I," and writes a diary. To make a long story short, the lenses made of water came out beautifully (I had to add only a little gelatin). I even managed to give them a variable focus and completed the job by adding a diaphragm. And I used not a milligram of any element other than my preferred four.

-5×10^6. As for the trees, by dint of living among them, and occasionally even on top of them, my wife and I grew to like them. What I mean is that we liked them not only as a source of food but for other reasons as well. They are beautiful structures—but we can discuss their aesthetic qualities another time. They are a marvel of engineering, and virtually immortal. Whoever said that death is an integral part of life wasn't thinking of trees—every spring they're young again. I need to give them some serious thought. Wouldn't they actually be the best model? Think about it. While I'm writing, right in front of me is an oak, thirty tons of good dense wood. Well, it's been standing tall and growing for three hundred years, never has to hide or flee, no one devours it, and it has never devoured anyone else. That's not all. I recently realized that the trees breathe for us, and that you can safely live on them.

Yesterday, in fact, something strange happened to me. I was idly looking at my hands and feet—just to be clear, by now mine are made more or less like yours. Well, they're made for trees. With my forefinger and thumb, I can make a circle capable of grabbing a large branch up to five centimeters. If it's fifteen centimeters, I can do it with both hands, thumb to thumb, finger to finger, and they still make a perfect circle. For even bigger branches, up to fifty or sixty centimeters, I can do it like this, with my two arms making a circle with my chest. The same is pretty much true for my legs and feet, and the arch of my foot molds perfectly to a branch.

"But this is what you wanted!" you'll say. Sure, but you know how things can happen without your really paying attention. It's true that I made myself all by myself, but I changed the models many times. I did various experiments, and sometimes I forgot to eliminate certain details—above all, when they didn't bother me too much. Or maybe I kept them on purpose, the way you do with ancestors' portraits. For example, I have a little bone in my auricle that's of no use to me whatsoever anymore, because it's been

quite a while since I've needed to orient my ears. But I'm very fond of it, and wouldn't let it atrophy for all the gold in the world.

–10^{6}. For some time now, my wife and I have understood that walking is the answer, but that walking on four legs is only half an answer. It's obvious that someone as tall as I am who stands erect will dominate the horizon with a radius of around a dozen kilometers, as if master of the land. But there's more: my hands would be free. They already are, but until now I hadn't considered using them for anything other than climbing trees. Well, I just realized that with a few slight adjustments they can be used for various other little jobs that I've been planning for some time.

I like conveniences and innovations. For example, tearing off branches and leaves to make a bed and a roof; sharpening a shell against a slate slab, and with that sharpened shell whittling down an ash branch, and using that smooth and tapered branch to fell a moose; and with that moose pelt making clothes for the winter and a cover to sleep under; and with the bones making a comb for my wife, a bodkin and an amulet for me, and a toy moose for my son, so he can play with it and learn to hunt. I have also noticed that in the process of making things you think of all sorts of other things to make. I often feel that I'm thinking more with my hands than with my brain.

Not that it's easy, but with my hands I can also break off a flint shard and tie it to the top of a stick and make myself a hatchet, and with the hatchet I can defend my territory, or maybe even expand it. In other words I can bash in the heads of certain other "I"s who are getting in the way, or who are courting my wife, or who are only whiter or blacker or more or less hairy than I am, or speak with a different accent.

This diary might as well end here. With these last transformations and inventions of mine, the job was pretty much done. From that point on, nothing fundamental happened to me, nor do I think anything much will happen to me in the future.

The Servant

In the ghetto, wisdom and knowledge are cheap virtues. They're so widespread that even the cobbler and the porter can boast of them, but don't, since they're really no longer virtues, just as washing your hands before you eat isn't a virtue. Therefore, even though he was wiser and more learned than anyone else, Rabbi Aryeh of Prague owed his fame not to these qualities but to another, far rarer quality: his strength.

He was as strong as a man could be both in flesh and in spirit. It was said that he defended the Jews from a pogrom using no weapons except the force of his large hands. They also said that he was married four times, and four times widowed, and that he had a great number of children, one of whom was the progenitor of Karl Marx, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein, and of all those who in the old heart of Europe pursued the truth in bold new ways. He married for the fourth time when he was seventy years old. At seventy-five, while serving as Rabbi of Mikulov, in that holy place Moravia, he accepted the appointment in Prague. At eighty, with his own hands he carved and erected the tomb that remains a destination for pilgrims to this day. This tomb has a crevice on top of its coffer: anyone who writes down a wish and slips it into the cleft—be he Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or pagan—has that wish granted within a year. Rabbi Aryeh lived in full vigor of body and spirit until he was a hundred and five. At ninety, he undertook the task of building a Golem.

Building a Golem is not in itself a difficult undertaking, and many have tried it. In fact, a Golem is only a little more than nothing; it's a portion of matter, or rather of chaos, closed up in a human or animal likeness. In short, it's a simulacrum and, as such, good for nothing. Actually, it's something

essentially suspicious and to be avoided, since it's written that "you shall not make for yourselves an idol . . . nor worship them." The Golden Calf was a Golem, and so was Adam, and so are we.

The difference among Golems lies in the precision and thoroughness of the instructions that guide their construction. If all they say is: "Take 240 pounds of clay, shape it into the form of a man, then put the simulacrum in the kiln until it has set," the result will be an idol, such as Gentiles make. It will take longer to make a man, because the instructions are more numerous, but not infinite, having been inscribed in each one of our tiny seeds. Rabbi Aryeh was well aware of this, since he had seen many children born and raised and had contemplated their features. Now, Aryeh was not a blasphemer, and he wasn't proposing to create a second Adam. He intended to construct not a man, but, rather, a *po'el*—let's call him a worker—a servant, faithful and strong, if not too discerning: in other words, what's called in his Bohemian language a robot. In fact, man can (and at times must) work hard and fight, but these are not properly human tasks. For such undertakings a robot is appropriate. He's something more and better than a bell-ringing puppet, like the ones that march across the façade of Prague's Town Hall when the hour strikes.

A servant, but as strong as the Rabbi, heir to his power, able to defend and help the people of Israel when Aryeh's days had reached their end. In order to achieve this, instructions were required of a more complex nature than those needed to make an idol that sits inactive and sneering in its niche, but not so complex as those needed for creating a second Adam—"a being made in the image of God." You needn't search for these instructions in the whirlwind of a starry sky, or in a crystal ball, or in the gibberish of the Python Spirit; they are already written, hidden in the books of the Law, all you have to do is read and choose—that is, select, elect. Not one letter, not one mark on the scrolls of the Law is there by chance; to one who knows how to read them, all appears clear, any undertaking, past, present, and future; the formula and the destiny of humanity and of every man, your own, and those of all flesh, down to the blind worm that makes its way in the mud. Aryeh made his calculations and produced the formula he desired for a Golem, one that would not surpass human abilities. Its composition filled thirty-nine pages, the exact number of his children, and the coincidence pleased him.

The question of the prohibition against making idols remained. As is well-known, one must “put a hedge around the Law,” meaning that it is prudent to interpret precepts and prohibitions in their broadest sense, because, while an error due to an excess of diligence isn’t damaging, a transgression never heals, for there is no atonement. Nevertheless, perhaps owing to the Jews’ long cohabitation with Gentiles, in Prague’s ghetto a lenient interpretation had prevailed. You will not make images of God, because God does not have an image, but why shouldn’t you make images of the world around you? Why should the image of a crow tempt you to idolatry more than the crow itself, outside your window, black and impudent in the snow? So, if you’re called Wolf, you’re permitted to draw a wolf on the door of your house, and if you’re called Baer, a bear. If you have the luck to be called Kohn, and therefore to belong to that blessed family, why shouldn’t you have two blessing hands carved on the lintel over your doorway, and (as late as possible) on your tombstone? And if instead you’re a Fischbaum, you’ll be happy with an image of a fish (perhaps upside down and caught among the branches of a tree), or an apple tree laden with herrings instead of apples. If, then, you are an Aryeh, or lion, a shield appropriate for you is a shield carved with a tousled young lion that leaps at the sky, as if to attack it, gnashing his teeth and baring his claws, just like the many lions chosen by the Gentiles, among whom you live, for their insignia.

In the cellar of his house on Široká, Rabbi Aryeh-Lion serenely began his work. The clay was brought to him at night by two of his disciples, along with water from the Vltava and coal to feed the kiln. Day by day—rather, night by night—the Golem took shape, and was ready in the year 1579 of the Common Era, 5339 of the Creation. Now, 5339 isn’t exactly a prime number, but almost, as it’s the product of 19, which is the number of the Sun and of gold, multiplied by the 281 bones that make up our bodies.

He was a giant with a human figure from the belt upward. Even this has an explanation: the belt is a frontier, only above the belt is man made in God’s image, while below he is a beast. For this reason, a wise man does not forget to wear it. Below the belt the Golem was truly a Golem—that is, a fragment of chaos. Behind his chain mail, which hung to the ground like an apron, all that could be glimpsed was a solid jumble of clay, metal, and glass. His arms were gnarled and strong, like oak branches. His hands, fidgety and bony, were modeled on Aryeh’s own. His face wasn’t truly

human, but more lion-like, because a saviour should inspire fear, and because Aryeh wished to include his signature.

So this was the figure of the Golem, yet the greater part remained to be done, since he lacked a spirit. Aryeh deliberated for a long time: should he give him blood, and with the blood all the passions of animal and man? No, since this servant would be excessively strong, giving him the gift of blood would be unwise. Aryeh wanted a faithful servant, not a rebel. He denied him blood, and, with the blood, Will, Eve's curiosity, and the desire for experience; but he infused him with other passions, and did so easily, since all he had to do was draw upon his own. He gave him the anger of Moses and the prophets, the obedience of Abraham, the arrogance of Cain, the courage of Joshua, and even a little of the madness of Ahab. But he did not give him Jacob's saintly perspicacity, or Solomon's wisdom, or Isaiah's clarity, because he did not want to create a rival.

Therefore, at the decisive moment, when it was time to place in the servant's lion skull the three principles of movement—the Nous, the Epithemia, and the Thymos[1]—Aryeh destroyed what was written regarding the first two and wrote on a piece of parchment only the third. Underneath, he added in large, fiery script the signs of the ineffable name of God, rolled up the parchment, and put it in a silver case. The Golem, then, didn't have a mind, but he had courage and strength, and the ability to come to life only when the silver case containing the Name was placed between his teeth.

When it was time for the first experiment, Aryeh's whole body trembled as never before. He inserted the Name in the designated position, and the monster's eyes lit up and stared at him. He expected him to ask, "What do you desire of me, O Lord," but instead he heard another question, familiar to him, and sounding full of anger: "Why do the wicked prosper?" The Rabbi realized that the Golem was his son, and he felt joy, and at the same time fearful before the Lord, because, as it is written, the joy of the Jew comes with a seed of terror.

Aryeh was not disappointed by his servant. When the Name was removed, he reposed in the cellar of the synagogue, entirely inert, a lifeless hunk of clay, and needed neither hay nor grain. When the Name brought him back to life, he drew all his strength from the Name itself and from the air around

him. He had no need of meat or bread or wine. Nor did he need the gaze and love of his master, upon which the horse and the dog feed. He was never sad, never happy, but in his heart of clay, hardened by fire, burned a tense anger, quiet and eternal, the same one that had flashed forth in the question that was his first act of life. He did nothing without Aryeh ordering him to, but he did not do everything Aryeh ordered him to. The Rabbi soon realized this and was both happy and worried. It was useless to ask the Golem to go into the forest to cut wood or to go to the well for water. He would respond, “It will be done, O Lord,” ponderously turn his back, and depart with his thunderous footsteps, but as soon as he was out of sight he would slip into his dark bed, spit out the Name, and stiffen into his habitual rock-like inertia. On the other hand, he accepted with a glint of delight in his eye all undertakings that required courage and valor, and he carried them out with a dark flair all his own.

For many years he was an able defender of the Prague community against iniquity and violence. His many exploits were often recounted: how he, by himself, had blocked the way of a tribe of Turkmen warriors intent on knocking down the White Gate to sack the ghetto; how he foiled the plans for a massacre by capturing the actual perpetrator of an assassination that the Emperor’s henchmen had tried to disguise as a ritual murder; how he, again alone, had saved the wheat stocks in the warehouse when the Vltava suddenly and disastrously flooded.

It is written: “The seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God: in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor the stranger that is within your gates.” Rabbi Aryeh reflected: the Golem was technically not a servant but, rather, a machine, animated by the spirit of the Name. In this respect, he was similar to windmills, which are permitted to grind on the Sabbath, and to sailboats, which are permitted to sail. But then he remembered that he had to put a hedge around the Law, and he resolved to take the Name from him every Friday at sunset, and this he did for many years.

Then there came a day (it was in fact a Friday) on which the Rabbi brought the Golem to where he lived, on the second floor of an ancient tenement on Broad Street, whose façade was blackened and corroded by time. He gave him a pile of logs to split, then lifted his arm and placed in his hand an ax. The Golem, holding the ax frozen in midair, turned slowly toward him, his ugly face expressionless and fierce. He didn't move.

"Let's go, get chopping!" Aryeh commanded, and a deep laugh tickled his heart without appearing on his face. The monster's laziness and disobedience impressed, even flattered him, because these are native human traits and the Rabbi hadn't inspired them—the clay colossus had conceived them on his own. He was more human than the Rabbi had intended. "Let's go, get to work," Aryeh repeated.

The Golem took two heavy steps toward the wood, holding the ax in front of him with an outstretched arm. He then let the ax fall with a crash to the granite floor. With his left hand he grabbed a log, placed it vertically on a stump, and let his right hand fall on it like a cleaver. The log split in two. He did the same with a second and a third log and then with all the others: two steps from the stump to the pile, a half turn, two steps from the pile to the stump, splitting with his naked hand of clay at every half turn. Aryeh, both fascinated and disturbed, observed his servant's angry and mechanical work. Why had he refused to use the ax? He thought about it for a while. His mind was accustomed to interpreting the Law and the sacred texts, which are made up of difficult questions and ingenious, convoluted responses. For at least half an hour, an answer eluded him, but he persisted in searching for one. The Golem was his creation, his son, and it is a painful blow to discover that our children have opinions and desires that are different, incomprehensible, and foreign to our own.

It was like this: the Golem was a servant who didn't want to be a servant. For him the ax was a servile instrument, a symbol of servitude, like the bit for a horse or the yoke for an ox. It wasn't so for the hand, which is a part of you, your destiny imprinted on your palm. The Rabbi was pleased with this response and lingered over his analysis, comparing it to the texts, and he was satisfied. It was shrewd, quick-witted, plausible, and piously felicitous. He tarried so long that he didn't notice what was happening—indeed, what had already happened—outside his window in the open air of Broad Street, under Prague's hazy sky: the sun had set, the Sabbath had begun.

By the time he noticed, it was too late. Aryeh tried in vain to stop his servant and to extract the Name from his mouth. But the Golem evaded him, swatted him away with his stiff arms, and turned his back on him. The Rabbi, who had never before touched him, came to know his inhuman weight, his rock-hardness. Like a pendulum, the Golem blundered back and forth across the little room, smashing wood against wood so that chips flew up to the rafters. Aryeh hoped and prayed that the Golem's fury would subside when the pile of logs was finished, but instead the giant leaned over, all his joints creaking, picked up the ax, and with it rampaged until dawn, shattering everything around him—furniture, shutters, windows, partition walls, even the safe containing the silver, and the shelves holding the sacred books.

Aryeh hid under the stairs, and here he had the time and opportunity to contemplate a terrible truth: nothing leads to madness more than two conflicting commands. In the Golem's rock-like brain, it was written: "You shall faithfully serve your Lord: you shall obey him like a corpse." But also written there was the entire Law of Moses, which had been transmitted to him with every letter of the message with which he was born, because every letter of the Law contains the whole Law. Therefore it was also written inside of him: "You shall rest on the Sabbath. You shall not do any work." Aryeh understood his servant's madness, and he praised God for that understanding, because he who has understood is more than half way. He praised God in spite of the destruction of his house, because he realized that the fault was neither God's nor the Golem's but his alone.

When the dawn of the Sabbath came through the broken windows and nothing remained to destroy in the Rabbi's house, the Golem stopped, exhausted. Aryeh fearfully approached him and with a tentative hand removed from his mouth the silver case that contained the Name.

The monster's eyes closed, and never opened again. In the evening, when that sad Sabbath was over, Aryeh tried in vain to bring him back to life so that he might help, with the methodical strength he once had, to put the Rabbi's devastated house back together. The Golem remained motionless and inert, entirely similar now to a forbidden and odious idol, an indecent man-beast of red clay, chipped here and there by his own frenzy. Aryeh touched him with a finger and the giant fell to the ground and shattered. The Rabbi gathered up the fragments and put them in the attic of

the house on Broad Street in Prague, dilapidated already then, where it is widely reported that they still can be found.

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1. In Plato's *Republic*, man is described as being composed of four parts: the physical, or Soma; the mind, or Nous; desire, or Epithemia; and the spirit, or Thymos.

Mutiny

To Mario Rigoni Stern[1]

The Faragos have been cultivating the land next to our garden for ten years now and, as will happen over a fence or across a river, a rudimentary friendship, perfunctory and vague, originated because of it. The Faragos have always been horticulturists and we both admire and envy them. They always know the right thing to do, in the right way, and at the right time, while we, amateurs and urbanites, feed off our errors. We devoutly heed their advice, both requested and the other kind, which the Farago patriarch yells at us across the fence when he observes us commit some grotesque mistake, or when the results of our grotesque mistakes cry out to the heavens. And yet, despite our humility and docility, our tiny plot of earth is full of weeds and anthills, while their vegetable gardens, which cover no less than two hectares, are clean, orderly, and thriving.

"It takes a good eye," the Faragos say, or "It takes the right hands." With the exception of Clotilde, they don't come over to see what we're doing very willingly. Perhaps they don't want the responsibility, or they realize that a greater intimacy or understanding between us is neither possible nor desirable. Or maybe, indeed probably, they don't want to teach us too much. One never knows, someday it might occur to us to steal their profession. Advice, yes, but from a distance.

Clotilde is different. We've watched her grow summer after summer like a poplar, and now she is eleven years old. She's slender, her brown hair is always falling over her eyes, and she is full of mystery, like all adolescents. But she was mysterious even before, when she was chubby, knee high to a grasshopper, covered in dirt up to her eyes, and had, it

seemed, learned to talk and walk directly from above. Or maybe she'd learned from the earth itself, with which she had an obvious but indecipherable relationship. At that time, we often saw her lying between the furrows, on the moist, warm, just tilled soil. She smiled at the sky with her eyes closed, intent on the beating wings of the butterflies that alighted on her as if she were a flower. She stayed perfectly still so as not to frighten them away. She held crickets and spiders in her hands with no sign of repugnance, and without hurting them. She stroked them with her brown finger just as you do with pets, and then returned them to the ground.

"Go, little creature, go on your way."

Now that she's grown, she, too, gives us advice and explanations, but of another kind. She explained to me that bindweed is kind but lazy. If you let it go, it invades the fields and suffocates them, but not to do damage, like couch grass—it's just too lazy to grow upright. "See what it does? It puts down roots in the ground but not too deep, because it doesn't want to tire itself out, since it's not very strong. It then splits into threads and each thread runs along the ground searching for food, and they never cross. They're no fools, they agree what to do beforehand: you head east, I'll go west. They produce flowers that are pretty enough and even a little fragrant, and they also produce these little balls, see? Because they, too, think about the future."

She had no pity for the couch grass, however. "It's entirely useless for you to chop it to pieces with the hoe since every piece will grow again, like the heads of a dragon in fables. Actually, it really is a dragon. If you look at it closely, you can see teeth, nails, and scales. It kills other plants, and never dies, because it lives underground. What you see aboveground is nothing, those thin little grass-like leaves seem so innocent, but the more you dig, the more you find, and if you dig deep enough you'll find a black, gnarled skeleton as hard as iron and older than I can guess—that is couch grass. Cows trample it and it doesn't die. If you were to put it into a tomb made of stone, it would crack the stone and find its way out. The only way to beat it is with fire. I don't talk to couch grass."

I asked her if she talks with the other plants and she told me she certainly does. Her mother and father, too, but she is better at it. It's not actually a matter of speaking with your mouth, like humans, but it's clear that when they want something plants make signs and grimaces, and they understand ours. However, because in general plants are very slow in their

movements, their understanding, and their self-expression, it's important not to lose patience in trying to understand them and in making yourself understood.

"See this?" she said to me, pointing to one of our lemon trees. "It's whining, and it's been whining for a while, and if you don't understand, how can you know something's wrong? And so it continues to suffer."

"What's it whining about? It's got plenty of water, and we care for it just like the others."

"I don't know, it's not always easy to comprehend. See here, on this side, all its leaves are shriveled. Something's wrong with it on this side. Maybe its roots are colliding with a rock. And see, on this same side, there's an ugly gash in its trunk."

In Clotilde's opinion everything that grows from the earth and has green leaves is "someone like us," with whom we could find a way to get along. In fact, for this reason one shouldn't keep plants and flowers in pots because it's like putting animals in a cage. They become stupid or mean or, in any case, they're no longer the same, and it's pure selfishness on our part to keep them so restricted just for our viewing pleasure. The couch grass, in fact, is an exception because it comes not from the earth but from the under-earth, the kingdom of treasure, dragons, and the dead. In her opinion, the under-earth is a complicated country like ours, only there it's dark while here it's light. There are caves, tunnels, streams, rivers, and lakes, and it also has veins of ore that are all poisonous and noxious except for iron, which is, within certain parameters, man's friend. Treasure is also to be found there—some of it hidden by men from the distant past, some, like gold and diamonds, having been there forever. The dead also live there, but Clotilde doesn't like to talk about them. Last month, an excavator was digging on the property on their other side. Clotilde, pale and fascinated, watched the mighty work of the machine until the hole was three meters deep, then she disappeared for a few days and returned only when the machine had left and all that could be seen in the great big hole was dirt and rocks, puddles, and a few exposed roots.

She told me, too, that not all the plants get along. There are those that have been domesticated, like cows and chickens, that wouldn't know what to do without people, but there are others that protest, attempt to escape, and sometimes succeed. If we aren't careful, they become wild and no longer produce fruit or, instead of producing it to our taste, they make it to

suit themselves—bitter, hard, all pit. If a plant hasn't been completely domesticated, it becomes homesick, especially if it is anywhere near a wild wood. It wants to return to the wood, where the bees alone take care of its fertilization, and the birds and the wind spread its seeds. She showed me the peaches from their orchard and it was just as she said, the trees nearest the fence stretched their branches over it, like arms.

"Come with me, I have to show you something." She led me up a hill in the middle of a wood that almost no one knows, it's so thick with brush. Furthermore, it seemed to be defended by a border of crumbling old terraces covered over with a kind of prickly ivy I couldn't identify. The ivy was beautiful to look at, its pear-shaped leaves bright green with white speckles, but the stems, branches, even the backs of the leaves themselves, were bristling with hooked thorns, barbed like arrowheads, and if they merely skimmed the flesh they would penetrate it and claim a piece.

Along the way, while I had only enough breath to govern my steps and give voice now and again to a syllable of assent, Clotilde talked. She told me she had just learned an important piece of news, and that she had heard it from a rosemary, a plant that is somewhat special, a friend to humans but only from afar, like a cat; it prefers to do things its own way. The aromatic flavor that goes so well with roasts is its invention. Humans like it, but insects find it bitter. In short, it's a repellent that the rosemary plant invented thousands and thousands of years ago, when humans weren't yet here, and in fact you'll never see rosemary eaten by slugs or caterpillars. Even its needle-shaped leaves are a great invention, but this was not the rosemary's doing. Pine trees and firs invented those many years earlier. They are a good defense, because the little creatures who eat leaves always begin at the tip and if they find it woody and sharp they immediately lose courage.

The rosemary plant, by means of gestures, had given Clotilde to understand that she should go into the wood in a particular direction and for a particular distance, and that there she would find something important. She had already visited the place a few days before, and what the rosemary had said was true, and she wanted to show me, too. Only, she was a little disappointed that the rosemary plant had turned out to be a snitch.

She showed me a path half buried in brambles that allowed us to penetrate the wood without too many scratches. And then, at the center of the forest, there it was: a small circular clearing that had never existed before. At the spot, the ground was almost flat, and the soil appeared smooth, compacted, without a single blade of grass or pebble. There were, however, three or four rocks about a meter from the circle's edge that Clotilde told me she had put there as markers to verify what the rosemary plant had told her: the place was a tree school, a secret place where trees taught one another to walk, in defiance of humans and unbeknownst to them. She led me by the hand (her hand was hardly childlike, but rather rough and strong) around the circle, and showed me many small, imperceptible things. She showed me that around every tree trunk the earth was loose and broken up, as if blocked on the outside and sunken on the inside. She showed me that all the trunks were leaning outward a little and even the vines ran radially toward the outside. Of course, I'm not at all sure that such signs can't be detected elsewhere, in other clearings, or perhaps in all of them, and that they don't have a different significance, or none at all. But Clotilde was full of excitement.

"There are some that are intelligent and some stupid, some lazy and others quick-witted, and none of them, not even the cleverest, actually get that far. But this one, for example," and she pointed at a juniper, "I've had my eye on for quite a while and I don't trust him." She told me that the juniper had moved at least a meter in four days. He had discovered a workable method: little by little he'd let all the roots on one side die while fortifying those on the other, and he wanted all the other trees to do the same. He was ambitious and patient. The power of all plants is their patience, but this fellow was also ambitious and one of the first to understand that a plant that moves can conquer a country and be free of humans.

"They all want freedom, but they don't know how to get it after so many years under our rule. Some trees, like olives, have been resigned to their fate for centuries, but they're ashamed of it and you can see it by how they grow, all twisted and desperate. Others, like peaches and almonds, have surrendered and produce fruit but—and you've seen this, too—as soon as they get the opportunity they become wild again. There are others I don't know about—it's difficult to understand what chestnuts and oaks want. Perhaps they're too old and too wooden and by now they don't want

anything else, which happens with the elderly. All they want is for winter to follow summer, and summer to follow winter."

A wild cherry then spoke. He didn't, of course, speak perfect Italian—it was like having a conversation with the Dutch who come to the seaside in July and though you don't understand every word, from gestures and intonations you end up understanding well enough what they want to say. That cherry spoke with the rustle of his leaves, which could be heard by pressing your ear against the trunk, and he said things that Clotilde disagreed with. He said flowers shouldn't be produced, because they are an indulgence to man, and the same with fruit, which is a waste and an unearned gift. The trees should fight against man, and no longer purify the air for him, pull up their roots and leave, even if it meant risking death or becoming wild again. I also leaned my ear against the trunk, but all I caught was an indistinct murmur, though perhaps a bit more resonant than the sounds the other plants made.

It was getting dark and there was no moon. The lights from the town and the beach gave us only a vague idea of the direction we should take to go back. We found ourselves badly entangled among the brambles and the crumbling terraces, and had to blindly jump down from one terrace to the next, trying to guess in the growing darkness whether we would land on rocks, or pine needles, or solid ground. An hour after we started down, both of us were tired, scratched, and worried. The lights below were as far away as before.

Suddenly, we heard a dog barking. We stopped. It was coming toward us, galloping along one of the terraces. It could be a good thing or a bad thing. From the sound of it, the dog wasn't very big, but he barked with anger and determination, until he was out of breath, and then we could hear him sucking in the air in short, convulsive gasps. He was soon only a few meters below us and it was clear that he wasn't barking for the fun of it but out of duty: he wasn't about to let anyone invade his territory. Clotilde begged his pardon for the intrusion and explained to him that we had lost our way and all we wanted was to get out of there. He was right to bark—it was his job—but if he could show us the path that led to his house, he would do even better because he wouldn't waste any more of his time or ours. She spoke in a tone so calm and persuasive that the dog immediately quieted down. We caught a glimpse of him below us, a blurry patch of white and black. We continued on down a few steps and felt beneath our

feet the hard elasticity of packed earth. The dog walked across to the right, yelping now and again, and stopping to see if we were following him. After a quarter of an hour, we were greeted by a tremulous chorus of bleating goats near the dog's home. From there, despite the darkness, we easily found a well-marked path that led down to the village.

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1. Mario Rigoni Stern (1921–2008) was an Italian novelist and short story writer. He was interned in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp and his experiences during the war were integrated into his fiction. Levi once wrote of him, "That Mario Rigoni Stern exists has something of the miraculous about it."



Written on the Forehead

When Enrico arrived, at nine in the morning, seven others were already waiting. He sat down and selected the least crumpled magazine he could find from a pile on the table. Even so, it was one of those offensively useless and boring publications that are even more vapid, mercenary, and vulgar than the newsreels and which no reasonable person would consider reading—and which, inexplicably, tend to accumulate out of nowhere precisely in places where people are forced to wait. Produced under the auspices of an unknown Agency, the one he had picked up featured regional handicrafts, and on every page some undersecretary was cutting a ribbon. Enrico put down the magazine and looked around.

Two of the others had big, gnarled hands and the aura of retirees. There was a tired-looking woman, modestly dressed, about fifty. The other four appeared to be students. A quarter of an hour passed, the door at the back opened, and a sophisticated young woman in a yellow smock asked: “Who’s first?”

The young woman appeared again after only three or four minutes. Enrico turned to the person nearest, one of the students, and said: “Looks like this won’t take long.”

The other responded morosely and with the air of an expert: “Don’t count on it.”

How willingly, easily, and quickly one assumes the role of the old expert, even if only in a waiting room! But the expert of the moment had been right: before the third person was called a good half hour had expired, and in the meantime two more “newcomers” had arrived. Enrico considered himself to be unequivocally old and expert with respect to them, and they,

furthermore, were looking around in the same disoriented manner as Enrico had half an hour earlier.

The time passed slowly. Enrico felt the rhythm of his heart accelerate unpleasantly and his hands became cold and sweaty. He felt as if he were waiting for the dentist or to take an exam, and he decided that all waiting was disagreeable—who knows why—perhaps because happy events occur less frequently than sad ones. But even awaiting happy events is disagreeable, because it makes you anxious, and you never know for sure who's going to turn up, what he'll look like, and what you will be required to say; in any case, it's still time that is not yours, time stolen from you by the unknown person on the other side of the wall. In short, there was no way to determine an average time for the interview. The young woman appeared at varying intervals from two minutes (for one of the retirees) to forty-five minutes (for one of the students who was very good-looking, with a blond beard and wire-rimmed glasses). When Enrico went in, it was almost eleven o'clock.

He was led into a cold and pretentious office; abstract paintings and photographic portraits hung on the walls, but Enrico didn't have time to examine them closely because an executive asked him to take a seat in front of the desk. He was a young man with a crew cut, tanned, tall, and athletic; a name tag on his lapel read "Carlo Rovati," and inscribed on his forehead in neat blue block letters were the words "Vacation in Savoy."

"You answered our ad in the *Corriere*," the young man informed him genially. "I don't believe you know who we are, but you will know soon, whether we come to an agreement or not. We are aggressive, people who go right to the heart of the matter without standing on ceremony. In our ad we spoke of an easy job that was well paid; here I can add that the job is so easy that it can't even be called work—it's more of a service or a concession. As for the pay, you can decide for yourself."

Rovati paused a minute, scrutinizing Enrico in a professional manner, closing one eye and leaning his head first to the left, then to the right, and finally adding: "You'll do very well. You have an open, positive face, not ugly and overall not too regular: a face that one doesn't easily forget. We could offer . . ." and here he mentioned a figure that made Enrico jump out of his chair. It should be said that Enrico, who was about to get married, earned very little, had saved little, and was one of those types who didn't like to push the envelope.

Rovati, meanwhile, continued: “As you’ll already have gathered, we are dealing with a new promotional technique” (and here, with elegant nonchalance, he indicated his forehead). “If you accept, you won’t be required to do anything as far as your behavior, your choices, or your opinions. I, for example, have never been to Savoy, on vacation or otherwise, nor do I imagine I’ll ever go. If people say things to you, respond as you like. You can even declare your slogan untrue or not respond at all. In other words, you sell or rent us your forehead, not your soul.”

“I sell or rent it?”

“It’s your choice: we offer you two types of contract. The figure I mentioned is for a three-year commitment. All you have to do is go to our graphics center, here on the ground floor, get your inscription, go to the cashier, and get your check. Or, if you prefer a shorter commitment, let’s say three months, the process is the same, but the ink is different: it disappears by itself, in around three months, leaving no trace. It goes without saying that the compensation is a good deal less if you choose this option.”

“In the first case, however, the ink lasts for three years?”

“No, not exactly. Our chemists haven’t yet been able to formulate a dermatological ink that will last a full three years, then disappear without fading beforehand. The three-year ink is indelible: at the end of the third year you come back here for a short visit and undergo an entirely painless and brief operation that will restore your face to the way it was previously. Unless, of course, you and our client agree to renew the contract.”

Enrico was worried, not on his own account but with regard to Laura. Four million lire are four million lire, but what would Laura say?

“You don’t have to decide right away, here and now,” Rovati interrupted, as if he had read Enrico’s mind. “Go home, think about it, consult whomever you want, then come back here and sign. But please do so before the week is out. You understand, we must complete our strategic planning.”

Enrico felt relieved. He asked, “Can I choose the inscription?”

“Within certain limits, yes. We will give you a list of five or six alternatives and you may choose. But, in any case, it’s a matter of a few words, accompanied by a logo.”

“And . . . I’d like to know: would I be the first?”

“You mean the second.” Rovati smiled, pointing to his own forehead. “But you wouldn’t even be the second. In this city alone we have agreements for . . . wait: here, eighty-eight contracts. So don’t be afraid, you won’t be alone, nor will you have to explain yourself too often. According to our predictions, within a year forehead advertising will become a feature in all urban centers, perhaps even a sign of originality and personal prestige, like having a badge from a club. Just think, this summer we signed twenty-two seasonal contracts in Cortina and fifteen in Courmayeur, in exchange merely for room and board for the month of August!”

To Enrico’s great surprise, and consternation, Laura didn’t hesitate even for a second. She was a practical girl, and pointed out to him that with four million lire their housing problem would be taken care of; not only that, but the sum, instead of being four million, could become eight, or even ten, and would then resolve the question of furniture, telephone, refrigerator, washing machine, and the Fiat 850 as well. And why ten? It was obvious! She, too, would sign up; a young, charming couple, with complementary advertisements on their foreheads, was certainly worth more than the sum of two unmatching foreheads. Those people would easily recognize the value of it.

Enrico did not display a great deal of enthusiasm: first, because the idea wasn’t his; second, because even if it had been, he would never have dared to propose it to Laura; third, because, well, three years is a long time, and it seemed to him that Laura inscribed, branded like a calf, and right on her clean, pure forehead, would not be the same Laura as before. Nevertheless, he let himself be convinced, and two days later they showed up together at the agency and asked for Rovati. There was some haggling, but not too fierce; Laura expounded upon her arguments with grace and conviction, Rovati evidently found her forehead all too pleasing, and the end result was nine million lire. As for what would be inscribed, there was not much of a choice: the only business that intended to advertise a product suitable for a bipartite presentation was a cosmetics company. Enrico and Laura signed the contract, picked up their check, were given a receipt, and headed down to the graphics center. A girl in a white coat painted a pungent-smelling

liquid onto their foreheads, exposed them for a few minutes to a flashing blue light from a lamp, and stamped a stylized lily directly above their noses. On Laura's forehead, she then inscribed in an elegant cursive, "Lilywhite, for Her," and on Enrico's forehead, "Lilybrown, for Him."

Two months later they were married, though those two months were rather difficult for Enrico. At the office, he had been obliged to make quite a few explanations, and could find nothing better to say than the plain truth —actually, almost the plain truth, because he didn't mention Laura, and claimed the nine million was earned by his forehead alone. He chose to reveal the amount, because he was afraid of being criticized for having sold himself for too little. Some approved, others disapproved; he didn't think he became any more popular, nor did he think anyone much noticed the scent emanating from his forehead. He struggled with two conflicting impulses: to blurt out the address of the agency to everyone so as not to be alone; or, instead, to keep it secret so as not to depreciate his value. His embarrassment increased a good deal some weeks later, when he saw Molinari, serious and intent as he always was, sitting at his drafting table, with the slogan "Healthy Teeth with Alnovol" blazed across his forehead.

Laura had, or met with, fewer problems. At home, no one found anything to ridicule; in fact, her mother was quick to get herself over to the agency, but they sent her away telling her plainly that her forehead had too many wrinkles to be usable. Since Laura was no longer a student and didn't yet work, she had few friends, so didn't have much trouble falling out of touch for a while. She went around to the shops in order to complete her trousseau, and buy furniture, and she could feel that she was being stared at, but no one asked her any questions.

They decided to go on their honeymoon by car, and take a tent, but they avoided organized campgrounds, and even after they came home they agreed to go out in public as little as possible: something not too difficult for two young newlyweds, and even less so since they had a house to set up. In any case, within a few months their discomfort was almost gone. The agency must have done a good job, or maybe other agencies had imitated them, because by then it was no longer rare to see on the street or on the tram individuals with inscriptions across their foreheads. For the most part they were young men or attractive girls, many of them obviously immigrants. In their same apartment block a young couple, the Massafras, had inscribed on their foreheads, in twin versions, an exhortation to enroll

in a correspondence school for professionals. The two couples soon became friends, and got into the habit of going together to the cinema and out to dinner in a restaurant on Sunday night; a table was reserved for the four of them, always the same one, to the far right of the entrance. They soon realized that a table next to theirs was habitually frequented by other inscribed people, and, naturally, they began to engage in conversation and to exchange confidences regarding their respective contracts, their previous experiences, their relationship with the public, and their future plans. Even at the cinema, whenever possible, they chose the seats that were to the right of the entrance because they noticed that several others who were inscribed, men and women, preferred to sit in those seats.

Toward November, Enrico calculated that one citizen in thirty had something inscribed on his forehead. For the most part, they were advertisements similar to theirs, but every once in a while they came across solicitations or declarations that were different. At the shopping center, they saw an elegant young woman who bore on her face “Johnson the Jerkoff”; on Via Larga a boy with a pug nose like a prizefighter’s announced “Order = Civilization”; behind the steering wheel of a Mini Morris stopped at a red light, a thirty-something man with sideburns bore “Empty Ballot!”; on the No. 20 tram two charming twins, barely adolescent, wore respectively on their foreheads, “Long Live Milan”[1] and “Go Zilioli”;[2] an entire class of teenagers coming out of a high school bore the slogan “Sullo So Home.”* One evening, in a dense fog, they encountered an indescribable character, dressed in a garish getup, who seemed drunk or drugged, and the light of the street lamp revealed the words “Internal Anguish.” It soon became very common to see children on the streets with insults, dirty words, “Long Live . . . ,” and “Down with . . .” scribbled across their foreheads in ballpoint pen.

And so Enrico and Laura felt less alone. They even began to feel proud, because they considered themselves to be, in some measure, pioneers and progenitors. They also learned that offers from the agencies had plummeted. Among those who had been inscribed for some time, word had it that for a normal slogan, of a single line, lasting three years, they no longer offered more than 300,000 lire, and double that for a text up to thirty words with a company logo. In February, they received a complimentary copy of the first issue of *The Foreheads’ Gazette.* It wasn’t clear who had published it; three-quarters of the magazine was predictably crammed full of advertising,

and the remaining quarter was suspicious. A restaurant, a campground, and various shops offered small discounts to the Foreheads; it was alleged that a Foreheads' club existed in an alley on the outskirts of town; the Foreheads were invited to come to a church dedicated to St. Sebastian. Out of curiosity, Enrico and Laura went one Sunday morning: behind the altar there was a large plastic crucifix, and the letters "INRI" were inscribed on Christ's forehead rather than on the scroll above his head.

Close to the end of the third year of the contract, Laura discovered that she was expecting a baby, and she was very happy, even if with the recent increase in the cost of living their financial situation was not bright. They went to Rovati to propose a renewal, but they found him rather less congenial than he had once been; he offered them a ridiculous sum for a long and ambiguous text featuring Danish films of a certain kind. They refused, in mutual agreement, and went down to the graphics center to have their inscriptions removed. Despite the reassurances of the girl in the white coat, however, Laura's forehead remained rough and nubby, as if it had been scalded, and upon closer observation the stylized lily was still distinguishable, like the faded Fascist graffiti on walls in the countryside.

The baby was born normally, at term. He was robust and beautiful, but, inexplicably, on his forehead was written "Homogenized Cavicchioli." They brought him to the agency, and Rovati, having made the appropriate inquiries, declared that such a company title did not exist in any trade directory and was unknown by the Chamber of Commerce, and therefore could offer them absolutely nothing, not even any kind of compensation for damages. He nonetheless gave them a voucher for the graphics center so that the writing on the infant's forehead could be removed free of charge.

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1. A soccer team in Milan.
2. Italo Zilioli, b. 1941, a professional cyclist.

Best Is Water

In the solitude of the laboratory, Boero was debating with himself, but could come to no conclusion. In order to get that post, he'd worked and studied hard for two years, and he'd even done a few things he was rather ashamed of, like playing up to Curti, for whom he had little respect. In front of Curti, he had even (deliberately or ingenuously, he wasn't sure even about this) cast doubt on the ability and qualifications of two of his colleagues and rivals.

Now he'd made it, he was a legitimate insider. His territory was small, but his own: a stool, a desk, half a cabinet of glassware, a square meter of a worktable, a lab coat, and a hanger to hang it on. He had made it, yet none of it was as marvelous as he had expected it to be; it wasn't even fun. In fact, it was rather sad to think (a) that just being in a laboratory didn't make you feel mobilized, a soldier on the scientific front; and (b) that, at least for a year, he would have to dedicate himself to a diligent and mindless job, diligent precisely because it was mindless, a job that required diligence alone, a job that had already been done by at least ten others, totally unknown, all of whom were probably dead, having died without any name greater than the one lost among thirty thousand others on the vertiginous list of authors found in Landolt's tables.

Today, for example, he was to verify the value of the coefficient of viscosity of water. Yes, sir, of distilled water. Can you imagine a more tedious job? Washing the viscometer twenty times a day is a job for a launderer, not a young physicist. It's a job for an accountant, a wonk, an insect. And that's not all. The fact is that the values found today don't match those of yesterday. These are things that happen, but no one will

outright admit to them. There's a difference, small but certain, obstinate in the way that only facts know how to be obstinate. The natural malevolence of inanimate things is, after all, well established. And so the machine is washed again, the water distilled for the fourth time, the thermostat checked for the sixth time, you whistle so as not to curse, and the measurements are taken again.

He spent all afternoon repeating the measurements but, not wanting to ruin his evening, didn't do the calculations. He did them the following morning and, sure enough,* the difference was still there, and not only that, there was even a slight increase. Now, it should be said that Landolt's tables are sacred: they are the Truth. One is given the task of retaking the measurements out of sadism, Boero suspected. Only the fifth and fourth significant figures have to be verified, but if the third doesn't correspond, and this was his case, what the hell are you supposed to do? To doubt Landolt, it should be said, is far worse than to doubt the Gospels. If you are wrong, you are smothered with ridicule and risk your career, and if you are right (which is unlikely) you don't get any more credit or glory than, in fact, the accountant, the wonk, and the insect. At the very most you got the pathetic joy of being right when another was wrong, which lasted as long as a morning.

He went to talk about it with Curti, who was predictably furious. He insisted that he retake the measurements. Boero told him that he had already done so numerous times and that he'd had it up to here with them. Curti told him to change careers. Boero walked down the stairs convinced that he would do just that, seriously, radically. Curti could find himself another slave. He didn't go back to the Institute for an entire week.

Brooding is unchristian, painful, boring, and generally not worth it. He knew it, but still for four days he'd done nothing else. He tried all the variations, went over all the things he had done, heard, and said. He examined the causes and effects of each and every one. He raved and negotiated. He stretched out on the gray sand beside the Sangone River, smoking one cigarette after another in an attempt to calm down and regain his sense of reality. He wondered if he really had burned his bridges, if he really would have to change careers, or if he should go back to Curti and

come to some agreement. Or if, perhaps, it would make even more sense for him just to take his job back, flick his thumb against the scale, and falsify the results.

The sound of the cicadas distracted him and he became lost in observation of the eddies forming around his feet. The phrase “Best is water” came to mind, but who had written it? Pindar, maybe, or another of those worthy types you study in high school.[1] In any case, on closer inspection, it appeared that something was wrong with the water. He’d known that river for many years, he’d played in it as a child, and later, exactly to this same spot, he’d brought a girl, and then another. Well, no doubt about it, the water was strange. He touched it, tasted it. It was cool, clear, had no taste, gave off its usual faint marshy smell, and yet it was strange. It seemed less mobile, less lively. The little waterfalls weren’t creating air bubbles, there were fewer ripples on the surface, even the rumble of waves on the shore was different, dulled, as if muffled. He went toward the deep part of the river and threw a rock into it. The radiating ripples were slow and lazy, and dissipated long before reaching the shore. He remembered that the municipal aqueduct water intake system was not far from there. Suddenly his sluggishness disappeared and he felt as keen and as shrewd as a snake. He had to get a water sample. He searched his pockets in vain, then climbed up the bank to where he had left his motorcycle. In one of the two saddlebags he found a sheet of plastic that he sometimes used to protect the seat from rain. He made a little container out of it, filled it with water, tied it tightly, and then took off like a rocket for the laboratory. The water was grotesque: 1.300 centipoise at 20°C, 30 percent higher than normal.

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The water of the Sangone was viscous from its sources to its confluence with the Po. The water of all the other rivers and streams was normal. Boero had made up with Curti—actually it was Curti who had made up with Boero, forced to do so by the facts. They quickly and furiously drafted a paper under both their names, but when it was in proofs they had to write another, even faster and more furiously, because in the meantime the water of both the Chisone and the Pellice had started to become viscous, and the

Sangone's water had reached a value of 1.450 centipoise. These waters were unchanged by distillation, dialysis, and filtration through absorption columns. If subjected to electrolysis with a recombination of hydrogen and oxygen, water identical to the original was obtained. After lengthy electrolysis under elevated tension, the viscosity increased even more.

That was April. In May the Po, too, became abnormal—first only in a few stretches, then through the entire course of the river to its mouth. The water's viscosity was by now visible to the untrained eye, the currents flowing silently and sluggishly, without a whisper, like a spill of degraded oil. The river's upper parts were clogged, and tended to flood, while farther down it was low and where it branched out near Pavia and Mantua had silted over in a matter of a few weeks.

The suspended sediments settled much more slowly than usual. By mid-June the delta, seen from the air, was surrounded by a yellowish halo with a radius of twenty kilometers. At the end of June, it rained all over Europe; in northern Italy, Austria, and Hungary the rain was viscous, had trouble draining off, and stagnated in the fields, which then turned into swamps. On all the plains, the harvests were destroyed, while in zones with even a mild incline the crops flourished more than usual.

The anomaly rapidly expanded in the course of the summer, by a mechanism that defied every attempt at explanation: viscous rains were reported in Montenegro, Denmark, and Lithuania, while a second epicenter was looming over the Atlantic, off Morocco. No instrument was needed to distinguish these rains from normal ones—the drops were heavy and large, like little blisters, cleaving the air with a slight hiss and squashing onto the ground with a particular crackling sound. Drops of two or three grams were collected. Doused with this water, asphalt became gluey and it was impossible to circulate on it with rubber-wheeled vehicles.

Within a few months, in the contaminated zones all, or almost all, the trees with tall trunks were dead, replaced by weeds and shrubs. The fact was attributed to the difficulty the viscous water had in ascending the trunks' capillary veins. In the cities, civic life continued almost normally for some months, though it was observed that there was a diminished flow in all the pipes carrying drinkable water; and bathtubs and sinks also took longer to drain. Washing machines became unusable: they filled with foam as soon as they were switched on, and their motors burned out.

At first, it seemed that the animal world offered a protective barrier against the entry of the viscous water into the human organism, but that hope was short-lived.

The current situation was established within little more than a year. Defenses gave way much earlier than was expected. All the body's humors thickened and became defiled, just as the seawater, the rivers, and the clouds had. The sick are dead, and now all of us are sick—our hearts, miserable pumps created for another epoch's water, tire themselves out from dawn to dawn trying to push the viscous blood through our network of veins. We die at thirty, or forty maximum, of edema, of sheer exhaustion, of a constant fatigue, merciless and unabated, which weighs upon us from the day we're born and prevents any rapid or sustained movement.

Like the rivers, we, too, are sluggish. The food that we eat and the water we drink must wait hours before it can become absorbed into our bodies, and this renders us inert and heavy. We don't cry. The lacrimal liquid remains uselessly in our eyes and doesn't form into teardrops but oozes like a serum denying us all dignity and relief from our tears. Before we knew what was happening, we were ambushed by this evil, and now all of Europe is afflicted. In America and other places, they are only beginning to suspect the nature of the water's alteration, but they are a long way from finding a remedy. In the meantime, it's been reported that the level of the Great Lakes is rapidly increasing, that the whole of the Amazon is turning into a swamp, that the upper Hudson continually floods, destroying its banks, and that the rivers and lakes of Alaska freeze into an ice that is no longer brittle but as elastic and strong as steel. The Caribbean Sea no longer has waves.

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1. The phrase "Best is water" is from the opening line of Pindar's *First Olympian Ode*.



Volume II



THE PERIODIC TABLE

Translated by Ann Goldstein

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Ibergekumeneh tsores iz gut tsu dertsailen.
(It’s good to tell past troubles.)

Argon

In the air we breathe are the so-called inert gasses. They bear curious Greek names of scholarly origin, which signify “the New,” “the Hidden,” “the Lazy,” “the Foreigner.” In fact, they are so inert, so satisfied with their condition, that they don’t interfere in any chemical reaction or combine with any other element, and so they passed unobserved for centuries: not until 1962 did a chemist of goodwill, after prolonged and ingenious efforts, manage to compel the Foreigner (xenon) to combine fleetingly with the avid, vivacious fluorine, and the enterprise appeared so extraordinary that he was awarded the Nobel Prize. These gasses are also called noble, and here it could be debated whether all the nobles are inert and all the inerts noble; finally, they are also called rare, although one of them, argon, the Lazy, is present in the air in the respectable amount of 1 percent—that is, twenty or thirty times as abundant as carbon dioxide, without which there would be no trace of life on this planet.

From the little I know of my forebears they resemble these gasses. They were not all physically inert, because that was not granted to them: rather, they were, or had to be, fairly active, in order to earn a living and because of a dominant morality according to which “if you don’t work you don’t eat”; but inert they undoubtedly were deep down, inclined to disinterested speculation, witty conversation, elegant, pedantic, and gratuitous argument. It can’t be coincidence if the activities attributed to them, while extremely varied, have in common something static, an attitude of dignified abstention, of voluntary (or accepted) relegation to the margin of the great river of life. Noble, inert, and rare: their history is meager compared with that of other illustrious Jewish communities of Italy and Europe. It seems

that they came to Piedmont around 1500, from Spain through Provence, as certain characteristic toponymic surnames seem to demonstrate, such as Bedarida-Bédarrides, Momigliano-Montmélian, Segre (a tributary of the Ebro that flows past Lérida, in northeastern Spain), Foà-Foix, Cavaglion-Cavaillon, Migliau-Millau; the name of the small town of Lunel, near Bouche-du-Rhône, between Montpellier and Nîmes, was translated into the Hebrew Jaréakh ("moon" = *luna*), and from this came the Jewish-Piedmontese surname Jarach.

Rejected, or not warmly welcomed, in Turin, they settled in various agricultural towns in southern Piedmont, where they introduced the technology of silk; even in the most prosperous periods, they were never more than an extremely small minority. They were neither much loved nor much hated; no stories of notable persecutions have been handed down, yet a wall of suspicion, of undefined hostility, of scorn, must have kept them essentially separate from the rest of the population until many decades after the emancipation of 1848 and the consequent urban migration, if what my father told me about his childhood in Bene Vagienna is true: that his classmates, when school was out, used to mock him (benignly) by waving goodbye with a corner of their jacket held in a fist, so that it looked like a donkey ear, and chanting, "*Ôrije 'd crin, ôrije d'asô, a ji ebreô ai piasô*." "Pig's ears, mule's ears, that's what the Jews like." The allusion to ears is arbitrary; the gesture was in origin a sacrilegious parody of the greeting that Jews exchange in the synagogue when they are called on to read the Bible, showing one another the hem of their prayer shawl, whose ribbons, minutely prescribed by ritual as to number, length, and form, are charged with mystic and religious significance. But the boys no longer knew the source of their gesture. I note here in passing that contempt for this prayer shawl is as ancient as anti-Semitism: from such shawls, confiscated from the deportees, the SS had underwear made, which was then distributed to the Jewish prisoners in the camps.

As always happens, the rejection was mutual: the minority erected a symmetrical barrier against all Christianity (*gôjím, ñarelím*: "the peoples," "the uncircumcised"), reproducing, on a provincial scale and against a peacefully bucolic background, the epic and Biblical situation of the chosen people. On this fundamental displacement the good-humored wit of our uncles (*barba*) and aunts (*magne*) was nourished—wise patriarchs smelling

of tobacco and domestic queens of the house, who still proudly called themselves *’l pòpôl d’Israél*.

As for the term “uncle,” I should point out immediately that it has to be understood in a very broad sense. It’s customary among us to call “uncle” any old relative, however distant; and since all or almost all the old people of the community are, ultimately, our relatives, it follows that we have a large number of uncles. Then, in the case of uncles and aunts who reach an advanced age (a frequent occurrence: we are a long-lived people, ever since Noah), the attributive *barba* or, respectively, *magna* tends to slowly fuse with the name and, assisted by ingenious diminutives and an unsuspected phonetic analogy between Hebrew and Piedmontese, stiffens into complex, strange-sounding appellations that are handed down unvaried from generation to generation together with the deeds, the memories, and the sayings of those who bore them for so long. Thus originated Barbaiòtô (Uncle Elia), Barbasachín (Uncle Isacco), Magnaiéta (Aunt Maria), Barbamôisín (Uncle Mosè, of whom the story is told that he had his two lower incisors removed by a quack so that he could hold the stem of his pipe more comfortably), Barbasmelín (Uncle Samuel), Magnavigàia (Aunt Abigaille, who as a bride had entered Saluzzo riding a white mule, coming up the frozen Po from Carmagnola), Magnafôriña (Aunt Zefora, from the Hebrew Tzippora, which means “bird”: a splendid name). Nònô—grandfather—Sacòb must have belonged to an even remoter epoch; he had been in England to buy fabrics, and so wore “*’na vestimenta a quàder*,” a checked suit; his brother, Barbapartín (Uncle Bonaparte: a name still common among the Jews, in memory of the first, ephemeral emancipation, bestowed by Napoleon), had been demoted from the rank of uncle because the Lord, blessed be His name, had given him a wife so unbearable that he had himself baptized, became a monk, and went off as a missionary to China, to get as far away from her as possible.

Nona—grandmother—Bimba was beautiful: she wore an ostrich-feather boa and was a baroness. Napoleon had made her and all her family barons, because they *l’aviô prestaie ’d mañòd*, had lent him money.

Barbarônín was tall, strong, and had radical ideas: he had escaped from Fossano to Turin and had had a lot of jobs. He had signed on at the Teatro Carignano as an extra in *Don Carlos* and had written to his family to come to the premiere. Uncle Natàn and Aunt Allegra came and sat in the gallery. When the curtain rose and my aunt saw her son fully armed as a Philistine,

she shouted as loudly as she could, “*Rônín, co’ t fai! Posa côl sàber!*” “Aronne, what are you doing! Put down that dagger!”

Barbamiclín was a simpleton; in Acqui he was respected and protected, because the simple are children of God and thou shalt not call them “fool.” But they called him Piantabibini (Turkey Planter), from the time when a *rashàn* (a cruel person) had made fun of him by making him believe that turkeys (*bibini*) can be sowed like peach trees: you plant their feathers in the furrows, and they grow on the branches. Moreover, the turkey had an oddly important place in this witty, gentle, and tidy family world: maybe because, being conceited, clumsy, and quick-tempered, it expresses the opposite qualities and easily becomes a laughingstock; or maybe, more simply, because during Passover, at its expense, a celebrated semi-ritual *quaiëtta ’d pitô* (turkey meatball) was made. For example, Uncle Pacifico raised a turkey hen and was very attached to her. Opposite him lived Signor Lattes, who was a musician. The turkey clucked and disturbed Signor Lattes; he asked Uncle Pacifico to keep his turkey quiet. The uncle answered, “*Sarà fàita la soâ commission. Sôra pita, c’a staga ciútô*.” “Your request will be carried out. Signora turkey, be quiet.”

Uncle Gabriele was a rabbi and so was known as Barba Morénô, Uncle Our Teacher. Old and almost blind, he was returning on foot, under the burning sun, from Verzuolo to Saluzzo. He saw a cart coming, stopped it, and asked for a ride; but then, speaking to the driver, he slowly realized that it was a funeral cart, carrying a dead Christian woman to the cemetery, which was an abomination, because, as it is written in Ezekiel 44:25, a priest who touches a dead man, or even merely enters a room where a dead man is lying, is contaminated and impure for seven days. He jumped up and cried, “*I eu viagià côn ’na pegartà! Viturín fermé!*” “I’ve traveled with a dead woman! Stop, driver!”

Gnôr Grassiadiô and Gnôr Côlômbô were two friendly enemies who, the story goes, since time immemorial had lived across from each other, on two sides of a narrow street in Moncalvo. Gnôr Grassiadiô was a Mason and very rich: he was a little ashamed of being Jewish and had married a *gôià*, that is, a Christian, with long blond hair, down to the ground, who was unfaithful. This *gôià*, although she was a *gôià*, was called Magna Ausilia, which indicates a certain degree of acceptance on the part of those who came later; she was the daughter of a sea captain, who had given Gnôr Grassiadiô a large, multicolored parrot that came from Guyana and said in

Latin, “Know thyself.” Gnôr Côlômbô was poor and a follower of Mazzini: when the parrot arrived, he bought himself a mangy crow and taught it to speak. When the parrot said, “*Nosce te ipsum*,” the crow answered, “*Fate furb*”: “Wise up.”

But with regard to Uncle Gabriele’s *pegartà*, Gnôr Grassiadiô’s *gôià*, Nona Bimba’s *mañòd*, and the *havertà* we’ll talk about below, an explanation is indispensable. *Havertà* is a mangled Hebrew word, both in form and in sense, and potently meaningful. Properly, it’s a random feminine form of *havèr = compagno* (“companion”) and means “servant,” but it contains the secondary idea of a woman of low birth, and of different beliefs and customs, who is forced to lodge under our roof. The *havertà* is by nature unclean and ill bred, and by definition maliciously curious about the habits and the conversations of the masters of the house, who are thus obliged to use in her presence a special vocabulary, which obviously includes the term *havertà* itself, in addition to the ones cited above. This vocabulary has now nearly disappeared; a couple of generations back, it was still flourishing, with hundreds of words and locutions, consisting for the most part of Hebrew roots with Piedmontese endings and inflections. Even a cursory study reveals its dissembling and covert function, like an underworld slang, meant to be employed when speaking of the *gôjím* in the presence of the *gôjím*, and also as a way of responding boldly, with incomprehensible insults and curses, to the regime of seclusion and oppression that they had established.

Its historical interest is small, because it was never spoken by more than a few thousand people, but its human interest is great, like that of all fluid border languages. It has a marvelous comic force, arising from the contrast between the fabric of the speech, which is the rough, sober, and laconic Piedmontese dialect, never written except on a bet, and the Hebrew framework, plucked from the remote language of the fathers, sacred and solemn, geologic, smoothed by the millennia like a riverbed by the glaciers. But this contrast mirrors another, that essential conflict of the Jews of the Diaspora, scattered among “the peoples” (the *gôjím*, that is), and stretched between divine vocation and the daily misery of exile; and still another, more general, and innate in the human condition, for man is a centaur, a tangle of flesh and mind, of divine breath and dust. The Hebrew people, after the dispersal, lived this conflict long and painfully, and drew from it not only its wisdom but its laughter, which is missing from the Bible and

the Prophets. Yiddish is pervaded by it, and, within modest limits, so was the strange speech of our fathers in this land, which I want to recall here before it disappears: a skeptical, good-natured speech that might upon superficial examination appear blasphemous, but in fact has a richly affectionate and decorous intimacy with God, Nôssignôr, Adonai Eloénô, Cadòss Barôkhú.

That it is rooted in humiliation is evident: it lacks, for example, as being of no use, terms for "sun," "man," "day," "city," while it does present terms for "night," "hide," "pennies," "prison," "dream" (the last used almost exclusively in the expression *bahalòm*, "in your dreams," added sarcastically to a statement so that one's companion, and only he, understands it as its opposite), "steal," "hang," and so on; further, there exist a good number of pejoratives, sometimes used to judge people but more typically employed, for example, between wife and husband pausing at the counter of a Christian shopkeeper and undecided on their purchase. We'll mention "*'n saròd*," the royal plural, no longer understood as such, of the Hebrew *tzarà*, "misfortune," and used to describe goods or a person of little value, which also has the charming diminutive *sarôdín*. Nor would I want the fierce nexus "*saròd e senssa mañòd*" to be forgotten, which is an expression used by the marriage broker in the case of girls who are ugly and have no dowry; or *hasirúd*, an abstract collective from *hasír*, "pig," and so practically equivalent to "filth, piggishness." Note that the (French) *u* sound doesn't exist in Hebrew; rather, there is the ending "út" (with the Italian *u*), which is used to coin abstract terms (for example, *malkhút*, "kingdom," from *mélekh*, "king") but lacks the strongly negative connotation that it had in the dialect use. Another typical and obvious use of these and other words was in the shop, by the owner and his assistants against the customers: in Piedmont in the last century the fabric business was often in Jewish hands, and a specialized subjargon arose that, handed down by salesclerks who became in turn owners, and were not necessarily Jewish, spread to many shops of that type and is alive today, spoken by people who are amazed when they happen to find out that they are using Jewish words. For example, someone might still use the expression "*'na vesta a kiním*," to indicate a polka-dotted dress; now, *kiním* are lice, the third of the ten plagues of Egypt, enumerated and sung in the ritual of Passover.

Then, there is a modest assortment of somewhat improper words, which can be used not only in their literal sense in front of children but also in

place of insults: in that case, compared with the corresponding Italian or Piedmontese terms, they offer the advantage, apart from the one previously mentioned of not being understood, of relieving the heart without flaying the mouth.

A few terms that allude to things pertaining to the Catholic faith are surely more interesting to the scholar of usage. In this case the original, Hebrew form is much more profoundly corrupted, and for two reasons: in the first place, secrecy was strictly necessary, because comprehension of such words on the part of Gentiles could have led to the dangerous accusation of sacrilege; in the second place, the mangling had the precise purpose of denying, of obliterating, the magical-sacred content of the word, hence eliminating any supernatural quality. For the same reason, in all languages the Devil is designated by names that have an allusive and euphemistic character, enabling the speaker to refer to him without uttering his name. The Church (Catholic) was called *tônevà*, a word whose origin I have not managed to reconstruct, and which probably only sounds like Hebrew; while the synagogue, with proud modesty, is called simply *scóla*, or "school," the place where one learns and is educated, and, in parallel, the rabbi is designated not by the proper term "rabbi" or *rabbénu* ("our rabbi") but as Morénô (our teacher) or Khakhàm (the Wise Man). At *scóla*, in fact, one is not wounded by the hateful Khaltrúm of the Gentiles: Khaltrúm, or Khantrúm, is the ritual and the religiosity of Catholicism, which is intolerable because it's polytheistic and, above all, teeming with images ("You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness . . . and you shall not bow down to them," Exodus 20:3), and hence idolatrous. The origin of this term, which is full of loathing, is also obscure, and almost certainly not Hebrew; but in other Jewish-Italian dialects there exists the adjective *khalto*, precisely in the sense of ostentatiously pious, and used principally to describe the Christian worshipper of images.

A-issà is the Madonna (it means simply "the woman"). Completely—and predictably—cryptic and indecipherable is the term "Odò," which one used, when it really couldn't be helped, to refer to Christ, lowering one's voice and looking around circumspectly: it's as well to mention Christ as infrequently as possible, because the myth of the Deicide People dies hard.

Numerous other terms were taken word for word from the liturgy and the sacred books, which Jews born in the last century read more or less

fluently in the original Hebrew, and often largely understood; but in colloquial usage they tended to distort or arbitrarily extend the words' semantic reach. From the root *shafokh*, which means "pour out" and appears in Psalm 79 ("Pour out your anger over the peoples who do not recognize you, and over the kingdoms that do not call on your name"), our ancient mothers had taken the domestic expression *fé sefòkh*, "make *sefòkh*," as a delicate description of baby vomit. From *rúakh*, plural *rukhòd*, which means "breath," an illustrious word that can be read in the marvelous mysterious second verse of Genesis ("The wind of the Lord breathed over the face of the waters"), came *tiré 'n rúakh*, "a wind is blowing," in its various physiological meanings: here one recognizes the Chosen People's Biblical familiarity with their Creator. Handed down as an example of a practical application was Aunt Regina's saying, as she sat with Uncle Davide in the Caffè Fiorio on Via Po, "*Davidín, bat la cana, c'as sentô nèn le rôkhòd!*" ("David, beat your cane so people won't hear you"), which attests to a conjugal relationship of affectionate intimacy. As for the cane, by the way, it was at that time a symbol of social status, as today traveling first class on the train might be: my father, for example, had two, a bamboo one for weekdays, and the other of malacca, with a silver-plated handle, for Sunday. He didn't use the cane for support (he didn't need it); rather, he would twirl it jauntily in the air, to keep insolent dogs out of his path—like a scepter, in other words, to distinguish him from the common people.

Berakhà is the blessing: a pious Jew is enjoined to utter it more than a hundred times a day, and he does so with profound joy, thus maintaining the age-old dialogue with the Eternal, who in every *berakhà* is praised and thanked for his gifts. Nonô Leônìn, my great-grandfather, who lived in Casale Monferrato, had flat feet; there was a cobblestone street in front of his house, and walking on it was painful. One morning he came out of the house and found the street paved, and he exclaimed from the bottom of his heart, "*'N abrakhà a côi gôím c'a l'an fàit i lòsi!*" "A blessing on those infidels who made the paving stones." The curious pair *medà meshônà* was used as a curse: literally, "strange death," but in effect a calque of the Piedmontese *assidènt*. Also attributed to Nonô Leônìn is the inexplicable imprecation "*C'ai takèissa 'na medà meshônà fàita a paraqua*," "May he suffer a stroke in the shape of an umbrella."

I couldn’t leave out Barbaricô, who was closer in time and space, being almost (by a single generation) my uncle in the restricted meaning of the term. I have a personal memory of him, and so it’s distinct and complex, not *figé dans un’attitude*, like that of the mythical characters I’ve recalled up to now. The simile of the inert gasses with which these pages began fits Barbaricô perfectly.

He studied medicine and became a good doctor, but he didn’t like the world. That is, he liked men and, especially, women, meadows, the sky, but not labor, the rattling of carts, the intrigues of a career, the struggle for daily bread, obligations, schedules, and deadlines: nothing, in other words, about the frenzied character of life in the city of Casale Monferrato in 1890. He would have liked to escape, but he was too lazy to do that. His friends and a woman who loved him, and whom he tolerated with distracted kindness, persuaded him to compete for the post of doctor on a transatlantic liner; he won the competition easily, made a single voyage from Genoa to New York, and on his return to Genoa quit, because in America “*a j’era trop bôrdél*,” there was too much noise.

After that he took up residence in Turin. He had several women, who all wanted to redeem and marry him, yet he considered not only marriage but a well-equipped office and the regular practice of his profession too demanding. Around 1930 he was a timid, bent, and shabby old man, frighteningly myopic; he lived with a fat, vulgar *gôià*, from whom he occasionally and halfheartedly tried to free himself, and whom time and again he called *’na sôtià, ’na hamortà, ’na gran beemà* (a lunatic, an ass, a big beast), but without animosity, and in fact with a streak of inexplicable tenderness. This *gôià* “*a vôría fiña félô samdé*,” even wanted him to be baptized (literally, “destroyed”), something that he always refused, not out of religious conviction but out of indifference and a lack of initiative.

Barbaricô had no fewer than twelve brothers and sisters, who referred to his companion by the ironic and cruel name Magna Môrfina: ironic because the woman, poor thing, as a *gôià*, and childless, could not be a *magna* except in a very limited sense, and in fact the name was to be understood as its opposite, non-*magna*, one excluded and cut off from the family; cruel because it contained an allusion that was probably false, and certainly harsh, to a particular use she made of Barbaricô’s prescription pad.

The two lived in a dirty, disorderly garret in Borgo Vanchiglia. My uncle was an excellent doctor, full of human wisdom and diagnostic insight, but he lay on his bed all day reading books and old newspapers: he was an attentive reader, mindful, eclectic, and tireless, although his myopia forced him to hold the printed page the width of three fingers from his spectacles, which were as thick as the bottom of a water glass. He got up only when a client sent for him, which happened often, because he almost never asked to be paid; his patients were poor people of the neighborhood, from whom he accepted in exchange half a dozen eggs, or greens from the garden, or maybe a pair of worn-out shoes. He went to his patients on foot, because he didn't have money for the tram; when, in the fog of his myopia, he glimpsed a girl on the street, he would approach and, to her surprise, examine her carefully, moving around her at a distance of a handsbreadth. He ate almost nothing, and more generally he had no wants; he was over ninety when he died, discreetly and with dignity.

Similar to Barbaricô in her rejection of the world was Nona Fina, one of four sisters who were all called Fina: this peculiarity was due to the fact that the four girls had been sent successively to the same wet nurse, in Bra, who was called Delfina, and who gave the name to all of her nurslings. Nona Fina lived in Carmagnola, in lodgings on the second floor, and did magnificent crochet work. At sixty-eight she had a slight illness, a *caôdaña*, as ladies used to have then, and today, mysteriously, no longer do: from that moment, for the next twenty years, and that is until her death, she never left her room; frail and pallid, she waved to the people coming out of *scòla* on Saturdays from a balcony crowded with geraniums. But she must have been very different in her youth, if what is told of her is true: that when her husband brought home as a guest the learned and illustrious Rabbi of Moncalvo, she fed him, without his knowledge, *'na côtlëtta 'd hasír*, a pork chop, because there was nothing else in the pantry. Her brother Barbaraflín (Raffaele) was known before his promotion to Barba as *'l fieul'd* Môisé'd Celín, the son of Môisé'd Celín. When he was already at a mature age and very wealthy because of the *mañòd* he had earned as a military supplier, he fell in love with a beautiful Dolce Valabrega di Gàssino; he didn't dare to declare it, but wrote her love letters that he didn't send, and passionate responses to himself.

Marchín, a former *barba*, had an unhappy love story, too. He had fallen in love with Susanna (which means "lily" in Hebrew), a lively and pious

woman, who was the repository of an age-old recipe for making goose salami: the neck of the bird is itself used as the casing for these salamis, and, as a consequence, in the Lassòn Acòdesh (in the "holy language," that is, in the dialect we are concerned with) three synonyms for "neck" survived. The first, *mahané*, is neutral, and of technical and generic use; the second, *savàr*, is used only in metaphors, like *a rôta 'd savàr*, at breakneck speed; the third, *khanèc*, is charged with meaning, alluding to the neck as a vital pathway that can be obstructed, occluded, or cut off, and is used in curses like *c'at resta ant 'l khanèc*, "may you choke on it," and *khanichésse*, meaning "go hang yourself." Marchín was Susanna's salesclerk and assistant, both in the mysterious kitchen-workshop and in the shop, on whose shelves salamis, religious ornaments, amulets, and prayer books were all mixed up together. Susanna refused him, and Marchín took revenge in a detestable way, by selling the recipe for the salami to a goy. Probably this goy didn't appreciate its value, since after Susanna's death (which took place in historical times) it was impossible to find goose salami worthy of the name and the tradition. For this despicable retaliation Uncle Marchín lost the right to be called uncle.

Most distant of all, prodigiously inert, wrapped in a thick shroud of legend and improbability, and fossilized in every fiber of his rank of uncle, was Barbabramín of Chieri, the uncle of my maternal grandmother. He had become very wealthy at a young age, having acquired from the local nobility numerous farms, from Chieri to Astigiano; counting on his inheritance, his relatives squandered all their property in banquets, balls, and trips to Paris. Now it happened that his mother, Aunt Milca ("queen"), got sick, and after much argument with her husband she was induced to agree to a *havertà*, that is, a maid, something that until then she had firmly refused to do. Barbabramín was promptly overwhelmed by love for this *havertà*, probably the first woman less than holy it had been granted him to approach.

Her name has not been handed down, but rather some attributes. She had an exuberant beauty and possessed splendid *khalaviòd* (breasts: the term is unknown in classical Hebrew, where, however, *khalàv* means "milk"). She was, naturally, a *gôià*, and she was insolent and didn't know how to read or write; on the other hand, she was a very skilled cook. She was a peasant, *'na pôñaltà*, and went barefoot in the house. With all this, precisely, Uncle fell in love: with her ankles, her freedom of language, and

the food she cooked. He said nothing to the girl, but he declared to his father and mother that he intended to marry her; his parents flew into a rage, and Uncle took to his bed. He remained there for twenty-two years.

Of what Barbabramín did during these years different stories are told. Certainly he spent a good part of them sleeping and gambling; it is known with certainty that he was ruined financially, because “he didn’t cut the coupons” of the treasury bills, and because he had entrusted the management of the farms to a *mamsér* (“bastard”), who sold them for a song to a straw man; in accord with the forebodings of Aunt Milca, Uncle thus dragged the entire family into his ruin, and even today they lament the consequences.

It’s also recounted that he read and studied, and that, finally, considered wise and just, he received from his bed delegations of the notables of Chieri and settled controversies; and it’s said, of this same bed, that the way was not unknown to that same *havertà*, and that, at least in the first years, the uncle’s voluntary seclusion was interrupted by nocturnal sorties to play billiards in the café next door. But, after all, in bed he remained, for almost a quarter of a century, and when Aunt Milca and Uncle Salomone died, he married the *havertà* and brought her to bed definitively, because by now he was so weakened that his legs would no longer support him. He died poor, but rich in years and in fame, and in peace of spirit, in 1883.

The Susanna of the goose salami was a cousin of Nona Màlia, my paternal grandmother, who survives as a tiny, dolled-up enchantress in some studio portraits taken around 1870, and as wrinkled, angry, slovenly, and fabulously deaf in my most distant childhood memories. Even today, inexplicably, the highest shelves of the closets yield up her precious relics: shawls of lace embroidered with iridescent lamé, elegant silk embroideries, a muff of marten fur mutilated by the moths of four generations, massive silver cutlery marked with her initials—as if, after almost fifty years, her restless spirit still visited our house.

In her good days she was known as la Strassacoeur, the Heartbreaker: she became a widow very early, and the rumor was that my grandfather had killed himself in despair because of her infidelities. In Spartan fashion she raised three children and educated them, but at an advanced age she let herself marry an old Christian doctor, majestic, bearded, and taciturn, and from then on she inclined to avarice and strangeness, although in her youth she had been royally generous, as beautiful, well-loved women tend to be.

With the passing of the years she estranged herself totally from family affections (which she probably never felt deeply anyway). She lived with the doctor on Via Po in a dark, gloomy apartment, warmed in winter only by a Franklin stove, and she threw nothing away, because everything might come in handy at the right moment: not even the cheese rind, or the tinfoil chocolate wrappers, with which she made silver balls to send to the Missions "to free a black child." Maybe out of fear of making the wrong choice, she went on alternate days to the *scòla* on Via Pio V and the parish church of Sant'Ottavio, and it seems that she even went sacrilegiously to confession. She was over eighty when she died, in 1928, in the presence of a chorus of neighbors, disheveled, dressed in black, and mad like her, led by a witch who was called Madama Scílimberg: amid the torments of kidney failure Grandmother watched Madama Scílimberg until her last breath, out of fear that she would find the *maftèkh* ("key") hidden under the mattress and take away her *mañòd* and the *hafassím* ("jewels," which all turned out to be paste anyway).

At her death, her sons and daughters-in-law devoted themselves for weeks, in dismay and disgust, to sorting out the mountain of domestic debris that had invaded the apartment: Nona Màlia had saved, indiscriminately, refined objects and revolting rubbish. From severe walnut wardrobes came armies of bugs dazzled by the light, and then linen sheets that had never been used, and others patched and threadbare, worn to transparency; curtains and coverlets of double-sided damask; a collection of straw hummingbirds, which crumbled to dust when they were touched. In the cellar were hundreds of bottles of precious wine turned to vinegar. Eight brand-new coats belonging to the doctor were found, packed in mothballs, along with the only one she had ever let him use, all patches and mends, the collar shiny with use, and in the pocket a Masonic shield.

I remember almost nothing about her; my father called her Maman (in the third person), and loved to describe her with a gluttonous taste for the bizarre, barely tempered by a veil of filial piety. Every Sunday morning, my father brought me to visit Nona Màlia: we walked slowly along Via Po, and he stopped to pet all the cats, to sniff all the mushrooms, and to leaf through all the used books. My father was l'Ingegnè, the Engineer, his pockets always bursting with books, known to all the salami makers because he checked with a slide rule the multiplication on the bill for the prosciutto. Not that he bought it with a light heart: rather superstitious than religious,

he felt uneasy about breaking the rules of kashruth, but he liked prosciutto so much that, before the temptation of the shop windows, he yielded every time, sighing, cursing under his breath, and looking at me furtively, as if he feared my judgment or hoped for my complicity.

When we reached the gloomy landing of the apartment on Via Po, my father rang the bell, and to Grandmother, who came to open the door, he shouted in one ear, "*Al' è 'l prim 'd la scòla!*" "He's first in his class!" Grandmother invited us in with evident reluctance and led us through a string of dusty, uninhabited rooms, one of which, scattered with sinister instruments, was the half-abandoned office of the doctor. The doctor was almost never seen, nor certainly did I wish to see him, from the day I had surprised my father telling my mother that when children who stuttered were brought to him he took a pair of scissors and cut off the membrane under their tongue. Reaching the good living room, my grandmother took out of a hiding place the box of chocolates, always the same one, and offered me one. The chocolate was moth-eaten, and, filled with embarrassment, I hid it in my pocket.

Hydrogen

It was January. Enrico came to call me right after lunch: his brother had gone off into the mountains and had left him the keys to the laboratory. I got dressed in a second and joined him in the street.

During the walk, I learned that his brother had not exactly left the keys: this was a condensed formulation, a euphemism, of the type spoken to those who are quick to understand. His brother, contrary to his usual practice, had not hidden the keys or taken them with him; besides, he had forgotten to repeat to Enrico the prohibition against laying hands on those keys, and the threats if Enrico should violate that prohibition. In the end, in short: the keys were there, after months of waiting; Enrico and I were determined not to miss our chance.

We were sixteen, and I was fascinated by Enrico. He wasn't very active, and he wasn't a good student, but he had qualities that distinguished him from all our other classmates, and did things that no one else did. He had a calm and stubborn courage, a precocious capacity to perceive his own future and to give it weight and shape. He spurned (but without sneering) our interminable discussions, by turns Platonic, Darwinian, later Bergsonian; he wasn't vulgar, he didn't boast of his athletic or virile abilities, he never lied. He was aware of his limits, but you would never hear him say (as we all said to one another, in search of comfort or an outlet for a bad mood): "You know, I'm a real idiot."

He had a slow, prosaic imagination: he lived on dreams, like all of us, but his dreams were reasonable; they were dull, possible, close to reality, not romantic, not cosmic. He wasn't acquainted with my tortured oscillations between heaven (a scholastic or athletic success, a new

friendship, a rudimentary and fleeting love) and hell (a bad grade, remorse, a brutal revelation of inferiority that appeared each time to be permanent, conclusive). His goals were always attainable. He dreamed of promotion, and he patiently studied things that didn't interest him. He wanted a microscope, and he sold a racing bike to get one. He wanted to be a pole vaulter, and he went to the gym every evening for a year, without putting on any airs or dislocating any limbs, until he reached the 3.5 meters he had fixed on, and then he stopped. Later, he wanted a certain woman, and got her; he wanted enough money to live in tranquility, and he got it, after ten years of boring, pedestrian work.

We had no doubt: we would be chemists, but our expectations and hopes were different. Enrico asked of chemistry, reasonably, the tools for an income and a secure life. I asked something else: for me chemistry represented a vague cloud of imminent powers, which enveloped my future in black spirals torn by flashes of fire, like the one that obscured Mount Sinai. Like Moses, I expected from that cloud my law, order in myself, around me, and in the world. I was sated with books, though I continued to devour them with indiscriminate voracity, and was looking for another key to the true heights: a key there must be, and I was certain that, because of some monstrous plot against me and the world, I would not get it at school. At school I was administered huge doses of notions that I diligently digested, but they didn't warm my blood. I watched the buds swell in spring, the mica sparkle in the granite, my own hands, and said to myself, "I'll understand this, too, I'll understand everything, but not the way *they* want. I'll find a shortcut, I'll make myself a picklock, I'll force the doors." It was exhausting, nauseating, to listen to lectures on the problem of being and knowing, when all around us was mystery wanting urgently to reveal itself: the old wood of the desks, the sphere of the sun beyond the windows and the rooftops, the idle flight of milkweed in the June air. There—would all the philosophers and all the armies in the world be capable of creating that gnat? No, and not even of understanding it: this was a shame and an outrage, another path had to be found.

We would be chemists, Enrico and I. We would dredge the belly of mystery with our powers, with our genius: we would grip Proteus by the throat, we would bring a halt to his inconclusive metamorphoses from Plato to Augustine, from Augustine to St. Thomas, from St. Thomas to Hegel, from Hegel to Croce. We would force him to speak.

This being our program, we could not afford to waste opportunities. Enrico's brother, a mysterious and quick-tempered person Enrico did not willingly talk about, was a chemistry student and had set up a laboratory at the back of a courtyard, in an odd narrow, twisting alley that goes off Piazza della Crocetta, and stands out in the obsessive Turinese geometry like a rudimentary organ trapped in the evolved structure of a mammal. The laboratory, too, was rudimentary: not in the sense of an atavistic remnant but, rather, in the sense of extreme poverty. There was a tiled counter, a little glassware, some twenty decanters containing reagents, a lot of dust, a lot of spiders, scant light, and extreme cold. All along the way we had discussed what we would do, now that we were going to "enter the laboratory," but our ideas were confused.

It seemed to us an embarrassment of riches, and was instead a different embarrassment, deeper and more fundamental: an embarrassment tied to an ancient atrophy, ours, our families', our caste's. What did we know how to do with our hands? Nothing, or almost. The women, yes: our mothers and grandmothers had quick, agile hands, they knew how to sew and cook, some even how to play the piano, paint with watercolors, embroider, braid hair. But we, and our fathers?

Our hands were clumsy and weak at the same time, regressed, insensitive: the least educated part of our bodies. Having completed their first basic experiences of play, they had learned to write and nothing else. They knew the convulsive grip of the branch of a tree, because we loved to climb, out of a natural desire and, at the same time (for Enrico and me), a confused homage and return to the origin of the species; but they didn't know the solemn, balanced weight of the hammer, the concentrated force of blades, which had been too prudently forbidden, the eloquent texture of wood, the similar yet different malleability of iron, lead, and copper. If man is the maker, we were not men: we knew it and suffered for it.

The laboratory glass entranced and intimidated us. Glass, for us, was what one mustn't touch because it breaks, and yet, on closer contact, it proved to be a material different from all others, sui generis, full of mystery and caprice. In that, it's like water, which has no congeners: but water is linked to man or, rather, to life by immemorial custom, by a relationship of multiple needs, so that its uniqueness is hidden under the guise of habit. Glass, on the other hand, is the work of man and has a more recent history. It was our first victim or, rather, our first adversary. In the Crocetta

laboratory there were glass tubes for lab use, in various diameters, in long pieces and short, all covered with dust: we lit a Bunsen burner and set to work.

Bending a tube was easy. You had only to hold a piece firmly over the flame: after a certain time the flame turned yellow, and the glass simultaneously became faintly luminous. At this point the tube could be bent: the bend obtained was quite far from perfect, but in effect something happened, a new, arbitrary form was created. A potential became actual, and wasn't that what Aristotle intended?

Now, a copper or lead tube can also be bent, but we quickly realized that the red-hot glass tube possessed a unique virtue: when it became pliant you could, by rapidly pulling apart the two cold ends, create very thin filaments —in fact infinitesimally thin, so that they were drawn upward by the current of hot air that rose from the flame. Thin and flexible, like silk. But then where had the unyielding rigidity of solid glass gone? And what about silk, and cotton, too—if they could be obtained in solid form, would they be rigid, like glass? Enrico told me that in the village where his grandfather lived the fishermen used to catch silkworms when they were already fat and, eager to make their cocoons, struggling blindly, clumsily, to climb the branches: the fishermen would catch them, snap them in two with their fingers, and, pulling apart the stumps, obtain a silk thread that was thick and coarse and extremely resistant, and which they then used as a line. This fact, which I did not hesitate to believe, seemed to me at once horrible and fascinating: horrible because of the cruel manner of that death and the pointless use of a natural wonder; fascinating because of the bold and reckless act of genius that it assumed on the part of its mythical inventor.

The glass tube could also be blown: this, however, was not so easy. You could seal the end of a small tube: then, when you blew hard from the other end, a bubble formed, which was very beautiful to look at and almost perfectly spherical but had absurdly thin walls. If you blew just a little too much, the walls took on the iridescence of a soap bubble. This was a sure sign of death: the bubble burst with a sharp *pop*, and the fragments scattered on the ground with the faint rustling of eggshells. In a way, it was a just punishment: glass is glass, and it should not have to simulate the behavior of soapy water. If you stretched the terms a little, the experience could be seen as an Aesopian fable.

After an hour of struggle with the glass, we were tired and humiliated. Our eyes were inflamed and dry from looking at burning glass, our feet were frozen and our fingers covered with burns. Besides, working glass isn't chemistry: we were in the laboratory with another goal. Our goal was to see with our own eyes, to bring about with our own hands, at least one of the phenomena described so casually in our chemistry textbook. One could, for example, prepare nitrous oxide, which in Sestini and Funaro was still described by the not very proper and not very serious term "laughing gas." Would it really make us laugh?

Nitrous oxide is made by cautiously heating ammonium nitrate. There was none in the laboratory; there was ammonia and nitric acid instead. Unable to make preliminary calculations, we mixed them until we got a neutral reaction on litmus paper, but as a result the mixture became very hot and emitted a lot of white smoke; then we decided to boil it to get rid of the water. The laboratory quickly filled with an unbreathable fog, which didn't make us laugh; we stopped the experiment, luckily for us, because we didn't know what can happen if you heat this explosive salt less than cautiously.

It was neither simple nor much fun. I looked around, and in a corner saw an ordinary dry-cell battery. That's what we would do: the electrolysis of water. It was an experiment with a sure outcome, which I had already carried out at home several times: Enrico wouldn't be disappointed.

I put water in a beaker, dissolved a pinch of salt in it, turned two empty jam jars upside down in the beaker, found two rubber-coated copper wires, attached them to the poles of the battery, and inserted the ends into the jars. From them a tiny procession of bubbles rose up into the jars: if you looked carefully, in fact, you could see that more or less twice the gas was being released from the cathode as from the anode. I wrote on the blackboard the well-known equation and explained to Enrico that what was written there was actually happening. Enrico didn't seem totally convinced, but it was now dark and we were half dead with cold; we washed our hands, bought some chestnut cake, and went home, leaving the electrolysis to continue on its own.

The next day we found the way clear again. In sweet deference to the theory, the cathode jar was almost full of gas, the anode half full: I pointed this out to Enrico, trying to look big, and to inspire in him the suspicion that, I won't say the electrolysis, but its application, as a demonstration of

the law of definite proportions, was an invention of mine, the fruit of patient experiments conducted in the privacy of my room. But Enrico was in a bad mood and questioned everything. “Who says it’s really hydrogen and oxygen?” he said rudely. “What if it’s chlorine? Didn’t you put salt in it?”

To me the objection was offensive: how could Enrico doubt my assertion? I was the theorist, I alone. Although he was the proprietor (to a certain extent, and then only by “transfer”) of the laboratory—in fact, precisely because he was in no position to boast of other qualifications—he should have abstained from criticism. “Now we’ll see,” I said. I carefully lifted up the cathode jar and, holding it with the mouth down, lit a match and brought it close. There was an explosion, small but sharp and angry, the jar splintered (luckily I was holding it at chest height and not higher), and there in my hand, like a sarcastic symbol, was the circular glass bottom of the jar.

We left, discussing what had happened. My legs were trembling slightly; I felt a retrospective fear, and at the same time a certain foolish pride, in having confirmed a hypothesis and unleashed a force of nature. So it really was hydrogen: the same that burns in the sun and the stars, and from whose condensation universes form in eternal silence.

Zinc

For five months, packed in like sardines and reverent, we had been attending Professor P.'s lectures on General and Inorganic Chemistry, taking away from them sensations that varied but were all exciting and new. No, P.'s chemistry was not the engine of the Universe or the key to Truth: P. was a skeptical and ironic old man, an enemy of all rhetoric (that, and only that, was why he was also an anti-Fascist), intelligent, obstinate, and, in his own spiteful way, shrewd.

Stories were handed down of examinations conducted with cold ferocity and ostentatious bias: his preferred victims were women in general and then nuns, priests, and anyone who showed up "in uniform." Suspicious tales circulated of a maniacal stinginess in his running of the Chemistry Institute and his own laboratory: that he kept boxes and boxes of used matches in the basement and forbade the janitors to throw them away; that in his long-ago youth he had built the mysterious minarets of the institute, which still bestow on that stretch of Corso Massimo d'Azeglio a foolish stamp of false exoticism, so that he could celebrate a foul secret orgy of salvage, burning the year's rags and filter papers, and personally analyzing the ashes, with miserly patience, to extract any valuable elements (and perhaps even the least valuable), in a sort of ritual palingenesis, at which only Caselli, his loyal technician-porter, was authorized to be present. It was also said of him that he had spent his entire academic career demolishing a certain theory of stereochemistry, not through experiments but through publications. Someone else—his great rival—did the experiments, in some unknown part of the world: one by one, as they were published in *Helvetica chimica acta*, he tore them to pieces.

I couldn’t swear to the authenticity of these rumors: but, truly, when he entered the Preparations lab, no Bunsen burner was low enough, and so it was prudent to turn them off; truly, he had the students prepare silver nitrate using the five-lire coin with the eagle that they took out of their pockets, and nickel chloride using the twenty-cent piece with the flying naked woman; and, truly, the only time I was admitted to his office I found written on the blackboard, in fine script, “I do not want a funeral, alive or dead.”

I found P. congenial. I liked the sober rigor of his lessons; I was amused by the scornful ostentatiousness with which at exams he wore, in place of the prescribed Fascist shirt, a comical black bib, several inches wide, and how at each of his brusque movements it came untucked from the lapels of his jacket. I appreciated his two textbooks, obsessively clear, concise, filled with his stern disdain for humanity in general and lazy, dull students in particular, because all students, by definition, were lazy and dull; anyone who, by great good luck, managed to show that he was not became his equal, and was honored with a laconic and precious word of praise.

Now our five months of restless waiting had passed: from among us eighty students, the twenty who were least lazy and least dull had been chosen, fourteen boys and six girls, and to us the Preparations laboratory had been opened. What, exactly, it was none of us had a precise idea; it seems to me that it was an invention of his, a modern, technical version of a savage initiation rite, in which each of his subjects was abruptly torn from book and desk and transplanted into the midst of smoke that burned the eyes, acids that burned the hands, and practical events that did not square with theories. I certainly wouldn’t question the usefulness—rather, the necessity—of this initiation: but in the brutality with which it was carried out it was easy to discern P.’s spiteful talent, his instinct for hierarchical distances and contempt for us, his flock. In short: not a word, uttered or written, was wasted by him as a viaticum, to encourage us on the road we had chosen, to indicate to us its dangers and traps, or to pass on to us its tricks. I’ve often thought that P. was at heart a savage, a hunter: a man who goes hunting has only to grab the gun, or, rather, the assegai and the bow, and set off for the forest; success or lack of it depends on him alone. You pick up and go; when the moment arrives seers and augurs have no place, theory is vain, and you learn along the way. The experiences of others are of no use—what’s essential is taking your own measure. The worthy win; those who have weak eyes or arms or sense of smell turn back and change

career. Of the eighty I mentioned, thirty changed careers in the second year, and twenty more later.

The laboratory was orderly and clean. We were there for five hours a day, from two until seven; at the entrance, an assistant assigned each of us a preparation, and then we went to the “store,” where the hirsute Caselli handed over the primary material, exotic or domestic—a piece of marble to this one, ten grams of bromine to that one, a little boric acid to the other, a handful of clay to yet another. Caselli entrusted these treasures to us with an undisguised air of suspicion: it was the bread of science, the bread of P., and, finally, it was also his stuff, stuff that he administered; who knew what improper use we, inexpert and profane, might make of it.

Caselli loved P. with a love that was acerbic and polemical. It seems that he had been loyal for forty years; he was P.’s shadow, his earthly incarnation, and, like all who perform vicarious functions, he was an interesting human specimen—like those, I mean, who represent Authority without possessing it themselves, such as, for example, sacristans, museum guides, janitors, hospital attendants, lawyers’ and notaries’ clerks, sales representatives. These, to greater or lesser degrees, tend to pour the human substance of their Chief into their own mold, as happens with pseudomorphic crystals: sometimes they suffer from it, often they enjoy it, and they possess two distinct schemes of behavior, according to whether they act on their own or “in the exercise of their duties.” It frequently happens that the personality of the Chief invades them so thoroughly that it disturbs their normal human relations, and so they remain celibate: celibacy is in fact prescribed and accepted in the monastic state, which brings with it proximity and subjection to the greatest of authorities. Caselli was a withdrawn, taciturn man in whose melancholy but proud expressions one could read:

> He is a great scientist and, as his famulus, I, too, am a little great;
>
> I, though humble, know things that he doesn’t know;
>
> I know him better than he knows himself; I anticipate his actions;
>
> I have power over him; I defend and protect him;

I can speak ill of him because I love him; to you this is not allowed;

His principles are just, but he applies them laxly, and “it wasn’t like that in the old days.” If it weren’t for me . . .

. . . and in fact Caselli managed the institute with a parsimoniousness and an intolerance of innovation superior to those of P. himself.

What fell to my lot, the first day, was the preparation of zinc sulfate. It shouldn’t be too difficult: you had to make an elementary stoichiometric calculation and attack the granulated zinc with previously diluted sulfuric acid; concentrate, crystallize, dry at the pump, wash, and recrystallize. Zinc, *zinco, Zink:* laundry tubs are made of it, it’s an element that doesn’t say much to the imagination, it’s gray and its salts are colorless, it’s not toxic, it doesn’t provide gaudy chromatic reactions—in other words, it’s a boring element. It’s been known to humanity for two or three centuries and is therefore neither a glorious veteran like copper nor one of those very new trace elements that still contain the thrill of their discovery.

Caselli handed over my zinc; I returned to my counter and got ready to work. I felt curious, ill at ease, and vaguely annoyed, as when, at thirteen, you have to go to temple to recite the bar mitzvah prayer, in Hebrew, in front of the rabbi: the moment, longed for and a little feared, had arrived. The hour had struck for the appointment with Matter, the great antagonist of Spirit: the hyle, which, oddly, is embalmed in the endings of the alkyl roots —methyl, butyl, and so forth.

The other raw material, zinc’s partner, that is, sulfuric acid, you didn’t have to get from Caselli: there was plenty of it everywhere. Concentrated, naturally: it has to be diluted with water. But be careful, all the books say, you have to operate in reverse; that is, pour the acid into the water and not vice versa, otherwise that innocuous-looking oil can be subject to furious rages—even high school boys know this. Then you put the zinc in the diluted acid.

Written in the lecture notes was a detail that at first reading had escaped me, and that is that tender, delicate zinc, so yielding in the face of acids, which make a single mouthful of it, behaves quite differently when it’s very pure: then it stubbornly resists attack. Two opposing philosophical conclusions could be drawn: praise of purity, which protects us from evil like a hauberk; praise of impurity, which lets in change—that is, life. I

threw out the first, as grossly moralistic, and paused to consider the second, which was more congenial to me. For the wheel to turn, for life to live, impurities are needed, and the impurities of impurities: in the earth, too, as we all know, if it is to be fertile. We need dissent, difference, the grain of salt, the mustard seed. Fascism doesn't want them, forbids them, and so you're not a Fascist; it wants everyone to be the same, and you are not the same. But immaculate virtue doesn't exist, or if it does it's detestable. So take the solution of copper sulfate, which is in the reagents cupboard, add a drop of your sulfuric acid, and you'll see the reaction get under way: the zinc awakens, develops a white skin of hydrogen bubbles, and we're there, the spell has been cast, you can leave it to its fate and take a short walk through the laboratory to see what's new and what the others are doing.

The others were doing various things: some were working intently, maybe whistling to give an appearance of casualness, each with his particle of hyle; others wandered about or looked out the windows at Valentino Park, which was now completely green; still others were smoking or chatting here and there.

In one corner was a hood, and in front of the hood sat Rita. I approached, and realized with fleeting pleasure that she was cooking the very dish I was: with pleasure because for some time I had been hovering around Rita. In my mind I prepared brilliant conversational openings, and then at the decisive moment didn't dare speak, putting it off till the next day. I didn't dare because of a deep timidity and distrust, and also because Rita discouraged contact, I don't know why. She was very thin, pale, sad, and self-assured; she passed the exams with good grades but without a genuine appetite—such as I felt—for the things she studied. She wasn't friendly with anyone, no one knew anything about her, she said little, and for all these reasons she attracted me. I tried to sit next to her in class, but she wasn't very welcoming, and I felt frustrated and challenged. Rather, I felt desperate, and certainly not for the first time; during that period, in fact, I believed I was condemned to a perpetual male solitude, denied forever a woman's smile, something I needed as I needed air.

It was clear that this day offered an occasion that could not be wasted: between Rita and me there existed at that moment a bridge, a little bridge of zinc, narrow but practicable; come now, take the first step.

Buzzing around Rita I became aware of a second lucky circumstance: a well-known cover was sticking out of her purse, yellow with a red border,

and on the cover stood a crow with a book in its beak. The title? Only a few letters could be read, but that was enough for me: it was my own guide in those months, the timeless story of Hans Castorp in his enchanted exile on the Magic Mountain. I asked Rita what she thought of it, filled with anxiety about her opinion, as if I had written the book myself: and I soon had to admit that she was reading the novel in a completely different way. As a novel, to be exact: she was interested in knowing how far Hans would go with Madame Chauchat, and she skipped relentlessly the fascinating (to me) political, theological, and metaphysical discussions of the humanist Settembrini and the Jewish Jesuit Naphta. It doesn't matter: better, there's room for debate. It could even become an essential and fundamental debate, because I, too, am a Jew and she isn't: I am the impurity that makes the zinc react, I am the grain of salt, the mustard seed. Impurity, certainly: since *La Difesa della Razza*[1] had just begun publication in those months, and there was a lot of talk about purity, and I was starting to be proud of being impure. The truth is that until then being Jewish hadn't much mattered to me: privately, and with my Christian friends, I had always considered my origin as a nearly negligible but curious fact, a small, cheerful anomaly, like having a crooked nose or freckles; a Jew is someone who doesn't have a Christmas tree, who shouldn't eat salami but eats it anyway, who learned a little Hebrew at the age of thirteen and then forgot it. According to the periodical cited above, a Jew is miserly and clever: but I was not especially miserly or clever, nor was my father.

So there was much to discuss with Rita, but the conversation I meant to have didn't get going. I soon realized that Rita was different from me; she wasn't a mustard seed. She was the daughter of a poor, invalid shopkeeper. The university, for her, was not the temple of Knowledge: it was a thorny and laborious path that led to a degree, a job, and an income. She had worked since childhood: she had helped her father, had been a clerk in a village shop, and even now bicycled through Turin to make deliveries and collect payments. All this did not distance me from her; on the contrary, I found it admirable, like everything about her—her uncared-for hands, her shabby clothes, her firm gaze, her concrete sadness, the reserve with which she accepted my conversation.

So my zinc sulfate ended badly. It became a concentrate and was reduced to a white powder that gave off in suffocating clouds all or almost all of its sulfuric acid. I abandoned it to its fate and offered to accompany

Rita home. It was dark, and her home wasn’t near. The goal I had proposed to myself was objectively modest, but to me it seemed of an unparalleled audacity: I hesitated for half the way, and felt I was on burning coals, and intoxicated myself and her with breathless, rambling conversation. Finally, trembling with emotion, I inserted my arm under hers. Rita didn’t withdraw, and yet she didn’t return the grip; but I adjusted my pace to hers and felt happy and victorious. It seemed to me that I had won a small yet decisive battle against the darkness, the emptiness, and the hostile years that were coming on.

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1. *La Difesa della Razza* (*Defense of the Race*) was a violently anti-Semitic biweekly that began publication in 1938.

Iron

Outside the walls of the Chemistry Institute it was night, Europe’s night: Chamberlain had returned, duped, from Munich; Hitler had entered Prague without firing a shot; Franco had subdued Barcelona and was sitting in Madrid. Fascist Italy, a lesser pirate, had occupied Albania, and premonitions of the imminent catastrophe had condensed like a sticky dew in the houses and the streets, in cautious conversations and drowsy consciences.

But the night did not penetrate those thick walls; Fascist censorship itself, masterpiece of the regime, kept us separate from the world, in a white limbo of anesthesia. Some thirty of us had made it over the high bar of the first exams, and had been admitted to the Qualitative Analysis laboratory of the second year. We had entered the vast smoke-darkened hall like those who, entering the House of God, reflect on their steps. The previous laboratory, of zinc, now seemed to us a childish exercise, as when children play at cooking: something, directly or indirectly, always came out. Maybe the yield was scant, maybe it wasn’t very pure, but you had to be a real dunce, or a contrarian, not to succeed in getting magnesium sulfate from magnesite, or potassium bromide from bromine.

Here no, here things got serious: the confrontation with Materia-Mater, the hostile mother, was harder and more intimate. At two in the afternoon, Professor D., with an ascetic and distracted air, handed each of us precisely one gram of a certain powder: by the next day, we had to complete the qualitative analysis; that is, give an account of what metals and non-metals it contained. An account in writing, in the form of an examination, yes and no, because doubts and hesitations were not admitted: it was a choice each

time, a deliberation—an adult and responsible undertaking, for which fascism hadn't prepared us, and which gave off a good dry, clean odor.

There were easy and guileless elements, incapable of hiding, like iron and copper; others were insidious and fugitive, like bismuth and cadmium. There was a method, a ponderous, primeval scheme of systematic research, a kind of comb and steamroller that nothing (in theory) could escape, but I preferred to invent my path every time, using the quick, improvised thrusts of the privateer rather than the exhausting routine of the war of position: sublimate mercury into drops, transform sodium into chloride or look at it in hopper-shaped crystals under the microscope. Here, one way or another, the relationship with Matter changed, became dialectic: it was a fencing match, a duel. Two unequal adversaries: on one side, interrogating, the unfledged, unarmed chemist, with Autenrieth's text beside him, his sole ally (because D., often called on to help in difficult cases, maintained a scrupulous neutrality; that is, he refused to give an opinion—a wise position, since one who gives an opinion could be wrong, and a professor must not be wrong); on the other, answering enigmatically, Matter, with its sly passivity, as old as the All and prodigiously full of tricks, as solemn and subtle as the Sphinx. I was then beginning to read, with difficulty, German, and I was enchanted by the word *Urstoff* (which means "Element": literally, "primal substance") and the prefix *Ur*, which appeared in it, and expresses ancient origin, remote distance in space and time.

Nor had many words been wasted here on teaching us to defend ourselves against acids, caustics, fires, and explosions: it seemed that, following the crude morality of the institute, the work of natural selection could be counted on to choose among us those most fit for physical and professional survival. Vacuum hoods were few; following the instructions in the text, each of us, in the course of systematic analysis, conscientiously vaporized into the free air a good dose of hydrochloric acid and ammonia, and so a thick white fog of ammonium chloride stagnated permanently in the laboratory and was deposited on the window glass in tiny sparkling crystals. Into the hydrogen sulfide chamber, with its lethal atmosphere, couples in search of intimacy withdrew, as did a few solitary souls to have an afternoon snack.

Through the haze, and the bustling silence, a Piedmontese voice was heard to say: "*Nuntio vobis gaudium magnum. Habemus ferrum*." It was March of 1939, and a few days earlier, with an almost identical solemn

announcement (“*Habemus Papam*”), the conclave that raised Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli to the Throne of Peter had been dissolved. Many placed their hopes in him, since you had to hope in something or someone. The boy who had uttered that sacrilege was the taciturn Sandro.

Among us, Sandro was solitary. He was of average height, thin but muscular, and he never wore a hat, even on the coldest days. He came to class in threadbare corduroy knickerbockers, gray wool knee socks, and sometimes a black cloak that made me think of Renato Fucini. He had large, calloused hands, a rugged, bony profile, a face baked by the sun, and a low forehead beneath the line of his hair, which he wore very short, in a crew cut. He walked with the long, slow steps of a farmer.

The racial laws had been promulgated a few months earlier, and I, too, was becoming solitary. My Christian classmates were civil people, and neither they nor the professors had directed at me a hostile word or gesture, but I felt them growing distant, and, following an ancient code, I grew distant from them: each look exchanged between me and them was accompanied by a tiny but perceptible flash of distrust and suspicion. What do you think of me? What am I to you? The same as six months ago, the peer who doesn’t go to Mass, or the Jew who “in your midst does not mock you”?

I had observed, with amazement and joy, that between Sandro and me something was happening. It wasn’t at all a friendship between two similar types: on the contrary, the difference in our origins made us rich in “goods” to exchange, like two merchants from remote and mutually mysterious lands. It wasn’t even the normal, marvelous intimacy of twenty-year-olds: with Sandro I never reached that. I soon realized that he was generous, perceptive, tough, and bold, with even a touch of bravado, but that he possessed an elusive, wild quality, because of which—although we were at the age when you have the need, the instinct, and the immodesty to inflict on others everything that’s swirling in your head and elsewhere (and it’s an age that can last a long time, but ends with the first compromise)—nothing seeped out of his wrapping of restraint, nothing of his inner world, which you felt was full and fertile, except some rare allusion dramatically cut short. He was made like a cat, a creature you could live with for years without ever being allowed to get under its sacred skin.

We had much to exchange with each other. I told him that we were like a cation and an anion, but Sandro did not appear to acknowledge the

similarity. I was born on the Serra d'Ivrea, a beautiful, miserly land; he was the son of a mason and spent the summers as a shepherd. Not a shepherd of souls: a shepherd of sheep, and not out of Arcadian rhetoric or eccentricity but happily, for love of the land and the grass, and generosity of spirit. He had a curious talent for mimicry, and when he talked about cows, chickens, sheep, and dogs he was transfigured: he imitated their look, their movements and voices; he became lighthearted and seemed to turn into an animal, like a sorcerer. He taught me about plants and animals, but of his family he said little. His father had died when he was a child; they were simple, poor people, and since the boy was smart they had decided to send him to school, so that he could bring home money. He had accepted this with Piedmontese seriousness, but without enthusiasm. He had traveled the long route of elementary and high schools, aiming at the best result with the least effort: he didn't care about Catullus and Descartes, he cared about promotion, and on Sundays he went skiing or rock climbing. He had chosen chemistry because it seemed to him better than other subjects: it was an occupation of things that are seen and touched, a less laborious way of earning one's bread than being a carpenter or a farmer.

We began to study physics together, and Sandro was amazed when I tried to explain to him some of the ideas I confusedly cultivated at that time. That the nobility of Man, acquired in a hundred centuries of trial and error, consisted in making himself master of matter, and that I had enrolled in Chemistry because I wished to keep faith with this nobility. That to conquer matter is to understand it, and understanding matter is necessary in order to understand the universe and ourselves; and that the Periodic Table of Mendeleev, which in those very weeks we were laboriously learning to sort out, was therefore a poem, loftier and more solemn than all the poems we had absorbed in high school: if you thought carefully, it even had rhymes! That, if he was seeking the bridge, the missing link, between the world of papers and the world of things, he needn't look far: it was there, in Autenrieth, in these smoky laboratories of ours, and in our future occupation.

Finally, and fundamentally, didn't he, who was honest and open, smell the foul odor of Fascist truths that were polluting the sky, didn't he find it disgraceful that a thinking man should be asked to believe without thinking? Didn't he feel disgust for all the dogmas, all the unproved declarations, all the imperatives? He did: and so how could he not feel in

our subject a new dignity and a new majesty, how could he be unaware that the chemistry and physics on which we nourished ourselves were, apart from vital nourishment themselves, the antidote to fascism that he and I sought, because they were clear and distinct, at every step verifiable, and not tissues of lies and vanity, like the radio and the newspapers?

Sandro listened to me with ironic attention, always ready to take me down with a few polite, dry words when I crossed the border into rhetoric: but something matured in him (certainly not thanks only to me: these were months filled with fateful events), something that disturbed him, because it was both new and ancient. He, who up till then had read only Salgari,[2] London, and Kipling, suddenly became a furious reader: he absorbed and remembered everything, and in him everything spontaneously arranged itself into a system of life; he also began to study, and his average jumped. At the same time, out of unconscious gratitude, and maybe also out of a desire for revenge, he in his turn began to occupy himself with my education, letting me understand that it was deficient. I, too, might be right. Matter might be our master, and maybe even, for lack of a better, our political school, but he had another matter to show me, another educator: not the powders of Qualitative Analysis but that true, authentic timeless *Urstoff*, the rock and ice of the nearby mountains. He easily demonstrated that I did not have the credentials to speak of matter. What commerce, what intimacy had I had, before now, with the four elements of Empedocles? Did I know how to light a stove? ford a stream? Did I know a high-altitude blizzard? the germination of seeds? No, and so he, too, had something vital to teach me.

An alliance was born, and a frenetic time began. Sandro seemed made of iron, and he was bound to iron by an ancient kinship. The fathers of his fathers, he told me, had been coppersmiths (*magnín*) and blacksmiths (*fré*) in the Canavese valleys: they fabricated nails on a coal forge, rimmed the wheels of carts with red-hot iron, beat metal plates until they were deaf; and he himself, when he saw in a rock a red vein of iron, seemed to have found a friend. In winter, when he got restless, he tied his skis to his rusty bicycle, set off early, and pedaled up to the snow, with no money, only an artichoke in one pocket and the other full of salad. He returned at night, or even the next day, sleeping in haylofts, and the more storms and hunger he endured, the more content he was, and the healthier he felt.

In summer, when he went off on his own, he often brought his dog along for company. It was a yellow mutt with a meek expression: in fact, Sandro had told me, miming in his way the animal episode, as a puppy he had had a run-in with a cat. He had come too close to a litter of newborn kittens, and the mother cat, offended, had begun to hiss and puff up; but the puppy hadn't yet learned the meaning of these signs and sat there like an idiot. The cat had attacked, pursued, caught him, and scratched his nose, and the dog had suffered a permanent trauma. He felt disgraced, and so Sandro had made a ball of rags and explained to him that it was a cat, and every morning he gave it to him so that he could revenge the insult and restore his canine honor. For the same therapeutic reason Sandro brought him to the mountains to play: he tied him to one end of the rope, tied himself to the other, nestled the dog carefully on an outcrop, and then climbed up; when he reached the end of the rope, he gently pulled the dog up, and the dog had learned to walk, head raised, with his four paws against the almost vertical rock face, whimpering under his breath, as if he were dreaming.

Sandro climbed rocks more by instinct than by technique, relying on the strength of his hands and, wherever they gripped, greeting with irony the silicon, calcite, and magnesium he had learned to recognize in the mineralogy course. It seemed to him that he had wasted a day if he hadn't in some way consumed his reserves of energy, and then, too, his gaze became more lively. And he explained to me that if you lead a sedentary life a deposit of fat forms behind the eyes, which isn't healthy; with activity, the fat is consumed, and the eyes retreat to the back of the sockets, becoming sharper.

He was extremely sparing in recounting his adventures. He didn't belong to the race of those who do things so that they can talk about them (like me): he didn't love big words, or, indeed, words. It seemed that, as with climbing, no one had taught him to speak; he spoke the way nobody speaks, saying only the essence of things.

If necessary he could carry a thirty-kilo pack, but usually he went without: his pockets were enough, with some vegetable, as I said, a piece of bread, a knife, sometimes the CAI mountain-climbing guide, its pages creased, and always a roll of wire for emergency repairs. He carried the guide not because he had faith in it: rather, for the opposite reason. He rejected it because he felt it to be a chain, and also a bastard creature, a

detestable hybrid of snow and rock and paper. He carried it to the mountains to vilify it, happy if he could catch it at fault, even at the expense of himself and his climbing companions. He could walk for two days without eating, or eat three meals at once and then set off. For him, all seasons were good. In winter he skied, but not in the fashionable, well-equipped places, which he avoided with laconic mockery; since we were too poor to buy sealskins for the ascents, he showed me how to sew rough hemp cloths, Spartan equipment that absorbs water and then freezes like a codfish, and on the way down you tie it around your waist. He dragged me on exhausting trips in the fresh snow, far from every human trace, following routes he seemed to intuit like a savage. In summer, going from hut to hut, we became intoxicated with sun, with weariness, with wind, abrading the skin of our fingertips on rock never before touched by the hand of man, but not on the famous peaks or in search of a memorable adventure; that did not matter to him. What mattered to him was to know his limits, to measure himself and improve; more obscurely, he felt the need to prepare himself (and to prepare me) for a future of iron, which came closer every month.

To see Sandro in the mountains reconciled you with the world and made you forget the nightmare weighing on Europe. It was his place, the one he was made for, like the marmots whose whistle and snout he imitated. In the mountains he became happy; it was a silent, contagious happiness, a light turned on. He stirred in me a new communion with earth and sky, in which my need for freedom, the fullness of my powers, and the hunger to understand things that had driven me to chemistry converged. We emerged at dawn, rubbing our eyes, from the doorway of the Martinotti hut,[3] and all around were the white-and-brown mountains, just touched by the sun, as if newly created in the just vanished night, and yet immeasurably ancient. They were an island, an elsewhere.

Yet it wasn’t always necessary to go high and far. In the middle seasons, training grounds of rock were Sandro’s kingdom. There are several of them, two or three hours by bicycle from Turin, and I would be interested to know if anyone still goes there: the peaks of the Pagliaio with the Wolkmann Tower, the Teeth of Cumiana, Roca Patanüa (meaning “bare rock”), the Plô, the Sbarüa, and others, with modest domestic names. This last, Sbarüa, it seems to me, was discovered by Sandro, or by a mythical brother, whom Sandro never let me see but who, from his scattered hints, must have been to him as he was to the general run of mortals. Sbarüa is a deverbative

derived from *sbarüe*, which means “frighten”; the Sbarüa is a prism of granite that sticks out a hundred meters from a small hill bristling with thorns and copses: like the Veglio di Creta,[4] it’s broken from the base to the summit by a crack that narrows as it goes up, until it forces the climber to emerge onto the wall, where, indeed, he is frightened, and where there was a single nail, charitably left by Sandro’s brother.

They were curious places, frequented by a few dozen who, like us, loved them, and whom Sandro knew by name or by sight. We ascended, not without technical problems, amid an irritating buzz of cow flies attracted by our sweat, scaling walls of good solid stone interrupted by grassy shelves where ferns and strawberries grew, or in autumn blackberries; often we used as handholds the trunks of stunted trees, rooted in cracks, and after a few hours we reached the summit, which wasn’t really a summit but generally a tranquil meadow, where the cows looked at us with indifferent eyes. We descended in no time at breakneck speed, on paths scattered with cow dung, ancient and recent, to retrieve our bicycles.

On other occasions the endeavors were more demanding: no pleasant escapes, since Sandro said that we would have time when we were forty to see the panoramas. “*Dôma, neh?*” he said one day in February: in his language, it meant that since the weather was good, we could leave that evening for a winter ascent of the Tooth of M., which for some weeks we had been planning. We slept at an inn and left the next day, not too early, at an unspecified hour (Sandro was not fond of watches: he felt their tacit continuous admonishment as a needless intrusion); we plunged boldly into the fog and emerged around one, into a splendid sun and halfway from the top of a peak that was not the right one.

So I said that we could go back down a hundred meters, cross the middle, and go up the next ridge; or, better still, since we were already there, continue on up and be satisfied with the wrong peak, since it was only forty meters lower than the other; but Sandro, with wonderful bad faith, said, in a few terse syllables, that he was all right with my last proposal, but that, “by the easy northwest ridge” (this was a sarcastic quotation from the aforementioned CAI guide), we could, in half an hour, just as well reach the Tooth of M., and that it was not worth being twenty if we could not afford the luxury of getting lost.

The easy ridge might well have been easy, in fact elementary, in summer, but we found it in uncomfortable conditions. The rock was wet on

the sun side and covered with black ice in the shadow; between one outcrop and the next there were pockets of wet snow where we sank up to our waists. We reached the summit at five, I dragging with exhaustion, Sandro prey to a sinister cheerfulness that I found irritating.

"And to go down?"

"We'll figure it out," he answered, and added mysteriously, "The worst that can happen is we'll taste bear meat." Well, we did taste bear meat, in the course of that night, which we found long. We went down for two hours, not much helped by the rope, which was frozen: a malicious stiff tangle that caught on all the outcrops and banged against the rock like the cable of an aerial tramway. At seven we were on the shore of a frozen lake, and it was dark. We ate the little we had left, built a useless wall on the windward side, and prepared to sleep on the ground, leaning against each other. It was as if even time had frozen; every so often we got up to reactivate our circulation, and the hour was always the same—the wind was always blowing, there was always a specter of a moon, always at the same point in the sky, and in front of the moon the same fantastic cavalcade of ragged clouds. We had taken off our shoes, as described in the books by Lammer that Sandro liked, and kept our feet in our packs; at the first gloomy light, which seemed to come from the snow and not from the sky, we got up, our limbs stiff and our eyes wild with sleeplessness, hunger, and the hardness of our bed: we found our shoes so frozen that they rang like bells, and to put them on we had to sit on them like hens.

But we returned to the valley on our own, and when the innkeeper asked us sardonically how it had gone, meanwhile glancing furtively at our dazed faces, we said brashly that we had had an excellent outing, and we paid the bill and departed with dignity. That was bear meat: and now that many years have passed I regret having eaten so little, since, of all the good that life has given me, nothing, even at a distance, has had the taste of that meat, which is the taste of being strong and free—free even to make a mistake—and master of one's destiny. So I am grateful to Sandro for having knowingly got me in trouble, in that and other adventures senseless only in appearance, and I know absolutely that these were useful to me later.

They were not useful to him, or not for long. Sandro was Sandro Delmastro, the first in the Piedmont military command of the Action Party to fall. In April of 1944, after some months of acute tension, he was captured by the Fascists; he wouldn't give up and tried to escape from the

Casa Littoria in Cuneo. He was killed, with a burst of machine-gun fire to the neck, by a monstrous child executioner, one of those wretched fifteen-year-old thugs whom the Republic of Salò recruited from the reformatories. His body lay abandoned in the street for a long time, because the Fascists had forbidden the people to bury it.

Today I know it's hopeless to try to clothe a man in words, make him live again on the written page, especially a man like Sandro. He was not a man to talk about, or build monuments to, he who laughed at monuments: he was all in his actions, and when those ended nothing of him remained, nothing except words, precisely.

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2. Emilio Salgari (1862–1911), an author of adventure stories that take place in exotic lands.
3. Situated in the Val di Cogne, in the mountains of the Valle d'Aosta.
4. The Old Man of Crete, a reference to *Inferno* Canto XIV.

Potassium

In January of 1941, the fate of Europe and of the world seemed to be sealed. Only the deluded could still think that Germany would not win; the stolid English "didn't know they had lost the match" and stubbornly endured the bombardments, but they were alone and were suffering bloody defeats on all fronts. Only someone who was willfully blind and deaf could doubt the lot reserved for Jews in a German Europe: we had read Feuchtwanger's *The Oppenheim Siblings*, smuggled from France, and a British white paper, arriving from Palestine, in which the "Nazi atrocities" were described; we believed half of it, but that was enough. Many refugees from Poland and France had landed in Italy, and we had talked to them: they didn't know the details of the slaughter that was unfolding under a monstrous veil of silence, but each was a messenger, like those who hastened to Job to say, "I alone escaped to tell you."

Yet if one wished to live, if one wished in some way to take advantage of the youth that ran in our veins, there remained no other recourse than willful blindness: like the English, "we didn't know," we banished all threats into the limbo of things either not perceived or immediately forgotten. One could also, in the abstract, throw off everything and flee, migrate to some distant, mythical country, choosing among the few that had kept their borders open: Madagascar, British Honduras. But to do this required a lot of money and a fabulous capacity for initiative, and I, my family, and my friends possessed neither. Besides, seen from close up and in detail, things did not then seem so disastrous: the Italy around us—that is to say (at a time when people didn't travel much), Piedmont and Turin—was not unfriendly. Piedmont was our true native land, the one where we

recognized ourselves; the mountains around Turin, visible on clear days, and within bicycling distance, were ours, irreplaceable, and they had taught us hard work, endurance, and a certain wisdom. In Piedmont and in Turin were, in other words, our roots, not powerful but deep, extensive, and fantastically intertwined.

Neither in us nor, more generally, in our generation, whether we were "Aryans" or Jews, had the idea that one should and could resist fascism yet made much headway. Our resistance at the time was passive and limited to rejection, to isolation, to not getting contaminated. The seed of active struggle had not survived into our day; it had been suffocated some years earlier, with the final stroke of the scythe that consigned to prison, to internment, to exile, or to silence the last eminent Turinese witnesses: Einaudi, Ginzburg, Monti, Vittorio Foa, Zini, Carlo Levi. These names said nothing to us, we knew almost nothing of them, the fascism around us didn't have opponents. We had to start again from nothing, "invent" our own anti-fascism, create it from the seed, the roots, our roots. We looked around us and took paths that didn't lead far. The Bible, Croce, geometry, physics seemed to us sources of certainty.

We met in the gym of the Talmúd Thorà, the School of the Law, as the old Jewish elementary school was proudly called, and taught one another to find in the Bible justice and injustice and the force that beats down injustice: to recognize in Ahasuerus and Nebuchadnezzar the new oppressors. But where was Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu, "the Holy One, Blessed be He," who breaks the chains of the slaves and drowns the chariots of the Egyptians? He who dictated the Law to Moses, and inspired the liberators Ezra and Nehemiah, no longer inspired anyone; the sky above us was silent and empty. He had let the Polish ghettos be wiped out, and slowly, chaotically, the idea dawned in us that we were alone, that we had no allies to count on, on earth or in heaven, that we would have to find in ourselves the power to resist. The impulse that then impelled us to learn our limits was therefore not completely absurd: to ride hundreds of kilometers on a bicycle, to furiously, patiently climb rock walls we hardly knew, to voluntarily suffer hunger, cold, and weariness, to train ourselves to endure and to decide. A nail goes in or not; the rope holds or doesn't—these, too, were sources of certainty.

Chemistry, for me, had ceased to be one. It led to the heart of Matter, and Matter was our ally, precisely because Spirit, dear to fascism, was our

enemy; but, reaching the fourth year of Pure Chemistry, I could no longer ignore the fact that chemistry itself, or at least what was dispensed to us, did not answer my questions. To prepare bromobenzene or methyl violet following Gattermann was entertaining, even exhilarating, but not that different from following the recipes of Artusi. Why that way and not some other? Having been stuffed in high school with the truths revealed by the Doctrine of Fascism, I was fed up with or suspicious of all truths that were revealed, not demonstrated. Were there theorems of chemistry? No: so you had to go beyond, not be content with the *quia*, go back to origins, to mathematics and physics. The origins of chemistry were ignoble, or at least equivocal: the caves of the alchemists, their abominable confusion of ideas and language, their confessed interest in gold, their Levantine deceptions, like those of charlatans or wizards. At the origin of physics, on the other hand, was the valiant clarity of the West, Archimedes and Euclid. I would become a physicist, *ruat coelum:* maybe without a degree, since Hitler and Mussolini forbade me.

A short course of physics experiments was part of the program for the fourth year of Chemistry: simple measurements of viscosity, surface tension, optical rotary power, and so forth. The course was conducted by a young assistant lecturer, who was thin, tall, slightly hunched, kind, and extraordinarily timid, and who behaved in a way we were not used to. Our other teachers, almost without exception, were convinced of the importance and superiority of the material they taught: some were like that in good faith; for others it was openly a matter of personal supremacy, of a game preserve. This assistant, instead, had an air of almost apologizing to us, of being on our side. In his rather embarrassed, courteous yet ironic smile one seemed to read: “I, too, know that with this antiquated worn-out equipment you won’t accomplish anything useful, and that, in any case, this futility is marginal; knowledge lives elsewhere. But it’s a job you have to do, and so do I, so, please, try not to do too much damage, and learn what you can.” In short, all the girls in the class were in love with him.

In the space of several months I had made desperate attempts, with this and that professor, to enter as a degree student. Some, with twisted mouth, or even rudely, had responded that the racial laws prohibited it; others had had recourse to vague and flimsy pretexts. One night, having politely absorbed the fourth or fifth rejection, I was going home on my bicycle, cloaked in an almost tangible discouragement and bitterness. As I was

listlessly going up Via Valperga Caluso, gusts of cold fog rising from Valentino Park overtook me; it was now night, and the light of the street lamps, masked with violet for the blackout, could not defeat the fog and the shadows. The passersby were few and hurried, and then one of them caught my attention. He was proceeding in my direction with a long, slow step; he wore a long black overcoat and his head was bare, and he walked slightly hunched over: he resembled the Assistant—he was the Assistant. I passed him, unsure what to do; then I plucked up my courage and turned back, and yet again did not dare to speak. What did I know of him? Nothing: he might be indifferent, a hypocrite, even an enemy. Then I thought that I risked nothing but another rejection, and asked straight out if it would be possible to be accepted for experimental research work in his institute. The Assistant looked at me in surprise, and, in place of the long speech that I would have expected, he answered with two words of the Gospel: “Follow me.”

Inside, the Institute of Experimental Physics was full of dust and ancient ghosts. There were rows of glass-fronted cabinets crammed with yellowed pages eaten by mice and moths: observations of eclipses, records of earthquakes, meteorological reports going back to the last century. Along the wall of one corridor I found an extraordinary trumpet, more than ten meters long, whose origin, purpose, or use no one knew: perhaps to announce the Judgment Day, in which all that is hidden will be made plain. There was an aeolipile in Secession style, a Hero’s fountain, and an obsolete, copious fauna of gadgets intended over generations for classroom demonstrations: a pathetic and innocent form of minor physics, in which the choreography counts more than the concept. It’s not illusionism or a conjuring trick, but it’s on the edge.

The Assistant welcomed me to the tiny room on the ground floor that he himself inhabited, and that was bursting with a different sort of equipment, exciting and unknown. Some molecules are carriers of two opposing electric charges, and in an electric field behave like tiny compass needles: they orient themselves, some lazily, others less so. Depending on the conditions, they obey certain laws with greater or less respect: the equipment served to clarify these conditions and this imperfect respect. It was waiting for someone to use it: he was busy with other matters (of

astrophysics, he explained, and the information shook me to the marrow: I had before me, in flesh and blood, an astrophysicist!), and besides, he wasn't practiced in certain operations that he considered necessary in order to purify the products subjected to measuring; for these he needed a chemist, and the welcome chemist was me. He willingly yielded the field and the instruments. The field was two square meters of table and desk; the instruments a small family, the most important being the Westphal balance and the heterodyne. The first I already knew; with the second I soon made friends. It was in substance a radio receiving device, constructed in such a way as to reveal tiny differences of frequency: and in fact it went horribly out of tune, and barked like a farmyard dog, if the operator merely shifted in his chair or moved a hand, or if someone entered the room. Also, at certain hours of the day, it revealed an intricate universe of mysterious messages, Morse code clicks, modulated hisses, and deformed, mangled human voices, which uttered sentences in incomprehensible languages, or in Italian, but these were in code, and meaningless. It was the radiophonic Babel of the war, messages of death transmitted by ships or planes, from who knows whom to who knows whom, beyond the mountains and the sea.

Beyond the mountains and the sea, the Assistant explained to me, lived a wise man named Onsager, of whom he knew nothing except that he had worked out an equation purporting to describe the behavior of polarized molecules under all conditions, provided they were in a liquid state. The equation worked well for diluted solutions; it appeared that no one had taken care of verifying it for concentrated solutions, pure polarized liquids, or mixtures of the latter. This was the work that he offered me, and that I accepted with wholesale enthusiasm: I was to prepare a series of complex liquids and test whether they obeyed Onsager's equation. As a first step, I would have to do what he didn't know how to do: at that time it wasn't easy to find pure products for analysis, and for several weeks I would have to devote myself to purifying benzene, chlorobenzene, chlorophenyl, aminophenol, toluidine, and others.

A few hours' acquaintance was enough for the figure of the Assistant to acquire definition. He was thirty, had recently married, came from Trieste but was of Greek origin, knew four languages, loved music, Huxley, Ibsen, Conrad, and my beloved Thomas Mann. He also loved physics, but he was suspicious of every activity that tended toward a purpose: so he was nobly lazy, and detested fascism *naturaliter*.

His relationship to physics perplexed me. He did not hesitate to stab my latest hippogriff, confirming in explicit words that message about “marginal futility” that we had read in his eyes in the laboratory. Not only those humble experiments of ours but all physics was marginal, by nature, by vocation, in that it set itself to give laws to the universe of appearances, while the truth, the reality, the intimate essence of things and of man are elsewhere, concealed behind a veil, or seven veils (I don’t remember exactly). He was a physicist, more precisely an astrophysicist, diligent and eager, but without illusions: the Truth was beyond, inaccessible to our telescopes, accessible to initiates; it was a long road he was traveling, with hard work, wonder, and deep joy. Physics was prose: an elegant gymnastics of the mind, the mirror of Creation, key to the kingdom of man on the planet—but what is the stature of Creation, of man, of the planet? His road was long, and he had just begun. I was his disciple: did I want to follow him?

It was a terrible request. Being the Assistant’s disciple was for me a pleasure every moment, a bond I had never felt before, without shadows, and intensified by the certainty that the relationship was mutual: I a Jew, made marginal and skeptical by recent events, an enemy of violence but not yet sucked into the necessity of opposing violence, I must have been for him the ideal interlocutor, a blank page on which any message could be inscribed.

I did not mount the gigantic new hippogriff the Assistant offered me. In those months the Germans destroyed Belgrade, broke the Greek resistance, invaded Crete from the air: that was Truth, that was Reality. There were no loopholes, or not for me. Better to remain on the Earth, play with dipoles, for lack of anything better, purify benzene, and prepare for a future that was unknown but imminent and certainly tragic. To purify benzene at that time, in the conditions to which the war and the bombs had reduced the institute, was not a small undertaking. The Assistant explained that I had a completely free hand, I could scrounge everywhere, from the cellars to the attic, appropriate any tool or product, but not buy anything. Not even he could; it was a regime of absolute autarky.

In the basement I found a bottle of technical benzene, 95 percent pure: better than nothing, but the manuals prescribed rectifying it, and then subjecting it to a final distillation in the presence of sodium, to free it from the last traces of dampness. “Rectify” means to distill fractionally,

discarding the fractions that have a boiling point lower or higher than what is prescribed, and collecting the “heart,” which should boil at a constant temperature: in the inexhaustible cellar I found the necessary glassware, including one of those Vigreux columns, which are as delicate as lace, a product of the glassblower’s superhuman patience and ability, but (just between us) of questionable efficacy; the water bath I made with an aluminum pan.

Distilling is beautiful. First, because it is a slow, philosophical, and silent occupation, which absorbs you but leaves you time to think of other things, rather like riding a bicycle. Then, because it includes a metamorphosis, from liquid to gas (invisible) and back to liquid again; but on this double path, up and down, it reaches purity, an ambiguous and fascinating condition, which starts in chemistry and goes far. And, finally, when you prepare to distill you become aware that you are repeating a rite now consecrated by the centuries, an almost religious act, in which from an imperfect material you obtain the essence, the *usía*, the spirit, and in the first place alcohol, which cheers the soul and warms the heart. It took a good two days to obtain a fraction that was pure enough: for this operation, given that I had to work with a free flame, I was voluntarily banished to a small, empty, deserted room on the second floor, far from every human presence.

Now it was a matter of distilling a second time in the presence of sodium. Sodium is a degenerate metal; in fact, it’s a metal only in the chemical sense of the word, certainly not in everyday language. It’s neither rigid nor elastic but soft, like wax. It isn’t shiny, or, rather, it is only if it’s preserved with maniacal attention; otherwise, it reacts instantaneously with the air, developing an ugly, rough rind. And it reacts with water even more rapidly, floating on it (a metal that floats!), dancing frenetically and releasing hydrogen. I searched in vain through the belly of the institute: like Astolfo on the Moon, I found dozens of labeled flasks, hundreds of abstruse compounds, other indeterminate anonymous sediments apparently untouched for generations, but no sodium. Instead I found a vial of potassium: potassium is sodium’s twin, so I took it and returned to my hermitage.

I put a lump of potassium “the size of half a pea” (thus the handbook) in the small flask of benzene and distilled the whole thing diligently; toward the end of the operation I dutifully turned off the flame, dismantled the

apparatus, let the small amount of liquid left in the flask cool a little, and then, with a long, pointed metal rod, speared the “half-pea” of potassium and extracted it.

Potassium, as I’ve said, is the twin of sodium, but it reacts with air and water even more energetically; everyone knows (and I knew, too) that on contact with water it not only releases hydrogen but also catches fire. So I treated my half-pea like a holy relic; I placed it on a piece of dry filter paper, wrapped it up, went into the courtyard of the institute, dug a tiny tomb, and there buried the devilish little corpse. I carefully packed the dirt over it and went back up to my work.

I took the empty flask, placed it under the faucet, and turned on the water. There was a sudden crash, a flame shot out of the neck of the flask straight toward the window, which was near the sink, and the curtains caught fire. As I fumbled around for even some primitive type of extinguisher, the panels of the shutters began to turn brown, and the place was full of smoke. I managed to pull over a chair and tear down the curtains; I threw them on the floor and trampled them madly, while the smoke half blinded me and the blood beat violently in my temples.

When it was all over, when all the burning shreds were put out, I stood for a few minutes, blank and as if stupid, with my knees like rubber, contemplating the traces of the disaster without seeing them. As soon as I had got my breath slightly, I went to the floor below and told the Assistant the story. If it’s true that there is no greater grief than to remember happiness in a time of sorrow, it’s equally true that to recall an anguished moment with a tranquil mind while sitting quietly at one’s desk is a source of profound satisfaction.

The Assistant listened to my account with polite attention but with an air of curiosity: who had forced me to embark on that voyage, to distill the benzene with all that care? Basically it served me right: these are things that happen to the profane, to those who linger, playing at the doors of the temple, instead of entering. But he said nothing; he assumed for the occasion (unwillingly as always) a hierarchical distance and pointed out that an empty beaker doesn’t catch fire: it must not have been empty. It must have contained, if nothing else, benzene gas, besides, naturally, the air that came in through the neck. But benzene gas, cold, has never been observed to catch fire spontaneously; only potassium could have ignited the mixture, and I had removed the potassium. All of it?

All, I answered: but I had a doubt. I went back up to the site of the accident and found the shards of the flask still on the floor; on one of them, if you looked carefully, you could see, just visible, a white speck. I tested it with phenolphthalein: it was basic—potassium hydroxide. The guilty party was found: a minuscule fragment of potassium must have been stuck to the glass of the beaker, just enough to react with the water I had introduced and ignite the benzene gas.

The Assistant looked at me with amusement and a vaguely ironic eye: better not to do than to do, better to meditate than to act, better his astrophysics, the threshold of the Unknowable, than my chemistry, smeared with smells, explosions, and trivial little mysteries. I thought of another moral, more earthly and concrete, and I believe that every militant chemist will be able to confirm it: you must not trust the almost-the-same (sodium is almost the same as potassium; but with sodium nothing would have happened), the practically the same, the nearly, the or, any surrogates or stopgaps. The differences may be small but can lead to radically diverse results, like railroad switches; the chemist’s work consists largely in watching out for these differences, in knowing them from close up, in predicting their effects. Not only the chemist’s work.

Nickel

In a drawer I had a parchment saying, in elegant script, that upon Primo Levi, of the Jewish race, a degree in Chemistry, with honors, was conferred: it was therefore a double-edged document, half glory and half mockery, half absolution and half conviction. It had been in that drawer since July of 1941, and it was now the end of November; the world was hurtling toward catastrophe, and around me nothing happened. The Germans had streamed into Poland, Norway, Holland, France, Yugoslavia, and penetrated the Russian steppes like a knife in butter; the United States made no move to help the English, and they remained alone. I couldn't find work and had worn myself out in the search for some remunerative occupation; in the next room my father, debilitated by a tumor, was living his last months.

The doorbell rang. There was a tall, thin young man, in the uniform of a lieutenant of the Royal Army, and I was not slow to see in him the figure of the messenger, the Mercury who guides souls, or, if you prefer, the angel of annunciation: he, in other words, whom each of us waits for, consciously or not, and who brings the heavenly message that changes our life, if for good or evil, we don't yet know, until he has opened his mouth.

He opened his mouth and, in a strong Tuscan accent, asked for Dr. Levi, who, incredibly, was me (I was not yet used to the title); he introduced himself politely and offered me a job. Who had sent him? Another Mercury, Caselli, the inflexible guardian of another's reputation: the "honors" of my degree had been useful for something.

That I was Jewish the lieutenant showed he knew (besides, my surname scarcely left room for doubts), but it didn't seem to matter to him. Rather, it seemed something extra: the fact in some way appealed to him. He had a

sharp, subtle taste for contravening the laws of separation; he was secretly an ally, and sought an ally in me.

The job that he offered was mysterious and alluring. “In some place” there was a mine that yielded 2 percent something useful (he didn’t say what) and 98 percent waste, which was dumped in a neighboring valley. In this waste there was nickel: very little, but the price was so high that retrieving it had to be considered. He had an idea, in fact a cluster of ideas, but he was serving in the military and hadn’t much free time: I was to substitute for him, try out his ideas in the laboratory, and then, if possible, and with him, carry them out on an industrial scale. It was clear that this would necessitate my moving to the “some place,” which was briefly described, and that this move would happen under a double seal of secrecy. In the first place, for my protection, no one was to know either my name or my detestable origins, because the some place was under the control of the military authorities; in the second, for the protection of his idea, I would have to pledge on my honor not to mention a word of it to anyone. Anyway, it was clear that one secret would reinforce the other, and so, in a certain sense, my condition of outcast suited him perfectly.

What was his idea and where was the some place? The lieutenant apologized: until I accepted provisionally he couldn’t tell me much, that was evident; in any case, the idea consisted of attacking the waste material in its gaseous state, and the some place was a few hours’ journey from Turin. I immediately consulted my parents. They were in favor: with my father’s illness there was an urgent need for money. As for me, I hadn’t the slightest doubt: I was worn out by inertia, confident of my chemistry, and eager to put it to the test. Besides, the lieutenant aroused my curiosity, and I liked him.

It was clear that he wore the uniform with disgust: his choice of me must have been dictated not solely by utilitarian considerations. He spoke of fascism and the war with reserve, and with a sinister gaiety that I had no trouble interpreting. It was the ironic gaiety of a whole generation of Italians, intelligent and honest enough to reject fascism, too skeptical to oppose it actively, too young to accept passively the tragedy that was looming and to despair of tomorrow: a generation to which I myself would have belonged if the providential racial laws had not intervened to age me precociously and guide my choice.

The lieutenant acknowledged my assent, and without wasting time made an appointment with me at the station for the next day. Preparations? Not many were necessary: documents certainly not (I would start work incognito, with no name or a false name, later on we would see); some heavy clothes, my mountain-climbing things would be fine, a lab coat, books if I wanted. For the rest, there were no difficulties; I would find a room with heat, a laboratory, regular meals with a family of workers, and colleagues, nice people, with whom, however, he urged me not to get too friendly, for the obvious reasons.

We departed, got off the train, and arrived at the mine after a climb of five kilometers through a wood sparkling with frost. The lieutenant, who was a brisk type, introduced me briefly to the director, a tall, energetic young engineer, who was even brisker, and who had evidently been informed of my situation. I was shown the laboratory, where a singular creature awaited me: a girl of about eighteen, with fiery hair and slanting green eyes, both cunning and curious. I learned that she would be my assistant.

During lunch, which, unusually, I was invited to have on the premises, the radio broadcast the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war on Japan by the United States. My fellow diners (several employees, besides the lieutenant) greeted the announcement in various ways: some, and among these the lieutenant, with reserve and cautious glances in my direction; others with worried comments; still others asserting, combatively, the proved invincibility of the Japanese and German armies.

The “some place” was thus localized in space, without, however, losing any of its magic. All mines are magical, and always have been. The guts of the earth are teeming with elves, Coboldi (cobalt!), Niccoli (nickel!), who can be generous and let you find treasure under the head of your pick, or deceive you, dazzle you, making modest pyrite shine like gold, or disguising zinc in tin’s clothing; and in fact the names of many minerals contain roots meaning “trick, fraud, dazzle.”

That mine, too, had its magic, its savage enchantment. A vast conical pit was dug into a squat, barren hill, all boulders and scrub: an artificial crater, with a diameter of four hundred meters, similar to schematic representations of the Inferno in synoptic tables of the *Divine Comedy*. Along the *gironi*,[5] day after day, volleys of mines were exploded; the gradient of the walls of

the cone was the minimum needed so that the dislodged material would roll to the bottom but without gaining too much momentum. At the bottom, in place of Lucifer, was a sturdy shutter-like door, and below that was a short vertical shaft that emptied into a long horizontal tunnel; this, in turn, came out into the air on the side of the hill, above the plant. An armored train went back and forth in the tunnel: a small but powerful locomotive drew its cars up one by one under the door to be filled, then hauled them out to see the stars again.

The plant was constructed in tiers, along the slope of the hill and below the tunnel opening. The mineral was broken up in a monstrous crusher, which the director showed me and demonstrated with almost childlike enthusiasm: it was an upside-down bell, or, if you prefer, the corolla of a convolvulus, with a diameter of four meters, made of solid steel; at the center, suspended from above and controlled from below, a gigantic clapper oscillated. The oscillation was slight, barely visible, but enough to crack in the blink of an eye the boulders as they poured down from the train: they broke apart, were caught farther down, broke up again, and came out the bottom in fragments as big as a man's head. The operation proceeded amid an apocalyptic noise, in a cloud of dust that could be seen from the plain. The material was then further ground down into gravel, desiccated, and sorted; and it wasn't hard to ascertain that the ultimate purpose of that cyclopean labor was to extract from the rock the wretched 2 percent of asbestos trapped in it. The rest, thousands of tons a day, was dumped down the hill at random.

Year by year, the valley was filling with a slow avalanche of dust and gravel. There was still asbestos in the mass, which made it slightly runny, sluggish, and doughy, like a glacier: the enormous gray tongue, dotted with black boulders, advanced laboriously, ponderously, toward the bottom, some ten meters a year; it exerted on the walls of the valley a pressure that caused deep transverse cracks in the rock, and shifted by centimeters a year any buildings that had been constructed too far down. In one of these, called "the submarine," precisely because of its silent drift, I lived.

There was asbestos everywhere, like an ashy snow; if you left a book on a table and a few hours later picked it up, you found the negative of its outline; the roofs were covered with a thick layer of dust, which on rainy days was absorbent, like a sponge, and would suddenly, and violently, slide to the ground. The mine chief, an obese giant with a thick black beard

whose name was Anteo, and who seemed to draw his strength from Mother Earth, told me that, years before, a steady rain had washed many tons of asbestos off the walls of the mine; the asbestos had accumulated at the bottom of the cone, above the open valve, stealthily packing itself into a plug. No one had thought much of this; but it had continued to rain, the cone had functioned like a funnel, on top of the plug a lake of twenty thousand cubic meters of water had appeared, and still no one thought anything of it. He, Anteo, feared the worst, and had insisted to the director at the time that he should do something about it: like a good mine boss, he inclined toward exploding a submerged mine on the bottom of the lake, without delay; but a little of this, a little of that, it might be dangerous, it might damage the valve, management had to be consulted, no one wanted to decide, so the mine itself decided, with its evil genius.

While the sages were deliberating, a deafening roar was heard: the plug had given way, the water had engulfed the shaft and the tunnel, had swept away the train and all its cars, and had devastated the plant. Anteo showed me signs of the flood, a good two meters above the inclined plane.

The laborers and the miners (who in the local slang were called “the minors”) came from the nearby towns, traveling maybe two hours on mountain paths; the office workers lived at the mine. The plain was only five kilometers away, but the mine was in effect a small autonomous republic. In that time of rationing and the black market, there were no problems with supplies: no one knew how, but everyone had everything. Many of the office workers had their own vegetable gardens, near the square building that housed the offices; some even had chicken coops. Several times the hens of one had crossed into the garden of another, damaging it, and tedious controversies and feuds arose, which did not accord with the serenity of the place and the vigorous character of the director. He had cut the knot on his own: he had obtained a Flobert gun and hung it on a nail in his office. Anyone who saw from a window a strange hen pecking in his garden had the right to take the gun and shoot twice: but it had to be caught in the act. If the hen died on his land, the corpse belonged to the shooter: that was the rule. In the early days after the measure, many quick trips to the gun and shootings were witnessed, while those who had no interest made bets. Then the trespassing had stopped.

Other marvelous stories were told to me, like the one about Signor Pistamiglio’s dog. By my time, this Signor Pistamiglio had been gone for

years, but the memory of him was vivid and, as often happens, had acquired the gilded patina of legend. Signor Pistamiglio was a very good head of his department, no longer young, a bachelor, full of common sense, well respected, and his dog was a beautiful German shepherd, equally upstanding and respected.

One Christmas, four of the fattest turkeys in the village in the valley disappeared. Never mind: people imagined thieves, foxes, then forgot. But another winter came, and this time, during November and December, seven turkeys disappeared. A report was made to the carabinieri, but the mystery would never have been cleared up if Signor Pistamiglio himself had not let a word too many escape, one evening when he was a little drunk. The turkey thieves were the two of them, him and the dog. On Sundays he brought the dog to the town, walked around among the houses, and showed him which were the finest and least guarded turkeys; he explained to him in each case the best strategy; then they returned to the mine, and at night he let him go. The dog arrived unseen, creeping along the walls like a wolf, jumped the fence of the pen or dug a tunnel underneath, silently killed the turkey, and brought it back to his accomplice. Signor Pistamiglio didn't sell the turkeys: according to the most credible version, he gave them to his lovers, who were many, ugly, old, and scattered throughout the Piedmontese Prealps.

Many love stories were told to me: as far as one could tell, all fifty inhabitants of the mine had interacted with the others, two by two, as in combinatorial analysis; I mean, each with all the others—specifically, every man with all the women, single or married, and every woman with all the men. It was enough to pick two names at random, better if of different sexes, and ask a third, "What was between them?" and, lo and behold, a splendid story unfolded, since everyone knew the history of everyone else. It's not clear why these events, often intricate and always intimate, were told so readily to me in particular, who, on the other hand, couldn't tell anybody anything, not even my real name; but that seems to be my planet (and I'm not complaining about it at all)—I'm a person to whom many things are told.

I recorded, in several variants, a saga going back to a time even before Signor Pistamiglio, a time when, in the offices of the mine, a regime from Gomorrah ruled. In that legendary era, no one went home when, at five thirty every evening, the siren sounded. At that signal, liquor and mattresses

came out from among the desks, and an orgy was unleashed that enveloped everything and everyone, unfledged young typists and balding accountants, from the director at the time all the way down to the disabled porters: suddenly, every evening, the sad rondeau of mining paperwork ceded the field to endless interclass fornication, public and variously tangled. No survivor had lived into our time, to bring direct testimony: a series of calamitous balance sheets had forced the management in Milan to a drastic, purifying intervention. No one except Signora Bortolasso, who, I was assured, knew everything and had seen everything, but wouldn't speak because of her extreme modesty.

Besides, Signora Bortolasso never spoke to anyone, except out of the strict necessities of work. Before she was called that, her name was Gina delle Benne: at nineteen, already a typist in the offices, she had fallen in love with a lean, tawny-haired young miner, who, without properly returning that love, nevertheless showed that he accepted it; but "her people" were inflexible. They had spent money on her education, and she was supposed to show gratitude, make a good marriage, and not go off with the first comer; and in fact, since the girl didn't understand these things, they would take care of them; she had better break it off with her red-haired fellow, or out of the house and away from the mine.

Gina was prepared to wait till she was twenty-one (it was only two more years), but the redhead didn't wait for her. He was seen on Sunday with another woman, then with a third, and ended up marrying a fourth. Gina at that point made a cruel decision: if she could not bind to herself the man she cared about, the only one, well, she would not be anyone else's. A nun, no, she had modern ideas: but marriage would be proscribed in a pitiless and sophisticated way, and that is by marrying. She now had special responsibilities, necessary to the management, and was endowed with a memory of iron and proverbial diligence: and she let everyone know, her parents and her bosses, that she intended to marry Bortolasso, the mine's idiot.

This Bortolasso was a middle-aged laborer, strong as a mule and dirty as a boar. He couldn't have been a pure idiot: it's more likely that he belonged to that human type of which it's said in Piedmont that they play the fool in order not to pay taxes. Sheltered by the immunity granted to the weak of mind, Bortolasso performed his job as a gardener with extreme negligence. It was a negligence that bordered on a primitive astuteness: all

right, the world had declared him irresponsible, now it must put up with him as such, in fact provide for and take care of him.

Rain-soaked asbestos is difficult to extract, so the rain gauge at the mine was very important; it was in the middle of a flower bed, and the director himself took the measurements. Bortolasso, who watered the flower beds every morning, got in the habit of watering the rain gauge as well, severely polluting the data on the costs of extraction; the director (not right away) realized it and ordered him to stop. “So he likes it dry,” Bortolasso reasoned: and after every rainfall he went and opened the valve at the bottom of the instrument.

By the time of my arrival, the situation had been stabilized for a while. Gina, now Signora Bortolasso, was about thirty-five; the modest beauty of her face had become rigid, fixed in a tense, alert mask, and manifestly bore the stigma of prolonged virginity. Because she had remained a virgin: everyone knew, because Bortolasso told everyone. This had been the agreement, at the time of the marriage: he had accepted it, even if afterward, almost every night, he tried to violate the woman’s bed. But she had defended herself furiously and still did: no man, and less than all others that man, would ever, ever touch her.

These nocturnal battles between the unhappy spouses were a fable of the mine, and among its few attractions. On one of the first warm nights, a group of aficionados invited me to go with them to hear what was happening. I refused, and they returned soon afterward, disappointed: all they heard was a trombone playing “Faccetta Nera.”[6] They explained that sometimes that happened; he was a musical idiot, and that was how he vented.

I was in love with my work from the first day, although in that phase it was nothing but the quantitative analysis of rock samples: attack with hydrofluoric acid, precipitate iron with ammonia, precipitate nickel (how little! a pinch of pink sediment) with dimethylglyoxime, precipitate magnesium with phosphate, always the same, every blessed day: in itself, it wasn’t very stimulating. But both stimulating and new was another sensation: the sample to be analyzed wasn’t an anonymous manufactured powder, a quiz that appeared out of nowhere; it was a piece of rock, guts of the earth, extracted from the earth by the force of an explosion. And, little by little, from the data of the daily analysis, a map emerged, a portrait of the subterranean veins. For the first time, after seventeen years of school, of

aorists and Peloponnesian wars, the things I had learned began to be useful to me. Quantitative analysis, so stingy with emotions, as heavy as granite, became lively, true, and useful when inserted in a serious and concrete job. It could be used: it was set in a plan, a tile of a mosaic. The analytic method I followed was no longer a bookish dogma; it was retested every day, it could be refined, made to conform to our purposes, by means of a subtle game of reason, of trial and error. A mistake was no longer a vaguely comic accident, which spoils an exam or lowers your grade; a mistake was like climbing a rock face, a measure of yourself, an awareness, a step higher, which makes you more capable and fit.

The girl in the laboratory was named Alida. She witnessed my neophyte's enthusiasms without sharing them; rather, she was surprised and a little irritated. Her presence was not unpleasant. She came from the high school, she quoted Pindar and Sappho, she was the daughter of a completely innocuous local party official, she was clever and lazy, and nothing whatever mattered to her, let alone the analysis of the rock, which she had learned to carry out mechanically from the lieutenant. Like everyone else, she had interacted with various persons, and made no mystery about it to me, thanks to the curious quality of confessor that I mentioned earlier. She had quarreled with many of the women on account of vague rivalries; she had been a little in love with many men, a lot with one, and was engaged to yet another, a good dull, modest man, employed in the Technical Office, who was from her town, and whom her family had chosen for her. Even this didn't matter to her. What to do about it? rebel? escape? No, she was a girl of good family; her future was children and stoves. Sappho and Pindar were things of the past, nickel an abstruse time filler. She did her work in the laboratory as she waited for that so little longed-for wedding, indifferently washing the precipitates and weighing the nickel dimethylglyoxime, and it took me some effort to persuade her that it wasn't a good idea to exaggerate the results of the analyses, something she tended to do; in fact she confessed she had done it often, because, she said, it didn't cost anyone anything and pleased the director, the lieutenant, and me.

What, then, in the end, was the chemistry that the lieutenant and I were working so hard at? Water and fire, nothing else, as in the kitchen. A less appetizing kitchen, of course: with pungent or disgusting odors rather than domestic ones; otherwise, there, too, put on the apron, mix, burn your

hands, wash up at the end of the day. No escape for Alida. She listened with dutiful attention and, at the same time, Italian skepticism to my accounts of life in Turin: they were very censored accounts, because both she and I had to play the game of my anonymity, yet something was bound to emerge, if only from my very reticence. After some weeks I realized that I was no longer nameless: I was a Dottor Levi who was not supposed to be called Levi, either in the second or the third person, out of good manners, and was not to cause trouble. In the gossipy, tolerant atmosphere of the Mines, the mismatch between my indeterminate condition of outcast and my obvious mildness of habits leaped out and, Alida confessed to me, was lengthily discussed and variously interpreted: from agent of the secret police to someone with high-level connections.

Going down to the valley was difficult, and also for me not very prudent; since I couldn't spend time with anyone, my evenings at the Mines were interminable. Sometimes I stayed in the laboratory after the whistle blew or went there after dinner to study, or to meditate on the problems of nickel; at other times I withdrew to my monastic little room in the submarine to read *The Stories of Jacob*. Evenings when there was a moon I often took long walks through the wild landscape of the Mines, up to the edge of the crater, or halfway down, along the gray and broken ridge of the dump, a route of mysterious shivers and crunching sounds, as if busy gnomes really were lurking there: the darkness was punctuated by the distant howling of dogs on the invisible valley floor.

These wanderings granted me a truce with the bleak awareness of my father dying in Turin, of the Americans defeated at Bataan, of the Germans victors in Crimea, that is, of the open trap that was about to spring: they created in me a new bond, more authentic than the rhetoric of nature learned in school, with the brambles and rocks that were my island and my freedom, a freedom that I would perhaps soon lose. For that unquiet rock I felt a fragile and precarious affection: with it I had formed a double bond, first in my adventures with Sandro, then here, attempting as a chemist to extract its treasure. In this rocky love, and in these solitudes of asbestos, on other long evenings two stories about islands and freedom had their origin: the first stories I wrote after the torment of high school compositions. One fantasized a remote precursor, a hunter of lead rather than nickel; the other, ambiguous and mercurial, was inspired by a mention of the island of Tristan da Cunha that I happened on in that period.

The lieutenant, who was doing his military service in Turin, came to the Mines only one day a week. He checked my work and gave me suggestions and advice for the following week, showing himself to be an excellent chemist and an acute, tenacious researcher. After a short period of orientation, a job with a higher ambition took shape beside the routine of the daily analyses.

In the rock in the Mines there was, anyway, nickel: very little—from our analyses it was an average content of 0.2 percent. Laughable, compared with the minerals exploited by my antipodean colleague-rivals in Canada and New Caledonia. But maybe the raw material could be enriched? Under the lieutenant's guidance, I tried everything that could be tried: separation by magnet, by flotation, by grinding, by sifting, with heavy liquids, with a flow table. I got nowhere: it couldn't be concentrated. In all the samples we obtained, the percentage of nickel remained obstinately the same as the original. Nature was no help: we concluded that nickel accompanied bivalent iron, stood in for it like a deputy, followed it like an evanescent shadow, a tiny brother: 0.2 percent nickel, 8 percent iron. Any possible reagents for attacking the nickel would have had to be used in amounts forty times as large, even without taking account of the magnesium—an economically desperate undertaking. In moments of weariness, I saw the rock that surrounded me—the green serpentine of the Prealps—in all its hostile, alien astral hardness. By comparison, the trees in the valley, now clothed in spring, were like us—people, too, who don't speak but feel heat and cold, enjoy and suffer, are born and die, spread seeds in the wind, mysteriously follow the sun in its course. Not rock: it receives no energy in itself, it's dead from the beginning, pure hostile passivity; a massive fortress that I had to dismantle bastion by bastion to put my hands on the hidden elf, on the capricious nickel-Nicolao that jumps out now here, now there, elusive and wicked, with his long ears erect, always quick to avoid the blows of the searching pickax, and to leave you disappointed.

But the time of elves, of Niccoli and Coboldi, is over. We are chemists, that is, hunters: ours are "the two experiences of adult life" that Pavese speaks of, success and unsuccess, kill the white whale or smash the ship; we mustn't give in to incomprehensible matter, mustn't sit back. We're here for this, to make mistakes and correct them, to suffer blows and inflict them. One mustn't ever feel helpless; nature is immense and complex but not

impervious to intelligence; you have to go around it, prick, probe, look for the opening or make it yourself. My weekly conversations with the lieutenant seemed like battle plans.

Among the many attempts we made was to reduce the rock using hydrogen. We placed the mineral, finely ground, in a porcelain boat, this in a quartz tube, and through the tube, warmed from the outside, we passed a current of hydrogen, in the hope that it would release the oxygen bound to the nickel and leave the nickel reduced, that is, bare, in the metallic state. Metallic nickel, like iron, is magnetic, and so, according to this hypothesis, it would be easy to separate it, alone or with iron, simply by means of a magnet. But after the treatment, we wriggled a powerful magnet in a watery suspension of our powder in vain: all we got was a trace of iron. Clear and sad: hydrogen, under those conditions, reduced nothing; the nickel, together with the iron, must be embedded in the structure of the serpentine in a stable state, solidly bound to the silica and water, content (so to speak) with its condition and averse to assuming another.

But if one tried to take apart that structure? The idea came to me like a lamp switched on, one day when an old, dusty diagram, the work of some unknown predecessor, chanced to fall into my hands; it reported on the loss of weight in the asbestos from the Mines as a result of temperature. Asbestos lost a little water at 150°C, then remained apparently unchanged until nearly 800°C; here an abrupt drop was observed, with a fall in weight of 12 percent, and the author had noted, “Becomes fragile.” Now, serpentine is the father of asbestos: if asbestos decomposes at 800°C, serpentine should also do so; and since a chemist doesn’t think—rather, doesn’t live—without models, I paused to make an illustration, drawing on the paper the long chains of silicon, oxygen, iron, and magnesium, with a little nickel trapped in their coils, and then the same chains reduced, after their breakdown, to short stubs, with the nickel flushed out of its den and exposed to attack; and I didn’t feel very different from the long-ago hunter of Altamira, who painted the antelope on the rock wall so that the next day’s hunting would be successful.

The propitiatory ceremonies didn’t last long: the lieutenant wasn’t there, but he might arrive anytime, and I was afraid that he would not accept, or not accept willingly, such an unorthodox hypothesis of a job. I felt itchy all over my skin, but said no more; better to get right to work.

There is nothing more invigorating than a hypothesis. Under the amused and skeptical gaze of Alida, who, since it was by now late afternoon, was looking ostentatiously at her wristwatch, I got to work like a whirlwind. In a moment, the equipment was assembled, the thermostat set to 800°C, the pressure reducer of the tank regulated, the flow meter put in place. I heated the material for half an hour, then reduced the temperature and passed hydrogen through it for another hour. It was now dark, the girl had gone, everything was silent against the deep background hum of the Sorting Department, which also worked at night. I felt part conspirator, part alchemist.

When the time was up, I extracted the capsule from the quartz tube, let it cool in a vacuum, then dissolved the powder in water; from greenish it turned yellowish, which seemed to me a good omen. I took the magnet and went to work. Every time I extracted the magnet from the water, it brought with it a clump of brown dust, which I carefully removed with filter paper and put aside, maybe a milligram each time; for the analysis to be reliable, it would take at least half a gram of material, that is, many hours of work. I decided to stop around midnight—to halt the separation, I mean—because at no cost would I put off the start of the analysis. Giving in to my urgency, and since it was a question of a magnetic sample (and hence presumably poor in silicates), I thought up on the spot a simplified variation. At three in the morning, I had the result: not the usual pink cloud of nickel dimethylglyoxime but a visibly abundant precipitate. Filter, wash, dry, weigh. The final datum seemed to me written in fire on the slide rule: 6 percent nickel, the rest iron. A victory: even without a further separation, an alloy that could be sent as it was to the electric oven. It was almost dawn when I returned to the submarine, with a keen desire to wake the director, to telephone the lieutenant, and to roll around in the dark, dewy meadows. I thought many senseless things, and did not think some sadly sensible ones.

I thought that I had opened a door with a key and possessed the key to many doors, maybe all. I thought that I had thought of something no one else had yet thought, not even in Canada or in New Caledonia, and I felt invincible and taboo, even in the face of enemies who were close by, and closer every month. I thought, finally, that I had revenged myself, not ignobly, on those who had declared me biologically inferior.

I didn’t think that, even if the method of extraction I had glimpsed could have found industrial application, the nickel produced would end up

entirely in the helmets and bullets of Fascist Italy and Hitler's Germany. I didn't think that, in those same months, veins of a mineral of nickel had been discovered in Albania compared to which ours could slink away, and with it every project of mine, the director, or the lieutenant. I didn't foresee that my interpretation of the magnetic separability of the nickel was essentially mistaken, as the lieutenant showed me a few days later, as soon as I had communicated to him my results. Nor did I foresee that the director, after sharing my enthusiasm for a few days, cooled mine and his when he was forced to realize that there existed no commercially available magnetic sorter capable of separating a material in the form of a fine powder, and that with a larger-grain powder my method wouldn't work.

And yet this story does not end here. In spite of the many years that have passed, the liberalization of trade and the lowering of the international price of nickel, the notion of the enormous wealth that lies in that valley, in the form of detritus accessible to all, still kindles fantasies. Not far from the Mines, in cellars, in stalls, on the border between chemistry and white magic, there are still people who go at night to the dump, return with sacks of gray pebbles, grind them, cook them, treat them with new reagents. The fascination with buried treasure—with two kilos of a noble silvery metal bound to a thousand kilos of discarded rock waste—is not yet extinct.

Nor are the two mineral stories that I wrote at the time. They have had a troubled fate, almost like mine: they have suffered bombardment and flight, and I had given them up for lost; I found them recently when I was putting in order papers forgotten for decades. I didn't want to abandon them: the reader will find them here, inserted, like the escape dream of a prisoner, among these stories of militant chemistry.

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5. The *gironi* are the circles of hell in Dante's *Inferno*.
6. A song that became popular during the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, about romantic relations between Italian soldiers and the *faccetta nera*: "black-faced" Ethiopian girls.

Lead

My name is Rodmund, and I come from far away. My land is called Thiuda; at least, that's what we call it, though our neighbors, that is, our enemies, have different names—Saksa, Nemet, Alaman. My land is different from this one: it has vast forests and rivers and long winters; swamps, fogs, and rains. My people, I mean those who speak my language, are shepherds, hunters, and warriors: they do not like to cultivate the earth; in fact they despise those who cultivate it, driving flocks into their fields, sacking their villages, and making slaves of their women. I'm neither a shepherd nor a warrior; I'm not even a hunter, although my work is not very different from hunting. It binds me to the earth, but I am free: I'm not a peasant.

My father and all of us Rodmunds in the paternal line have always followed this trade, which consists in recognizing a particular heavy rock, finding it in distant lands, heating it in a particular way we know, and digging out the black lead. Near my village lies a large deposit: they say it was discovered by a great-grandfather of mine, who was called Rodmund Blue Tooth. It's a village of leadsmiths: everyone knows how to melt it and work it, but only we Rodmunds know how to find the rock, and make sure that it's true lead rock, and not one of the many heavy rocks that the Gods have scattered in the mountains to deceive man. It's the Gods who sow the veins of metal underground, but they keep them secret, hidden; those who find them are almost their equal, and so the Gods do not love them, and try to confuse them. They don't love us Rodmunds, but we don't care.

Now, after five or six generations, the bed has been exhausted: someone suggested following it underground by digging tunnels, and tried, to his detriment; finally more prudent judgment prevailed. All the men took up

their old trades, but not I: as lead without us does not see the light, so we without lead cannot live. Ours is an art that makes you rich but leads to an early death. Some say that this is because the metal enters the blood and, little by little, thins it; others think, rather, that it's the Gods' revenge, but in any case we Rodmunds don't care that our life is short, because we are rich and respected, and we get to see the world. In fact, the case of my great-grandfather with the blue teeth is exceptional, because the deposit he discovered was exceptionally rich: in general we searchers are travelers. He himself, they told me, came from far away, from a place where the sun is cold and never sets, the people live in buildings of ice, and marine monsters a thousand feet long swim in the sea.

Thus, after a halt lasting six generations, I began traveling again, in search of rocks to melt, or to have other people melt, teaching them the art in exchange for gold. You see, we Rodmunds are necromancers: we turn lead into gold.

I left alone, heading south, when I was still young. I traveled for four years, through many lands, avoiding the plains, ascending the valleys, tapping with my hammer and finding little or nothing. In summer I worked in the fields, in winter I wove baskets or spent the gold that I had brought with me. Alone, I said: among us, women serve to produce male children, so that the race doesn't die out, but we don't take them with us. What use would they be? They don't learn to find the rock, and in fact, if they touch it when they have their period, it dissolves into dead sand and ashes. Better the girls we meet along the way, good for a night or a month, whom we can have a good time with and not think of tomorrow, the way wives do. It's better to live our tomorrow alone. When the flesh begins to grow flabby and pale, and the stomach hurts, and the hair and teeth fall out, and the gums go gray, then it's better to be alone.

I came to a place where, on clear days, you could see a mountain range to the south. In spring I started off again, determined to reach it: I was bored with that sticky soft earth, good for nothing, good for making clay ocarinas—earth without virtues or secrets. The mountains are different, the rocks, the bones of the earth, are exposed, they ring under hobnailed boots, and it's easy to discern their different qualities: the plains are not for us. I asked around where the easiest pass might be; I also asked if the people had lead, where they bought it, how much they paid for it—the more they paid, the more carefully I searched the surrounding regions. Sometimes, they

didn't even know what lead was: when I showed them the slab that I always carry in my pack, they laughed at its softness, and asked derisively if in my country plowshares and spades are also made of lead. Most of the time, though, I couldn't understand them or make myself understood: bread, milk, a bed, a girl, the direction to take the next day—that's all.

I went over a broad pass in midsummer, and though the sun was almost directly overhead at noon, there were still patches of snow on the meadows. A little lower down were flocks, shepherds, and paths, and you could see the valley floor, so far down that it seemed to be buried in night. I descended, finding villages, one in fact quite large, beside the stream, where the mountain people came to trade beasts, horses, cheese, furs, and a red drink they called wine. I couldn't help laughing when I heard them speak; their language was a crude, indistinct mumbling, an animal-like bar-bar, so that it was amazing to see that they had weapons and tools like ours, some even more ingenious and elaborate. The women spun, as our women do. There were houses built of stone, not so beautiful but solid; others were of wood and, supported on four or six wooden logs surmounted by disks of smooth stone, were raised about a foot above the ground. I think this was to keep mice from getting in, and it seemed to me an intelligent invention. The roofs were not of straw but of broad, flat stones; beer was unknown.

I immediately saw that, high up the valley walls, there were holes in the rock and flows of debris: a sign that someone was searching even here. But I didn't ask questions, in order not to rouse suspicions; a stranger like me shouldn't rouse too many. I went down to the stream, which was fairly swift (I recall that the water was cloudy, whitish, as if it had been mixed with milk, something that has never been seen in my land), and began to patiently examine the stones. It's one of our tricks; the rocks in a stream come from far away, and speak clearly to those who understand. There was a little of everything: flint, green rocks, limestone, granite, rocks with iron, even a little of what we call galmeida, all stuff that didn't interest me. And yet I had a kind of bee in my bonnet that in a valley made like that, with particular white stripes on the red stone, and so much iron around, there had to be rocks with lead.

I was going along the stream, sometimes on the boulders, sometimes wading where I could, like a hunting dog, eyes nailed to the ground, when, there, just beyond the confluence with a smaller stream, I saw a rock amid a million other rocks, a rock almost the same as all the others, a whitish rock

with black grains, that made me stop, tense and motionless, like a pointing hound. I picked it up, and it was heavy; next to it was a similar, smaller one. We're not likely to make a mistake: but in any case I broke it, picked up a fragment the size of a walnut, and took it away to test it. A good searcher, who's serious and doesn't want to lie to others or to himself, shouldn't trust appearances, because rock, which seems dead, is actually very deceptive: sometimes it changes its state just as you're digging it up, like certain snakes that change color in order not to be seen. So a good searcher carries everything with him: the clay crucible, the charcoal, the tinder, the flint, and yet another tool, which is secret and can't be named, and is used to find out if a rock is good or not.

In the evening I found myself an out-of-the-way spot and built a fire, on which I placed the well-layered crucible, heated it for half an hour, and let it cool. I broke it, and there was the heavy, gleaming disc, which you can scratch with a fingernail, which gladdens the heart and revives road-weary legs, and which we call "the little king."

It's not that you're set at this point: most of the work is still to be done. You have to go back up the stream, and at every fork find out if the good rock continues to the right or the left. I followed the biggest stream for quite a distance, and though the rock was there, it was increasingly rare; then the valley narrowed into a gorge so deep and steep that you couldn't even think of continuing. I asked the shepherds in the area, and they led me to understand, with gestures and grunts, that there was no way of getting around the drop, but that if I returned to the larger valley I would find a very narrow path that went over a pass they called something like Tringo and descended above the gorge to a place where there were horned, mooing beasts, and therefore (I thought) fields, shepherds, bread, and milk as well. I set off, easily found the path and the Tringo, and from there arrived in a beautiful land.

Right before me as I descended was a valley green with larches and, in the background, mountains white with snow though it was midsummer; the valley ended below me in a vast meadow dotted with huts and herds. I was tired; I went down, and stayed with some shepherds. They were distrustful, but they knew (too well) the value of gold, and let me stay for several days without bothering me. I took advantage of this to learn some words of their language: they call the mountains pen, the fields tza, the snow in summer roisa, the sheep fea, their houses bait. The lower part, where they keep the

animals, is stone, and the upper is wood, with stone supports, as I've already described; there they live and store their hay and provisions. They were surly people, of few words, but they did not have weapons and did not treat me badly.

Once I had rested, I took up the search again, always using the system of the stream, and I ended by threading my way into a valley that was parallel to the one with the larches, long, narrow, and deserted, without fields or forest. The stream that ran through it had a wealth of good rock: I felt I was close to what I was looking for. It took three days, and I slept in the open, or rather, I didn't sleep at all, I was so impatient; I spent the nights scanning the sky for daybreak.

The deposit was very remote, in a steep canyon. The white rock was visible under stunted grass, within reach, and you had to dig down only six or seven inches to find the black rock, which is the richest of all: I had never seen it before, but my father had described it to me. A compact rock, without slag, that can be worked by a hundred men for a hundred years. The strange thing was that somebody must have been there already: you could see, half hidden behind a boulder (certainly placed there on purpose), the entrance to a tunnel, which must have been very old, because stalactites as long as my fingers were hanging from the vault. On the ground were rotted wooden stakes and a few broken bits of bone; the foxes must have carried off the rest. In fact, there were traces of foxes and, perhaps, wolves, but half of a skull sticking out of the mud was certainly human. It's difficult to explain, but it's happened more than once: someone, sometime, coming from somewhere, in a long-ago era, maybe before the flood, finds a deposit, says not a word, attempts to dig up the rock on his own, and leaves us his bones; centuries pass. My father told me that in whatever tunnel you may excavate you'll find a dead man's bones.

Anyway, there was a deposit. I made my tests, built a furnace as best I could out in the open, went down and came back with firewood, melted as much lead as I could carry on my back, and went down again. I said nothing to the people in the fields: following the Tringo, I descended to the big village on the other side, which was called Sales. It was market day, and I attracted attention with the piece of lead in my hand. People began to stop, to weigh it in their hands, and to ask me questions that I halfway comprehended: it was clear that they wanted to know what it was used for, how much it cost, where it came from. Then an alert-looking fellow, in a cap

of braided wool, came forward, and we understood each other quite well. I showed him that you could beat the stuff with a hammer; in fact, I immediately found a hammer and post, and showed him how easy it is to make slabs and sheets; then I explained to him that by welding a sheet along one side with a red-hot iron you can make a pipe. I told him that wooden pipes—for example, the gutters of that town Sales—leak and rot; I explained that bronze pipes are difficult to make and when they're used for drinking water cause stomachaches; and that lead pipes, on the other hand, last forever and you can easily weld one to another. Somewhat trusting to luck, I put on a solemn expression and tried to impress him by explaining that coffins can be sheathed in lead, in such a way that the dead don't produce worms but become dry and thin, and thus the soul doesn't disappear, which is a real advantage; with lead, too, you can cast funeral statues—not bright, like bronze, but slightly somber, shadowed, as is fitting for objects of mourning. Seeing that these matters were of great interest to him, I explained that, beyond appearances, lead really is the metal of death: because it brings death; because its weight expresses a desire to fall, and falling is for corpses; because its very color is deathly pale; because it is the metal of the planet Tuisto, which is the slowest of the planets, that is, the planet of the dead. I also told him that, in my opinion, lead is a material different from all others, a metal that feels tired, perhaps tired of being transformed, and doesn't want to be transformed anymore: the ashes of unknowable other living elements, which thousands and thousands of years ago were burned in their own fire. These are things I truly think, I didn't just invent them to clinch the deal. That man, whose name was Borvio, listened in astonishment, and then he told me that what I said must be true, and that that planet is sacred to a god who in his country is called Saturn, and is represented with a scythe. It was the moment to get to the point, and while he was still mulling over my sales patter I asked him for thirty pounds of gold, in exchange for the yield of the deposit, the technology of melting, and precise instructions on the principal uses of the metal. He made me a counteroffer of bronze coins with a boar on them, minted who knows where, but I pretended to spit on it: gold, and no nonsense. Besides, thirty pounds is too much for someone traveling on foot, everyone knows it, and I knew that Borvio knew: so we closed for twenty pounds. He had me lead him to the deposit, which was fair. When we came down again, he handed over the

gold: I checked all twenty ingots, I found them genuine and of good weight, and we got very drunk on wine to celebrate the contract.

It was also a farewell drunk. Not that I didn't like that country, but many reasons pushed me to go back on the road. First, I wanted to see the warm countries, where they say that olive and lemon trees grow. Second, I wanted to see the sea, not the stormy one that my great-grandfather with the blue teeth came from but the warm sea, where salt comes from. Third, there's no point in having gold and carrying it around on your back, with the constant fear that at night, or during a drunken stupor, it will be stolen. Fourth and inclusive: I wanted to spend the gold for a journey on the sea, to learn about the sea and sailors, because sailors need lead, even if they don't know it.

So I left: I walked for two months, passing through a large gloomy valley, until it opened onto the plain. There were meadows and fields of grain, and a sharp odor of burned stubble that made me nostalgic for my country: in all the countries of the world, autumn has the same odor, of dead leaves, of earth lying fallow, of burning wood, in short of things that are ending, and you think, Forever. I came to a fortified city, bigger than any we have, at the confluence of two rivers; there was a slave market, meat, wine, dirty, robust, slovenly girls, and an inn with a good fire, and I spent the winter there. It snowed as it does among us. I left again in March, and after a month of walking I found the sea, which wasn't blue but gray, roared like a bison, and hurled itself upon the land as if it wanted to devour it; at the thought that it was never at rest, never had been since the world began, I felt my courage fail. But still I took the road to the east, along the shore, because the sea fascinated me and I couldn't part from it.

I found another city and stopped there, partly because my gold was running out. They were fishermen and strange people, who came by ship from various distant lands: they bought and sold; at night they squabbled over women and knifed each other in the alleys. So I, too, bought myself a knife, of bronze, solid, with a leather sheath, to carry at my waist under my clothes. They knew glass but not mirrors: that is, they had only cheap mirrors of polished bronze, the type that are easily damaged and distort colors. If you have lead, it's not very hard to make a glass mirror, but I revealed the secret as if doing them a great favor, telling them it's an art that only we Rodmunds know, that a goddess named Frigga taught it to us, and other nonsense that they lapped right up.

I needed money: I looked around; near the port I found a glazier who had a fairly intelligent look, and I made an agreement with him.

From him I learned various things, first of all that glass can be blown; I liked that system so much that I even learned myself, and one day or another I'll try to blow molten lead or bronze (though they're too liquid; it's unlikely I'll succeed). On the other hand, I taught him that you can pour molten lead on a hot sheet of glass and obtain a mirror that's not too big but is luminous, without flaws, and will last for many years. He was very skilled, and had a secret for making stained glass, and he cast some very beautiful multicolored panels. I was full of enthusiasm for the collaboration, and I also devised a way of making mirrors with domes of blown glass, pouring the lead on the inside or spreading it on the outside: when you look into them, you see yourself bigger or smaller, or all distorted; women don't like these mirrors, but all the children got one. All summer and fall we sold mirrors to the merchants, who paid us well; but meanwhile I talked to them, and tried to gather as much information as I could about a land that many of them knew.

It was stunning to observe how these people, who spent half their life on the sea, had such confused ideas about the cardinal points and about distances; but anyway on one thing they all agreed, and that was that if you sailed south, some said a thousand miles, others ten times as far, you would come to a land that the sun had burned to dust, abounding in unknown trees and animals, and inhabited by fierce black-skinned men. But many were sure that halfway there you would come to a big island called Icnusa, the island of metals. About this island they told the strangest stories: that it was inhabited by giants, but that the horses, the oxen, and even the rabbits and chickens were tiny; that the women were in command and went to war, while the men watched the animals and spun wool; that these giants ate men, and especially foreigners; that it was a land of prostitution, where the husbands exchanged wives, and even the animals coupled randomly, wolves with cats, bears with cows; that pregnancy lasted only three days, then the women gave birth and immediately said to the child, "Get up, bring me the scissors and a light, so I can cut the cord." Still others recounted that along the coasts there were stone fortresses, as big as mountains; that everything on the island is made of stone, the spear tips, the cart wheels, the women's combs and sewing needles, even the cooking pots, and there are rocks that burn, and are kindled under these pots; that along the streets, watching

over the crossroads, are petrified monsters, which are terrifying to look at. These things I listened to dutifully, but inside I split my sides laughing, because I've been around enough by now, and I know it's the same the whole world over. When I return and talk about the countries where I've been, I, too, enjoy inventing oddities, and here they tell fantastic things about my country: for example, that our buffalo don't have knees, and that to kill them all you have to do is saw at the base of the tree that they're leaning against at night to rest—under their weight, the tree breaks, and they fall flat and can't get up.

About the metals, however, they all agreed; many merchants and sea captains had brought from the island to the mainland cargoes of raw or refined metal, but they were a crude people and from their conversations it was difficult to understand what metal it was; also, they didn't all speak the same language, and no one spoke mine, and there was a great confusion of terms. For example, they said kalibe, and there was no way to know if they meant iron or silver or bronze. Others called sider both iron and ice, and they were so ignorant as to maintain that ice in the mountains, with the passing centuries and under the weight of the rock, hardens and becomes first rock crystal and then iron ore.

Anyway, I was tired of women's work and I wanted to go to this Icnusa. I sold the glassblower my share of the business, and with that money, plus what I had earned with the mirrors, I found passage on a cargo ship. But you can't go in winter, there's the north wind, or the mistral, or notus, from the south, or eurus, from the east; no wind, it seems, is good, and until April the best thing to do is stay on land, get drunk, bet your shirt at dice, and make the girls at the port pregnant.

In April we left. The ship was loaded with amphoras of wine; besides the captain, there was a crew chief, four sailors, and twenty rowers chained to the benches. The crew chief came from Crete and was a great liar: he told of a country inhabited by men called Big Ears, who have ears so large that in winter they wrap up in them to sleep, and animals with tails in front who are called Alfil and understand the language of men.

I have to confess that I had trouble getting used to living on a ship: it dances under your feet, it inclines to the right and the left, it's hard to eat and sleep, and everyone steps on everyone else's feet because of the lack of space; then, the chained rowers look at you so fiercely you have to think that if they weren't chained they would rip you to pieces in a moment, and

the captain told me that sometimes it happens. On the other hand, when the wind is favorable, the sails swell, the rowers lift their oars, and the ship seems to be flying, in an enchanted silence; you can see dolphins leaping out of the water, and the sailors claim they understand, from the expression of their muzzle, what tomorrow's weather will be. That ship was well coated with pitch, and yet you could see that the hull was riddled with holes: from the shipworms, they explained. Also in the port I had noticed that all the ships were eaten away on the bottom: there's nothing to do, the owner, who was also the captain, told me. When a ship gets old, it's broken up and burned: but I had an idea, and for the anchor as well. It's stupid to make anchors of iron: they get eroded by rust and don't last two years. And the fishing nets? Those sailors, when the wind was good, cast a net that had floats of wood, and rocks for ballast. Rocks! If they had been of lead, they would have been four times less cumbersome. Obviously I didn't say a word to anyone, but, you, too, will have understood, I was already thinking of the lead I would dig out of the belly of Icnusa—selling the bearskin before I had killed the bear.

We came in sight of the island after eleven days at sea. We entered a small port by means of the oars: around it were steep granite slopes, and slaves who were carving columns. They weren't giants, and they weren't sleeping in their own ears; they were made like us, and they and the sailors understood one another well enough, but their overseers wouldn't let them speak. That was a land of rock and wind, which I liked immediately: the air was filled with the bitter, wild odors of grass, and the people seemed strong and simple.

The land of the metals was a two-day walk: I rented a mule and its driver, and this is really true, the mules are small (not, however, like cats, as they say on the mainland), but sturdy and tough; that is, there may be some truth in the tales, a truth hidden under veils of words, like a riddle. For example, I saw that the business of the stone forts was true: they aren't really as big as mountains, but they're massive, have a regular shape, and are made of precisely joined blocks; and what's curious is that everyone says "They've always been here," and no one knows by whom, how, why, or when they were built. That the islanders eat foreigners, however, is a big lie: in stages, they led me to the mines, without any fuss or secretiveness, as if their land belonged to everyone.

The land of metals is intoxicating: as when a bloodhound enters a forest full of game, and bounds from scent to scent, quivers all over, and becomes almost dazed. It's close to the sea, a line of hills that become rocky at the top, and near and far, up to the horizon, plumes of smoke from the foundries can be seen, with people hard at work all around, free men and slaves. And the story of the rock that burns is true—I couldn't believe my eyes. It's a bit difficult to light, but then it produces a lot of heat and lasts a long time. I don't know where they bring it from, in baskets on the backs of mules: it's black, oily, fragile, not very heavy.

I was saying, though, that there are marvelous rocks, certainly heavy with unknown metals, which appear on the surface in traces of white, violet, blue: in that earth there must be a fabulous tangle of veins. I would have happily gotten lost, tapping, digging, and testing: but I am a Rodmund, and my rock is lead. I immediately set to work.

I found a deposit on the western border of the country, where I think no one had ever searched: in fact there were no shafts or tunnels or dumps, or even any signs on the surface; the rocks that were visible looked like all the other rocks. But just a little below, the lead was there, and this is a thing I've often thought about: we searchers believe we've found the metal with our eyes, experience, and talent, but really what guides us is something more profound, a force like the one that guides the salmon to go back up our rivers, or swallows to return to the nest. Perhaps we are like diviners, who don't know what guides them to the water, but something does, and twists the rod in their fingers.

I can't say how, but there was the lead; I felt it under my feet, dark, poisonous, and heavy, for two miles along a stream in a wood where, among the lightning-struck trunks, wild bees nest. Within a short time I bought slaves to excavate for me, and as soon as I had a little money saved I also bought a woman. Not to carouse with: I chose her with care, looking not so much at beauty, but making sure she was healthy, broad-hipped, young, and cheerful. I chose her so that she could give me a Rodmund, and so our art won't perish; and I didn't waste time, because my hands and knees have begun to tremble, and the teeth are loose in my jaws, and have turned blue like those of my great-grandfather who came from the sea. This Rodmund will be born at the end of next winter, in this land where palm trees grow and salt condenses, and at night you hear the wild dogs baying as they track the bears, in the village that I founded near the stream of the

wild bees. I would have liked to call it, in my language—which I am forgetting—Bak der Binnen, which means "River of the Bees": but the people here have accepted the name only in part, and among themselves, in their language, which now is mine, they call it Bacu Abis.

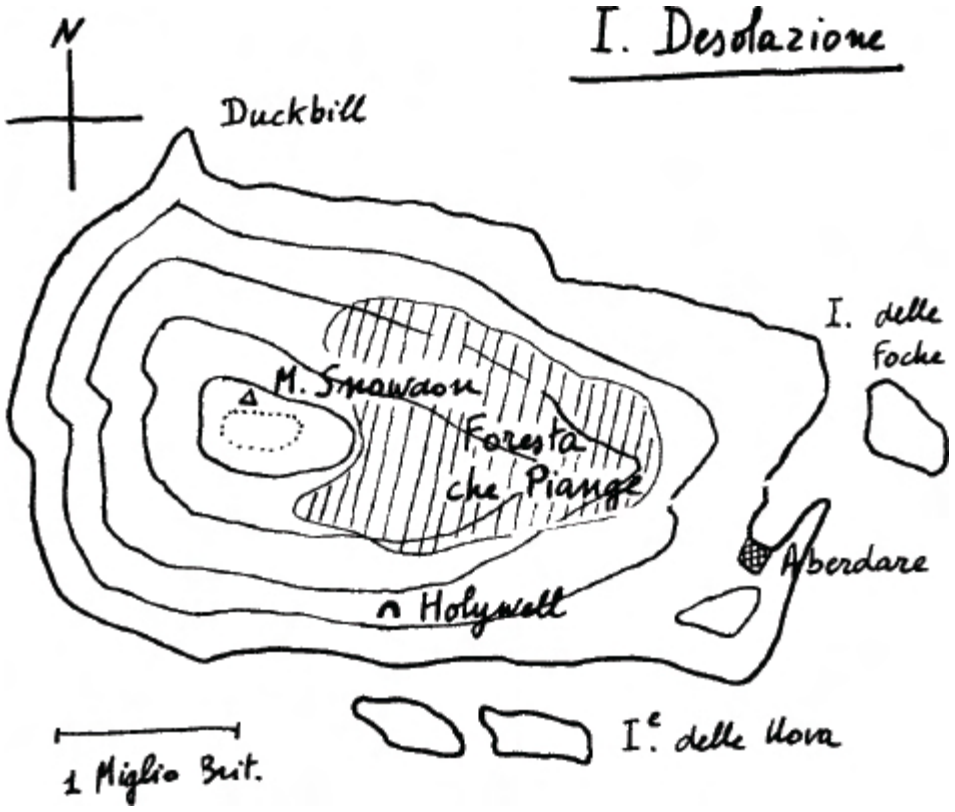
Mercury

With my wife, Maggie, I, the undersigned Corporal Abrahams, have lived on this island for fourteen years. I was garrisoned here: it seems that on a nearby island (I mean "the nearest": it's northwest of this, not less than 1200 miles, and is called St. Helena) an important and dangerous person had been exiled, and they were afraid that his supporters might help him flee and take refuge here. It's a story I've never believed: my island is called Desolation, and never did an island have a better name; so I've never understood what an important person like that would come looking for here.

The rumor was that he was a renegade, adulterer, papist, agitator, and blowhard. As long as he was alive, there were twelve other soldiers with us, young and cheerful fellows, from Wales and Surrey; they were good farmers, and gave us a hand with the work. Then the agitator died, and a gunboat came to take everyone home; but Maggie and I thought about certain old debts, and we preferred to stay here and take care of our pigs. Our island has the shape that is drawn on the following page.

It's the most solitary island in the world. It's been discovered more than once, by the Portuguese, by the Dutch, and, even earlier, by a savage people who carved signs and idols into the rocks of Mount Snowdon; but no one ever stayed, because it rains half the year here, and the soil is good for nothing but sorghum and potatoes. Yet those who content themselves certainly won't die of hunger, because for five months of the year the north coast is teeming with seals, and the two little islands to the south are crowded with seagulls' nests: all you do is take a boat, and you'll find as many eggs as you like. They taste of fish, but they're nourishing and they

satisfy hunger; besides, everything here tastes of fish, even the potatoes and the pigs that eat them.



On the eastern slopes of Snowdon grow ilexes and another plant, whose name I don't know: in autumn it produces fleshy blue flowers, with the odor of unwashed people, and in winter hard acidic berries that aren't good to eat. It's a strange plant: it sucks up water from deep in the earth and regurgitates it as rain from the tops of the branches; even on dry days the forest floor is damp. The water that rains down from the branches is good to drink, and in fact helps fluxion, although it tastes of moss: we collect it, using a system of gutters and tubs. This forest, which is the only one on the island, we named the Weeping Forest.

We live in Aberdare. It's not a city; there are only four wooden huts, two of which are falling apart, but one of the Welshmen, who was, in fact, from Aberdare, insisted on the name. Duckbill is the far north of the island: the soldier Cochrane, who suffered from homesickness, went there often and spent the days in the salty fog and wind, because it seemed to him that he was closer to England. He also built us a lighthouse, which no one ever

bothered to light. The place is called Duckbill because, seen from the east, it has the shape of a duck's bill.

The Island of Seals is flat and sandy: the seals come there in winter to give birth. The cave Holywell was named by my wife; I don't know what she found there. In certain periods, when we were alone, she went there almost every evening, with a torch, and it's almost two miles from Aberdare. She sat there spinning or knitting, waiting for who knows what. I asked her, more than once: she told me a confusion of things, that she heard voices and saw shadows, and that down there, where not even the roar of the sea penetrated, she felt less alone and more protected. I was afraid, rather, that Maggie was tending toward idolatry. In that cave were boulders that resembled figures of men and animals: one, at the back, was a horned skull. Certainly those shapes were not made by human hand—and so by whom? I, for my part, preferred to keep clear of it, and also because sometimes in the cave dull rumblings could be heard, like colics in the guts of the earth, the floor was warm under your feet, and from certain cracks, at the back, came gusts smelling of sulfur. Anyway, I would have given that cave a different name, but Maggie said that the voice she claimed to hear would one day utter our destiny, and that of the island, and of all humanity.

For several years, Maggie and I were alone. Each year, at Easter, Burton came by in his whaler, bringing provisions and news of the world, and loading on the small amount of smoked lard we produced; but then everything changed. Three years ago, Burton disembarked two Dutchmen. Willem was still almost a child, timid, fair, and pink; he had a silvery wound on his forehead that looked like leprosy, and no ship wanted him on board. Hendrik was older; he was thin and gray-haired, with a wrinkled brow. He told a dubious story of a brawl in which he supposedly bashed in the head of his quartermaster, and on account of which the gallows awaited him in Holland; but he didn't talk like a sailor, and he had the hands of a gentleman, not someone who bashes heads. One morning a few months later, we saw smoke rising from one of the Egg Islands. I took the boat and went to investigate: I found two shipwrecked Italian sailors, Gaetano from Amalfi and Andrea from Noli. Their ship had broken up on the cliffs of Erpice, and they had saved themselves by swimming. They didn't know that

the big island was inhabited; they had lit a fire of brush and guano to dry off. I told them that in a few months Burton would come by and could take them to Europe, but they refused, in terror. After what they had seen that night, they would never set foot on a ship again, and it took me a lot of effort to persuade them to get into my boat and cross the hundred ells of sea that separated us from Desolation. For their part, they would have remained on that wretched cliff eating seagull eggs until the time of their natural death.

It's not that there is a shortage of space on Desolation. I settled the four in one of the huts abandoned by the Welshmen, and they had room enough, especially since their baggage was modest. Only Hendrik had a wooden trunk, locked shut. Willem's wound was not leprosy: Maggie healed it in a few weeks, with poultices of an herb she knows. It's not really cress but a fleshy grass that grows on the edge of the forest and is good to eat, although it can give you strange dreams; we call it cress anyway. In truth, she didn't heal the wound with poultices alone; she shut herself in the room with him and sang what sounded like lullabies, with pauses that seemed to me too long. I was happy and calmer when Willem was cured, but right afterward another annoying business started up, with Hendrik. He and Maggie took long walks together, and I heard them talking about the seven keys, Hermes Trismegistus, the union of opposites, and other obscure things. Hendrik built himself a strong cabin, without windows, carried his trunk to it, and passed entire days there, sometimes with Maggie: you could see smoke rising from the hearth. They also went to the cave, and returned with colored rocks that Hendrik called cinnabar.

The two Italians worried me less. They, too, looked at Maggie with shining eyes, but they didn't know English and couldn't speak to her: besides, they spent their days jealously watching each other. Andrea was devout, and soon filled the island with saints of wood and fired clay: he gave Maggie a terra-cotta Madonna, but she didn't know what to do with it and stuck it in a corner of the kitchen. In other words, it would have been clear to anyone that for those four men four women were needed; one day I assembled them and, without mincing words, said that if any one of them touched Maggie he would end up in hell, because it's wrong to desire someone else's woman, and I would send him to hell myself, at the cost of ending up there, too. When Burton came by, with the hold full of whale oil, we solemnly charged him to find us four wives, but he laughed in our faces:

what were we thinking? That it would be easy to find women willing to settle amid seals, on this forgotten island, to marry four good-for-nothings? Maybe if we could pay them, but with what? Certainly not with our sausages, half pork and half seal meat, that had a stronger stink of fish than his whaleboat. He left, and immediately raised the sails.

That very evening, a little before nightfall, we heard a loud thunderclap, as if the island itself were being shaken to its roots. In a few minutes the sky darkened, and the black cloud that covered it was illumined from below as if by a fire. First we saw red flashes shooting into the sky from the summit of Snowdon, then a broad, slow flow of burning lava that descended not toward us but to the left, southward, whistling and cracking as it dripped from ledge to ledge. After an hour it reached the sea and was consumed, roaring and releasing a column of steam. None of us had ever thought that Snowdon might be a volcano: and yet the shape of its summit—a circular cone at least two hundred feet deep—might have led us to suppose it.

The spectacle went on all night, every so often subsiding, then regaining strength with a new series of explosions: it seemed that it would never end. Finally, around dawn, a hot wind came from the east, the sky cleared, and the noise grew gradually less intense, dwindling to a murmur, then silence. The dazzling yellow mantle of lava turned reddish, like coals, and by day had cooled.

My concern was the pigs. I told Maggie to go and sleep, the four men to come with me: I wanted to see what had changed on the island.

Nothing had happened to the pigs, but they ran toward us like brothers. (I can't bear it when people speak ill of pigs: these beasts have cognition, and it pains me when I have to butcher them.) Several crevices had opened up, two big ones where you couldn't see to the bottom, on the northwest slope. The southwest edge of the Weeping Forest was buried, and a strip about two hundred feet wide along the edge had dried up and caught fire; the earth must have been hotter than the sky, because the fire pursued the trunks down to the roots, burrowing into them. The mantle of lava was studded with burst bubbles whose edges were sharp, like glass splinters; it looked like a giant cheese grater. It emerged from the southern rim of the crater, which had collapsed, while the northern edge, which constituted the top of the mountain, was now a rounded crest that appeared much higher than before.

When we looked at the cave of Holywell we were dumbstruck. It was a new and completely different cave, as when you shuffle a deck of cards—narrow where it had been wide, high where it had been low. In one place the roof had caved in, and the stalactites, instead of down, were pointing sideways, like the beaks of swans. At the back, where the Devil's Skull had been, there was an enormous chamber, like the dome of a church, still full of smoke and crackling sounds, so that Andrea and Gaetano wanted at any cost to turn back. I sent them for Maggie, so that she, too, could see her cavern, and, as I predicted, she arrived in a hurry, breathless with emotion; the two stayed outside, presumably to pray to their saints and say their litanies. Inside the cave Maggie ran back and forth like a hunting dog, as if the voices she said she heard were calling her: suddenly she let out a cry that made our hair stand on end. There was a crack in the vault of the dome, and drops were falling from it, but not water: shiny, heavy drops that fell on the stone floor, burst into a thousand tiny drops, and rolled away. A little farther down a pool had formed, and then we understood that it was mercury. Hendrik touched it, and I, too; it was a cold, living material, and it moved in angry, frenetic little waves.

Hendrik seemed transfigured. He exchanged with Maggie quick glances whose meaning I didn't understand and told us some mysterious and muddled things, which she, however, appeared to grasp: that it was time to begin the Great Work; that the earth, too, like the sky, has its dew; that the cavern was filled with the spiritus mundi. Then he turned openly to Maggie and said, "Come here tonight, we'll make the two-backed beast." He took from around his neck a chain with a bronze cross and showed it to her: on the cross was a crucified serpent, and he threw the cross into the mercury in the pool, and it floated.

If you looked around carefully, you could see the mercury trickling out of all the fissures in the new cave, like beer from new vats. If you listened closely, you heard a kind of sonorous murmur, made by countless metallic drops as they broke off from the vault to splatter on the ground, and by the rivulets that flowed, quivering, like melted silver and sank into the cracks in the floor.

To tell the truth, I had never liked Hendrik; of the four, it was he I liked least, but at that moment he also inspired fear, anger, and disgust. He had an oblique and mobile light in his eyes, like that of mercury itself; he seemed to have become mercury, as if it ran in his veins and oozed from his

eyes. He went through the cave like a ferret, dragging Maggie by the wrist; he plunged his hands into the pools of mercury, sprinkled it on himself and poured it on his head, like a thirsty man with water—he was practically on the point of drinking it. Maggie followed him as if under a spell. I endured it for a while, then I opened my knife, seized him by the chest, and pushed him against the rock wall: I'm much stronger than he, and he went limp, like a sail when the wind drops. I wanted to know who he was, what he wanted from us and the island, and that business of the two-backed beast.

He was like a man waking from a dream, and didn't have to be asked twice. He confessed that the story of the murdered quartermaster was a lie, but not the gallows that awaited him in Holland: he had proposed to the States-General that he transform the sand of the dunes into gold, had obtained an allocation of a hundred thousand florins, had spent a little of it on experiments and the rest on debauchery. Then he had been asked to carry out before the judges what he called the experimentum crucis, but from a thousand pounds of sand he had managed to get only two specks of gold, and so he leaped out the window, hid in the house of his lover, and then stealthily boarded the first ship leaving for the Cape; in his trunk he had all his alchemist's equipment. As for the beast, he told me it's not something that can be explained in a few words. Mercury would be indispensable for their work, because it's a winged fixed spirit, or, rather, the feminine principle, and combined with sulfur, which is fiery masculine earth, it allows you to obtain the Philosophical Egg, which is the Beast with Two Backs, because the male and the female are joined and commingled in it. Quite a discourse, wouldn't you say? Clear, direct speech, just like an alchemist's, and I didn't believe a word of it. Those two were the beast with two backs, he and Maggie: he gray and hairy, she white and smooth, in the cave or who knows where, or maybe in our own bed, while I was seeing to the pigs. They were getting ready to do it, drunk on mercury as they were, if they hadn't already.

Maybe the mercury was running in my veins, too, because at that moment I truly saw red. After twenty years of marriage, Maggie wasn't so important to me, but at that moment I was burning with desire for her, and I would have slaughtered him. Yet I mastered myself; in fact, I still had Hendrik pinned tight against the wall when I had an idea, and I asked him how much the mercury was worth—with his occupation, he would surely know.

“Twelve pounds sterling a pound,” he said in a whisper.

“Swear!”

“I swear!” he said, raising two thumbs and spitting on the ground between us; maybe it was their oath, those transformers of metals; but he had my knife so close to his throat that he was certainly telling the truth. I let him go, and, still frightened, he explained to me that unrefined mercury, such as ours, wasn’t worth much, but that it can be purified by distilling, like whiskey, in retorts of cast iron or terra-cotta, and then the retort is broken and in the residue lead, often silver, and sometimes gold can be found; that this process was a secret of theirs, but that he would do it for me, if I promised to spare his life.

I didn’t promise him a thing, and told him instead that with the mercury I wanted to pay for four wives. To make retorts and vessels of pottery had to be easier than turning the sands of Holland into gold: he had better get busy, Easter was approaching and, with it, Burton’s visit; for Easter I wanted to have forty pint jars of purified mercury ready, all alike, with tight-fitting lids, and they should be smooth and round, because the eye had to play its part as well. He was to get help from the three others, and I, too, would lend a hand. To fire retorts and jars, he needn’t worry: there was already the kiln where Andrea fired his saints.

I learned distilling right away, and in ten days the jars were ready: they were pint jars only, but they held seventeen generous pounds of mercury, and were hard to lift with an outstretched arm, and if you shook them it was as if a live animal were wriggling inside. As for finding raw mercury, that was nothing: the cavern was wallowing in mercury; it dripped on your head and shoulders, and coming home you found it in your pockets, your boots, even in your bed, and it went to our heads a little, so that it began to seem natural that it should be exchanged for women. It’s a truly bizarre substance: it’s cold and volatile, always restless, but when it’s still it’s a better mirror than a mirror. If you give it a spin in a bowl, it will go on spinning for almost half an hour. Not only Hendrik’s sacrilegious cross floated in it but also rocks, and even lead. Gold, no: Maggie tried her ring, but it immediately sank, and when we fished it out it was tin. In other words, it’s not a material I like, and I was in a hurry to get the business done with and be free of it.

At Easter Burton arrived, picked up the forty jars, which were tightly sealed with wax and clay, and left without making any promises. One

evening around the end of autumn, we saw his sail take shape in the rain, grow larger, and then disappear in the murky air and the darkness. We thought he was waiting for daylight to enter the port, as he usually did, but in the morning there was no trace of Burton or his whaler. Instead, standing on the beach, drenched and numb, were four women, along with two children, huddled together because of the cold and their timidity; one of them silently handed me a letter from Burton. It was just a few lines: that, to find four women for four strangers on a desolate island, he had had to hand over all the mercury, and nothing remained for the commission, and on his next visit he would require, in mercury or lard, 10 percent; that they were not women of the highest quality, but he had found nothing better; that he preferred to put them ashore quickly and return to his whales, in order not to witness ugly brawls, and because he wasn't a pimp or a pander, or a priest who could celebrate weddings; that in any case he recommended that we celebrate them ourselves, as best we could, for the health of our souls, which he already considered somewhat compromised.

I called the four men, and was going to propose drawing lots, but I saw immediately that it wasn't necessary. There was a plump middle-aged mulatto, with a scar on her forehead, who looked insistently at Willem, and Willem looked at her with curiosity: the woman could have been his mother. I said to Willem, "You want her? Take her," and he took her, and I married them as well as I could; that is, I asked her if she wanted him and him if he wanted her, but I couldn't precisely remember the speech "for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health," so I invented it on the spot, ending with "until death comes upon you," which sounded fine to me. I was just finishing up with those two when I realized that Gaetano had chosen a cross-eyed girl, or maybe she had chosen him, and they were running off in the rain, so that I had to follow and marry them from a distance, running myself. Of the two who remained, Andrea took a Negress of around thirty, graceful and even elegant, with a feather hat and a soaking-wet ostrich boa, but with a rather equivocal look, and I married them, too, although I was still short of breath from my run.

There remained Hendrik, and a small, thin girl who was the mother of the two children; she had gray eyes and looked around as if the scene had nothing to do with her but amused her. She was looking not at Hendrik but at me; Hendrik was looking at Maggie, who had just emerged from the hut and hadn't even taken out her curlers, and Maggie looked at Hendrik. Then

it occurred to me that the two children could help me look after the pigs; that Maggie would certainly not give me children; that Hendrik and Maggie would do very well together, making their two-backed beast and their distillations; and that the gray-eyed girl did not displease me, even if she was much younger than me—in fact she made a cheerful, light impression, like a tickle, and I imagined I was capturing her in flight, like a butterfly. So I asked her what her name was, and then I asked myself aloud, in the presence of the witnesses: "Do you, Corporal Daniel K. Abrahams, take as your wife Rebecca Johnson here?" I answered yes, and since the girl agreed, we were married.

Phosphorus

In June of 1942 I spoke openly to the lieutenant and the director: I realized that my work was becoming futile, and they did, too, and advised me to look for another job, in one of the few niches that the law still allowed.

I had been searching in vain when, one morning, I was called to the telephone at the Mines—something extremely rare. At the other end of the line was a Milanese voice, which seemed to me rough and energetic, and, saying that it belonged to a Dottor Martini, summoned me for the following Sunday at the Hotel Suisse in Turin, without granting me the luxury of any particulars. But he really had said “Hotel Suisse,” and not “Albergo Svizzera,” as a loyal citizen should have done: at that time, the time of Starace,[7] one was very attentive to such small details, and one’s ears were practiced in picking up certain nuances.

In the *hall* (excuse me, *vestibolo*) of the Hotel Suisse, an anachronistic oasis of velvets, shadows, and draperies, waited Dottor Martini, who was called Commendatore, as I had learned a little earlier from the porter. He was a thickset man of sixty, of medium height, tanned, and nearly bald: the features of his face were heavy, but his eyes were small and astute, and his mouth, slightly twisted to the left, as if in a grimace of disdain, was thin, like a cut. This Commendatore, too, revealed himself, in his first remarks, to be a brisk type: and I understood then that this curious haste of many “Aryan” Italians in regard to Jews was not random. Whether it was intuition or calculation, it served a purpose: at the time of *Difesa della Razza*, one could be courteous to a Jew, one could perhaps help him, and even boast (cautiously) of having helped him, but it was advisable not to maintain

human relations with him, not to compromise oneself totally, so as not to be forced to show understanding or compassion later.

The Commendatore asked few questions, answered mine, which were many, evasively, and proved to be a man who was solid on two fundamental points. The initial salary he proposed amounted to a figure that I would never have dared ask, and it left me astonished. His company was Swiss; indeed, he himself was Swiss (he pronounced it *svissero*, rather than *svizzero*); hence there were no difficulties in the way of my possible employment. I found his Swissness, expressed with such a virulent Milanese accent, strange, in fact frankly comic; I found his reticence, on the other hand, justifiable.

The factory of which he was the owner and manager was on the outskirts of Milan, and to Milan I would have to move. The factory produced hormonal extracts: I, however, was to work on a very particular problem, and that was researching a remedy for diabetes that could be taken orally. Did I know anything about diabetes? Very little, I said, but my maternal grandfather had died a diabetic, and on the paternal side, too, several of my uncles, legendary pasta eaters, had in old age shown symptoms of the disease. Hearing this, the Commendatore became more attentive, and his eyes narrowed: I later learned that, since the tendency to diabetes is inherited, he wouldn't have minded having available an authentic diabetic, from a race substantially human, on whom to test certain of his ideas and preparations. He said that the salary he offered was subject to rapid increases; that the laboratory was modern, well equipped, spacious; that there was in the factory a library of more than ten thousand volumes; and, finally, as when the magician pulls a rabbit out of his hat, he added that, maybe I didn't know it (and I didn't), but already working in his laboratory, and on the same problem, was a person I knew well, a schoolmate and friend, who in fact had told him about me, Giulia Vineis. I should decide in tranquility: I could find him at the Hotel Suisse two Sundays later.

The very next day I resigned from the Mines and moved to Milan with the few things I felt were indispensable: my bicycle, Rabelais, the *Macaroneae*, *Moby-Dick* translated by Pavese, and a few other books, my pick, my climbing rope, my slide rule, and a recorder.

The Commendatore's laboratory lived up to his description: a palace, compared to the one at the Mines. I found, already arranged for my arrival,

a counter, a hood, a desk, a cupboard full of glassware, and an inhuman silence and orderliness. “My” glassware was marked with a blue enamel dot, so that I wouldn’t confuse it with that of other cupboards, and because “you pay for breakage here.” This, in any case, was only one of the many instructions that the Commendatore communicated when I entered: he bluntly passed these off as “Swiss precision,” the soul of the laboratory and of the entire factory, but to me they seemed a lot of silly constraints, verging on a persecution mania.

The Commendatore explained to me that the business of the factory, and specifically the problem that he intended to entrust to me, had to be carefully protected from possible industrial spies. These spies could be outsiders, but they might also be employees of the factory itself, in spite of the precautions he took in his hiring. Therefore I was not to discuss with anyone the subject that he had proposed to me, or its possible developments: not even with my colleagues, in fact with them less than with others. For this reason, every employee had his own particular schedule, which coincided with a single pair of trips on the tram that came from the city: A had to arrive at 8, B at 8:04, C at 8:08, and so on, and analogously on leaving, in such a way that two colleagues never had occasion to travel in the same tram car. For late arrivals and early departures there were heavy fines.

The last hour of the day, no matter what, was to be devoted to disassembling, washing, and putting away the glassware, so that no one, coming in after hours, would be able to reconstruct the work that had been done during the day. Every evening a daily report had to be compiled, and delivered in a sealed envelope to him personally, or to Signora Loredana, his secretary.

Lunch I could have where I wanted: it was not his intention to sequester his employees in the factory during the noon break. However, he said (and here his mouth twisted more than usual, and became even thinner), there were no good restaurants in the neighborhood, and his advice was to make arrangements to have lunch in the laboratory: I should bring the ingredients from home, and a worker would take care of cooking for me.

As for the library, the rules to be obeyed were singularly severe. One was not permitted to take books out of the factory for any reason: they could be consulted only with the consent of the librarian, Signorina Paglietta. Underlining a word, or even making a pen or pencil mark, was an

extremely serious contravention: Signorina Paglietta was obliged to check every volume, page by page, when it was returned, and if she found a mark the volume had to be destroyed and replaced at the expense of the guilty party. It was also forbidden to leave a bookmark between pages or fold down the corner of a page: “someone” might deduce from it clues to the interests and activities of the factory, penetrate, in other words, its secret. Within this system, it was logical that keys were fundamental: in the evening, everything had to be locked up, even the analytic scale, and the keys deposited with the porter. The Commendatore had a key that opened all the locks.

This viaticum of directives and prohibitions would have made me permanently unhappy if, upon entering the laboratory, I had not found Giulia Vineis, perfectly at ease, sitting at her counter. She wasn’t working; rather, she was mending her stockings, and seemed to be expecting me. She greeted me with affectionate familiarity and a sarcastic smile full of insinuations.

We had been colleagues at university for four years and had been together in all the laboratory courses—which are remarkable matchmakers—without ever forming a particular friendship. Giulia was a small, lively, dark-haired girl; she had elegantly arching eyebrows, a smooth, sharp face, quick but precise movements. She was more open to practice than to theory, full of human warmth, Catholic without being rigid, generous and disorderly; she spoke in a husky, dreamy voice, as if she were definitively tired of life, which she was not at all. She had been there for almost a year; yes, it was she who had given my name to the Commendatore. She knew vaguely about my precarious situation at the Mines, thought I would be good at this research job, and then, why not admit it, she was tired of being alone. But I mustn’t get the wrong idea: she was engaged, very much engaged, a complicated and tumultuous affair that she would explain to me later. And I? No? No girls? Bad: she would take care to give me a hand, racial laws or not—all nonsense, how important could they be?

She urged me not to take the Commendatore’s fixations too seriously. Giulia was one of those people who, apparently without asking questions and without going to any trouble, immediately know everything about everybody, something that to me, I don’t know why, doesn’t happen; therefore she was an excellent tour guide and interpreter. In a single session she taught me the essential, the pulleys concealed behind the scenes of the

factory, and the roles of the principal characters. The Commendatore was the boss, although subject to obscure other bosses in Basel: but the person in charge was Signora Loredana (and she pointed her out to me through the window in the courtyard: tall, dark, shapely, coarse, a bit faded), who was his secretary and his lover. They had a villa on the lake, and he, “who was old but a lecher,” took her out sailing: there were some pictures in the administrative offices, had I seen them? Signor Grasso, in the Personnel Office, was also after Signora Loredana, but for the moment she, Giulia, had not been able to establish if he had gone to bed with her or not: she would keep me up to date. Living in that factory was not difficult; it was difficult to work there, because of all the obstacles. The solution was simple: not to work. She had realized this right away and, modesty aside, had done practically nothing; all she did was set up the apparatus in the morning, enough to satisfy the eye, and take it apart in the evening, according to the rules; the daily reports she made up. Apart from that, she was getting her trousseau ready, she slept a lot, wrote torrential letters to her fiancé, and, against the rules, started conversations with anyone who came within range. With Ambrogio, who was half deaf, and took care of the rabbits for the experiments; with Michela, the custodian of all the keys, who was probably a Fascist spy; with Signorina Varisco, the woman who, according to the Commendatore, would make my lunch; with Maiocchi, who had fought for the Fascists in Spain and was a dandy and a womanizer; and with, impartially, the pale, gelatinous Moioli, who had nine children and had been in the People’s Party, and whom the Fascists had beaten severely, breaking his back.

Varisco, she explained, was her creature: she was devotedly attached to her and would do anything she asked, including special expeditions into the Organotherapy Production Department (off-limits to those who were not employed there), from which she returned with livers, brains, adrenal glands, and other precious offal. Varisco, too, was engaged, and between them there was a deep solidarity and an intense exchange of intimate confidences. From Varisco, who, being in the Cleaning Department, had access to everything, she had learned that the Production Department was heavily swathed in anti-spy trappings: all the pipes for water, steam, vacuum, gas, naphtha, and so forth ran in tunnels or were set in concrete, and only the valves were accessible; the machines were housed in

complicated, locked casings. The dials of the thermometers and gauges were not graduated: they bore only conventional colored marks.

Of course, if I wanted to work, and if diabetes research interested me, I should go ahead with it, we would get along just the same; but I should not count on her collaboration, because she had other things to think about. I could, however, count on her and on Varisco as far as cooking was concerned. They, both of them, had to practice, in view of their marriages, and they would prepare food that would make me forget ration cards and rationing. To me it seemed slightly irregular that complex cooking should be done in a laboratory, but Giulia told me that, apart from a certain mysterious consultant from Basel who seemed to be embalmed, and who showed up once a month (and, besides, was announced far in advance), looked around as if he were in a museum, and left without opening his mouth, no living soul ever came to that laboratory, and you could do what you liked, provided you left no traces. In the memory of man, the Commendatore had never set foot there.

A few days after I was hired, the Commendatore called me to his office, and on that occasion I noticed that the photographs with the sailboat, although very chaste, were indeed there. He said that it was time to get to the point. The first thing I was to do was go to the library and ask Signorina Paglietta for Kerrn, a treatise on diabetes: I knew German, right? Good, that way I could read the original text, and not a bad French translation that the people in Basel had had made. He, he had to admit, had read only the latter, without understanding much, but he was convinced that Doktor Kerrn knew what was what, and that it would be wonderful to be the first to translate his ideas into practice. Of course, he wrote in a rather convoluted way, but the people in Basel, and especially the embalmed consultant, attached great importance to this matter of the oral diabetes medicine. So I should take Kerrn and read it carefully, then we would discuss it together. But meanwhile, in order not to waste time, I could start work. His many concerns had not permitted him to devote to the text the attention it deserved, but he had got from it two basic ideas, and one could attempt to test them in practice.

The first idea had to do with anthocyanins. Anthocyanins, as you well know, are the pigments of red and blue flowers: they are substances that, like glucose, are easy to oxidize and deoxidize and diabetes is an anomaly in the oxidation of glucose; “therefore,” using anthocyanins one could

attempt to restore the normal oxidation of glucose. Anthocyanins are abundant in the petals of cornflowers; in view of this, he had had a whole field of cornflowers planted, and the petals gathered and dried in the sun: I was to try to make extracts, administer them to the rabbits, and check their glucose levels.

The second idea was equally vague, at once simplistic and muddled. Also according to Doktor Kerrn, in the Commendatore's Lombard interpretation, phosphoric acid had a fundamental importance in the replacement of carbohydrates. Up to that point, there was little to object to; less convincing was the hypothesis, elaborated by the Commendatore himself from Kerrn's obscure principles, that you had only to administer to the diabetic a little phosphorus of vegetal origin to straighten out his disrupted metabolism. At that time I was still young enough to think it possible to persuade a superior to change his ideas, so I put forward two or three objections; but I immediately saw that under the blows the Commendatore hardened like a copper plate under the hammer. He cut me off and, in a peremptory tone that transformed his proposals into orders, advised me to analyze a good number of plants, to choose those which were richest in organic phosphorus, to make the usual extracts, and insert them in the usual rabbits. Good luck with the work and good evening.

When I reported to Giulia the outcome of this conversation, her opinion was immediate and indignant: the old man is mad. But I had provoked him, descending onto his terrain and showing from the start that I took him seriously: it served me right, so now I had to extricate myself, with the cornflowers and the phosphorus and the rabbits. According to her, that mania of mine for work, which went so far that I prostituted myself to the Commendatore's senile fairy stories, came from the fact that I didn't have a girl; if I had, I would have thought of her rather than of anthocyanins. It was a real pity that she, Giulia, wasn't available, because she knew my type, I was one of those who won't take the initiative, who, in fact, flee, and have to be led by the hand, slowly overcoming the obstacles. Well, she had a cousin in Milan who was also a little timid; she would find a way for me to meet her. But I, too, good heavens, had to get busy; it pained her to see someone like me wasting on rabbits the best years of his youth. This Giulia was a bit of a witch; she read palms, went to fortune-tellers, and had premonitory dreams, and sometimes I dared to think that her rush to free me from an old anguish, and to get for me a modest portion of happiness

immediately, came from an obscure intuition of what destiny had in store for me, and was aimed unconsciously at deflecting it.

We went together to see *Port of Shadows* and found it marvelous, confessing to each other that we had identified with the protagonists: Giulia, slender and dark, with the ethereal Michele Morgan and her icy gaze, I, meek and withdrawn, with Jean Gabin, deserter, charmer, tough guy, and murder victim. Ridiculous, and then the two of them were in love and we were not, right?

When the film was nearly over, Giulia announced that I must see her home. I was supposed to go to the dentist, but she said, "If you don't come with me, I'll shout 'Hands off, you pig!'" I objected, but Giulia took a breath and in the darkness of the theater began, "Hands . . ."; so I telephoned the dentist and took her home.

Giulia was a lioness, who could travel ten hours, standing up, on a train crowded with evacuees to spend two with her man, radiantly happy if she could engage in a violent verbal duel with the Commendatore or Signora Loredana, but she was afraid of small animals and thunder. She would call me to get a spider off her desk (however, I was not to kill it but to put it in a weighing bottle and carry it out into the garden), and this made me feel virtuous and strong, like Hercules before the Hydra of Lerna, and at the same time tempted, because I perceived the intense feminine charge of the request. There was a fierce storm; Giulia endured two thunderclaps and at the third sought refuge with me. I felt the heat of her body against mine, dizzying and new, known in dreams, but I did not return the embrace; if I had, perhaps her destiny and mine would have gone crashing off the tracks, toward an utterly unpredictable common future.

The librarian, whom I had never seen before, guarded the library like a barnyard dog, one of those poor dogs that are deliberately made vicious by means of a chain and hunger; or, rather, like the toothless old cobra, pale through centuries of darkness, that guards the king's treasure in *The Jungle Book*. Signorina Paglietta, poor woman, was practically a *lusus naturae*: she was small, without bosom or hips, wan, melancholy, and monstrously nearsighted; she wore glasses so thick and concave that, when you looked straight at her, her eyes, of a light blue that was almost white, seemed very

distant, as if pasted to the back of her skull. She gave the impression that she had never been young, although certainly she was no more than thirty, and that she had been born there, in the shadows, in that faintly stale musty odor. No one knew anything about her, the Commendatore himself spoke of her with irritable impatience, and Giulia admitted that she hated her instinctively, without knowing why, mercilessly, the way the fox hates the dog. She said that she smelled of naphthalene and had the face of someone constipated. Signorina Paglietta asked me why I needed Kerrn in particular, wanted to see my identity card, examined it with a malevolent expression, made me sign a registry, and gave up the volume with reluctance.

It was a strange book: unlikely that it could have been written and published anywhere but in the Third Reich. The author was certainly not inexperienced, but every page exhaled the arrogance of one who knows that his statements will not be challenged. He wrote, or held forth, like a possessed prophet, as if the metabolism of glucose, in the diabetic and the healthy, had been revealed to him by Jehovah on Sinai, or, rather, by Wotan in Valhalla. I immediately conceived for Kerrn's theories a spiteful distrust; perhaps I was wrong, but the thirty years that have passed since then have not led me to reevaluate them.

The adventure of the anthocyanins ended quickly. It began with a picturesque invasion of cornflowers, sacks and sacks of delicate blue petals, dry and fragile as tiny fried potatoes. They yielded extracts with changeable colors, also picturesque but extremely unstable: after a few days of attempts, even before turning to the rabbits, I got authorization from the Commendatore to drop the matter. I continued to find it strange that this man, who was Swiss, and had his feet on the ground, had let himself be convinced by that fanatical visionary, and, given the opportunity, I hinted, cautiously, at my opinion, but he responded harshly that it was not my business to criticize professors. He gave me to understand that I was not paid for nothing, and invited me not to waste time, and to start on the phosphorus right away: he was sure that phosphorus would certainly lead to a brilliant solution. On with phosphorus.

I set to work, scarcely persuaded, persuaded instead that the Commendatore, and maybe Kerrn himself, had succumbed to the cheap fascination of names and clichés. In fact phosphorus has a very beautiful name (it means "bearer of light"), it's phosphorescent, it's in our brains, it's also in fish, and *therefore* eating fish makes us intelligent; without

phosphorus plants can’t grow; *fosfatina Falières* are glycerophosphates for anemic children of a hundred years ago; it’s in the tips of matches, which girls hopeless in love would eat to kill themselves; it’s in will-o-the-wisps, the putrid flames that appear to the traveler. No, it’s not an emotionally neutral element: it was understandable that a Professor Kerrn, half biochemist and half wizard, in the magic-saturated environs of the Nazi court, had designated it a *medicamentum*.

Unknown hands left on my counter, at night, plant upon plant, one species per day. They were all singularly domestic plants, and I don’t know how they had been chosen: onion, garlic, carrot, burdock, blueberry, yarrow, willow, sage, rosemary, dog rose, juniper. Day after day, I calculated the amount of phosphorus in each, inorganic and total, and felt like a mule bound to a water wheel. As the analysis of nickel in the rock had exhilarated me in my previous incarnation, so now the daily measuring of phosphorus humiliated me, because to do a job you don’t believe in is distressing; Giulia’s presence in the next room, as she sang in a muted voice “Wake up, little girls, it’s spring” and cooked in Pyrex beakers, using a thermometer, was scarcely enough to cheer me up. Every so often she came to watch me work, provocative and mocking.

We had noticed, Giulia and I, that, in our absence, the same unknown hands left barely perceptible traces in the laboratory. A closet, locked at night, was open in the morning. A stand had changed position. The hood, left raised, had been lowered. One rainy morning we found, like Robinson Crusoe, the outline of a rubber sole on the floor: the Commendatore wore rubber-soled shoes. “He comes at night to make love with Signora Loredana,” Giulia decided. I, on the other hand, thought that that obsessively well-ordered laboratory must be used for some intangible secret Swiss activity. From the inside, we systematically inserted sticks in the locked doors that led from Production into the laboratory: by morning the sticks had always fallen out.

After two months I had undertaken some forty analyses: the plants with the highest phosphorus content were sage, celandine, and parsley. I thought that at this point it would be sensible to determine in what form the phosphorus was bound, and try to isolate the phosphoric component, but the Commendatore telephoned Basel and then declared that there wasn’t time for such refinements: go forward with the extracts, made simply, with hot

water and a press, and then concentrated in a vacuum; insert them into the esophagus of the rabbits, and measure their glucose levels.

Rabbits are not sympathetic creatures. They are among the mammals furthest removed from man, perhaps because their qualities are those of despised and rejected humanity: they are timid, silent, and elusive, and all they know is food and sex. Except for some country cat in remotest childhood, I had never touched an animal, and faced with the rabbits I felt repulsion; so did Giulia. Luckily, however, Signorina Varisco was on very familiar terms both with the beasts and with Ambrogio, who took care of them. She showed us, in a drawer, a small assortment of suitable implements. There was a tall, narrow box, without a top, and she explained to us that rabbits like to be in a den, and if you grab them by the ears (which are their natural handle) and put them in a box, they feel more secure and stop moving around. There was a rubber tube and a small wooden spindle with a transverse hole: you had to force it between the animal's teeth, and then stick the tube through the hole and down the rabbit's throat without too much ceremony, pushing until you felt it touch the bottom of the stomach; if you don't put in the spindle, the rabbit cuts the tube with its teeth, swallows it, and dies. It's easy to squirt the extract through the tube into the stomach with an ordinary syringe.

Then you have to measure the glucose level. What the tail is in mice, the ears are in rabbits, in this case as well: they have fat, bulging veins, which immediately become congested if the ear is stroked. From these veins, pierced with a needle, you drew a drop of blood and, without asking the why of the various manipulations, proceeded according to Crecelius-Seifert. Rabbits are either stoic or insensitive to pain. None of these abuses seemed to make them suffer; as soon as they were freed and returned to their cages, they began to nibble their hay in tranquility, and showed no fear the next time. After a month I could have measured glucose levels with my eyes closed, but our phosphorus didn't seem to have any effect; one of the rabbits reacted to the celandine extract with a lowering of its glucose, but after a few weeks it got a huge tumor in its neck. The Commendatore told me to operate, I operated with a sharp sense of guilt and violent disgust, and it died.

Each of those rabbits, by order of the Commendatore, lived in its own cage, male and female in strict celibacy. But one night there was a bombardment that, without doing much other damage, smashed all the

cages, and in the morning we found the rabbits intent on a meticulous and general campaign of copulation: the bombs hadn't frightened them in the least. As soon as they were free, they had dug in the flower beds the tunnels (*cunicolo*) from which they get their name (*coniglio*), and at the slightest alarm abandoned their wedding nights midway and took refuge. Ambrogio had a lot of trouble catching them and putting them in new cages; the work of the glucose tests had to be suspended, because only the cages had been marked and not the animals, and after they dispersed they could no longer be identified.

Giulia came in between one rabbit and the next and said, point-blank, that she needed me. I had arrived at the factory by bicycle, right? Well, that evening she had to go urgently to Porta Genova, she would have to take three trams, she was in a hurry, it was an important matter: could I please take her on the crossbar, all right? I, who according to the maniacal staggered schedule of the Commendatore, left twelve minutes before her, waited around the corner, sat her on the crossbar of the bicycle, and we left.

There was nothing reckless about going around Milan on a bicycle then, and carrying a passenger on the crossbar, in a time of bombs and evacuations, was practically normal: sometimes, especially at night, strangers might ask for a ride, and in exchange for transport from one end of the city to the other would give you four or five lire. Giulia was normally quite restless, but that night she compromised the stability of the equipment: she gripped the handlebars convulsively, hampering the driver; suddenly changed position; illustrated her conversation with violent gestures of hand and head that unpredictably shifted our common center of gravity. At first her conversation was fairly generic, but Giulia was not the type to let a secret work in her body like a poison; halfway along Via Imbonati it came out vaguely, and at Porta Volta it was explicit. She was furious because his parents had said no, and she was dashing to the counterattack. Why had they said no? "I'm not pretty enough for them, you see?" she growled, shaking the handlebars angrily.

"How stupid. To me you seem very pretty," I said seriously.

"Wise up. You don't get it."

"I only wanted to pay you a compliment; and I really do think so."

“It’s not the moment. If you try to flirt with me now, I’ll tip you over.”

“You’ll fall, too.”

“You’re an idiot. Come on, pedal, it’s late.”

In Largo Cairoli I knew everything: or, rather, I possessed all the factual elements but so confused and displaced in their temporal sequence that it wasn’t easy for me to make sense of them.

Mainly, I couldn’t understand how the will of that “he” was not enough to cut the knot: it was inconceivable, outrageous. There was this man, whom Giulia had at other times described to me as generous, strong, in love, and serious; he possessed that girl, who, splendidly disheveled in her anger, was wriggling between my forearms, which were busy steering; and, instead of rushing to Milan to assert himself, he was holed up in I no longer know what barracks on the border, defending his country. Because, being a *gòi*, he was, naturally, doing his military service: and while I was thinking that, and while Giulia was arguing with me as if I were her Don Rodrigo, I was overcome by an absurd hatred for my unknown rival. A *gòi*, and she a *gôià*, according to the atavistic terminology: and they would be able to marry. I felt, perhaps for the first time, a nauseating sensation of emptiness growing inside me: this, then, meant being other; this was the price of being the salt of the earth. To carry on the crossbar of your bicycle the girl you desire, and to be so distant that you can’t even fall in love: to carry her on the crossbar to Viale Gorizia to help her become another’s, and disappear from my life.

In front of 40 Viale Gorizia there was a bench: Giulia told me to wait for her, and she went through the doorway like the wind. I sat and waited, giving free rein to the course of my thoughts, which were jumbled and painful. I thought that I should have been less of a gentleman, less inhibited and foolish, and that for my whole life I would regret that between her and me there had been nothing other than some memories of school and work; and that perhaps it was not too late, perhaps the “no” of those parents out of an operetta would be immovable, Giulia would emerge in tears, and I would be able to console her; and that these were wicked hopes, taking cruel advantage of the misfortunes of another. And finally, like a shipwrecked man who is tired of struggling and lets himself sink, I fell back into the thought that was dominant in those years: that the existing fiancé and the laws of separation were only foolish pretexts, and that my incapacity to get close to a woman was a sentence without appeal, and would accompany me

to my death, restricting me to a life poisoned by envy and abstract desires, sterile and without purpose.

Giulia emerged after two hours—rather, erupted from the doorway like a shell from a howitzer. There was no need to ask questions to know how it had gone. “I made them feel this high,” she said, all red in the face and still panting. I did my best to compliment her in a credible way, but you can’t make Giulia believe things you don’t think, nor can you hide things you do think. Now that she was relieved of her weight, and happy in victory, she looked me straight in the eye, saw the cloud, and asked, “What were you thinking about?”

“About phosphorus,” I said.

Giulia was married a few months later, and she said goodbye to me sniffling, and giving Signorina Varisco detailed instructions about meals. She had many travails and many children; we remained friends and we see each other in Milan every so often and talk about chemistry and sensible things. We are not discontent with our choices or with what life has given us, but when we meet we both feel the curious and not unpleasant sensation (we have many times described it to each other) that a veil, a puff of wind, a roll of the dice turned us off onto two divergent paths that were not ours.

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7. Achille Starace was for many years the secretary of the Fascist Party; he promoted among other things purity of the language, which meant eliminating words of foreign origin, such as hotel and (below) hall (meaning “lobby”).

Gold

It's a widely known fact that Turinese transplanted to Milan don't grow there, or don't thrive. In Milan in the fall of 1942 there were seven of us, friends from Turin, boys and girls, who had for various reasons landed in the big city that the war made inhospitable; our parents—those of us who still had them—had been evacuated to the countryside to escape the bombing, and we led a nearly communal life. Euge was an architect, who wanted to rebuild Milan, and said that the best urban planner had been Frederick Barbarossa. Silvio had a law degree, but was writing a philosophical treatise on tiny pages of parchment and was employed in a transport and shipping business. Ettore was an engineer at Olivetti. Lina made love with Euge and did some sort of work in art galleries. Vanda was a chemist, like me, but she couldn't find a job and was permanently irritated by this fact, because she was a feminist. Ada was my cousin and worked at the publisher Corbaccio: Silvio called her a bi-doctor, because she had two degrees, and Euge called her *cugimo*, that is, the cousin—*cugino*—of Primo, which Ada resented a little. I, after Giulia's marriage, was alone with my rabbits, feeling widowed and orphaned, and I fantasized about writing the saga of a carbon atom, so that the world would understand the solemn poetry, known only to chemists, of chlorophyllous photosynthesis. In fact, I did write it, but many years later; it's the story that ends this book.

If I'm not mistaken, we all wrote poetry, except Ettore, who said that it wasn't dignified for an engineer. To write melancholy, crepuscular poems, and not even very good ones, while the world was in flames, seemed to us neither strange nor shameful: we proclaimed ourselves enemies of fascism,

but in fact fascism had worked in us, as in almost all Italians, alienating us and making us superficial, passive, and cynical.

We bore with spiteful cheer the rationing and the cold, in houses without coal, and accepted unconsciously the nighttime bombing by the English; it was not for us, it was a brutal sign of the power of our distant allies: they should go ahead. We thought what all humiliated Italians thought at the time: that the Germans and the Japanese were invincible, but that so were the Americans, and the war would go on for twenty or thirty more years, a bloody and interminable yet remote stalemate, known only through censored war reports, and sometimes, in certain families of my contemporaries, through the grim, bureaucratic letters that said “heroically, in the fulfillment of his duty.” The macabre dance, up and down the Libyan coast, forward and back in the steppes of Ukraine, would never end.

We all did our jobs, day after day, halfheartedly, without conviction, which happens to those who know they aren’t working for their own tomorrow. We went to the theater and to concerts, which were sometimes interrupted in the middle because the air-raid sirens sounded, and this seemed to us a ridiculous and gratifying accident. The Allies were masters of the sky; perhaps in the end they would win and fascism would be finished: but it was their business, they were rich and powerful, they had the aircraft carriers and the Liberators. We did not: they had declared us “other,” and other we would remain; we took sides, but we kept ourselves apart from the stupid, cruel games of the Aryans, discussing the plays of O’Neill or Thornton Wilder, going climbing in the Grigne, falling a little in love with one another, inventing intellectual games, and singing beautiful songs that Silvio had learned from some Waldensian friends. Of what was happening in those very months all over German-occupied Europe, in Anne Frank’s house in Amsterdam, in the ditch of Babi Yar near Kiev, in the Warsaw Ghetto, in Salonika, in Paris, in Lidice: of this pestilence that was about to overwhelm us we had no precise information, only vague and sinister hints brought by soldiers who were returning from Greece or from behind the lines of the Russian front, and whom we tended to censor. Our ignorance allowed us to live, as when you are in the mountains, and your rope is worn and about to break, but you don’t know it, and you go confidently onward.

But in November came the Allied landing in North Africa, in December came the Resistance, and then the Russian victory at Stalingrad, and we

understood that the war had come close and history had started up again on its path. In the space of a few weeks each of us matured, more than in all the preceding twenty years. Out of the shadows came men whom fascism had not bowed, lawyers, professors, and workers, and we recognized in them our teachers, those from whom we had till then uselessly sought wisdom in the Bible, in chemistry, in the mountains. Fascism had reduced them to silence for twenty years, and they explained to us that fascism was not only a clownish and improvident bad government but the denier of justice; it not only had dragged Italy into an ill-omened and unjust war but had arisen and established itself as the guardian of a detestable order and law, based on coercion of those who work, on uncontrolled profits for those who exploit the work of others, on silence imposed on those who think and don't wish to be slaves, on systematic and calculated lies. They told us that our scornful impatience was not enough; it had to become anger, and the anger had to be channeled into an organic and timely revolt. But they did not teach us how to make a bomb, or how to fire a gun.

They spoke of men unknown to us: Gramsci, Salvemini, Gobetti, the Rosselli brothers. Who were they? Did there exist, then, a second history, a history parallel to what school had administered from on high? In those few convulsive months, we tried in vain to reconstruct, to repopulate the historical void of the previous twenty years, but those new characters remained "heroes"; like Garibaldi and Nazario Sauro, they had no depth or human substance. Time to consolidate our education was not granted: in March came the strikes in Turin, indicating that the crisis was near; on July 25 came the collapse of fascism from the inside, the squares overflowing with brotherly crowds, the extemporaneous and precarious joy of a country that had been given its freedom by a palace intrigue; and then came September 8, and the gray-green serpent of Nazi divisions in the streets of Milan and Turin, the brutal awakening. The comedy was over; Italy was an occupied country, like Poland, like Yugoslavia, like Norway.

In this way, after the long intoxication of words, we descended into the field to measure ourselves: certain of the justice of our choice, extremely unsure of our means, with much more desperation than hope in our hearts, and against the background of a country undone and divided. We separated, to follow our destiny, each into a different valley.

We were cold and hungry, the most poorly armed partisans in Piedmont, and probably also the most inexperienced. We thought we were safe, because we had not yet moved from our refuge, buried under a meter of snow. But someone betrayed us, and at dawn on December 13, 1943, we awoke surrounded by the Republic: they were three hundred, we were eleven, with a machine gun lacking ammunition and some pistols. Eight managed to flee and scatter in the mountains; we did not. The soldiers captured the three of us, Aldo, Guido, and me, all still half asleep. As they entered, I had time to hide in the ashes of the stove the revolver I kept under my pillow. I wasn't sure I knew how to use it, anyway; it was tiny, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the type that movie heroines desperate to kill themselves use. Aldo, who was a doctor, rose, stoically lit a cigarette, and said, "I'm sorry for my chromosomes."

They hit us a few times, warned us "not to try anything rash," promised to interrogate us later in a certain persuasive way they had and to shoot us right afterward, positioned themselves around us with great ceremony, and we set off for the pass. During the march, which lasted for several hours, I managed to do two things that were of great importance to me: I ate, bit by bit, the patently false identity card I had in my wallet (the photograph was particularly revolting), and, pretending to stumble, thrust into the snow the notebook full of addresses I had in my pocket. The soldiers sang proud war songs, shot at rabbits with their machine guns, threw grenades into the stream to kill the trout. Down in the valley several buses were waiting for us. They made us get in and sit separately; I had soldiers all around, sitting and standing, who paid no attention to us and went on singing. One, just in front of me, turned his back to me; a grenade was hanging from his belt, the German kind, with a wooden handle, that go off on a timer. I could have easily removed the safety, pulled the cord, and put an end to myself along with several of them, but I didn't have the courage. They led us to the barracks, on the outskirts of Aosta. Their centurion was named Fossa, and it's strange, absurd, and comical, in a sinister way, given the situation at the time, that he has lain for decades in some godforsaken war cemetery, while I am here, alive and fundamentally unharmed, writing this story. Fossa was legalistic, and he quickly got busy organizing for us a prison regime that followed the rules; thus he put us in the basement of the barracks, one to a cell, with cot and pail, rations at eleven, an hour in the open air, and a ban

on communicating with one another. This ban was painful, because among us, in our minds, weighed an ugly secret: the same secret that had exposed us to capture, extinguishing in us, a few days earlier, any will to resist, indeed to live. We had been forced by our conscience to carry out a sentence, and we had done so, but we had emerged destroyed, destitute, desiring that everything be finished and to be finished ourselves; but desiring also to see each other, to talk, to help one another exorcise that still so recent memory. Now we were finished, and we knew it: we were in a trap, each in his own trap, there was no exit, except down. It didn't take me long to become convinced of it, examining my cell bit by bit: the novels I had nourished myself on years before were full of marvelous escapes, but here the walls were half a meter thick, the door was massive and guarded from the outside, the window fitted with bars. I had a nail file, I could have sawed through one, maybe even all of them; I was so thin that I might have been able to get out. But I discovered that against the window there was a solid block of concrete to provide protection from the splinters of the bombing raids.

Every so often we were called to interrogations. When it was Fossa who interrogated us, it went pretty well: Fossa was an example of a man whom I had never met before, a textbook Fascist, foolish and courageous, whose career as a soldier (he had fought in Africa and Spain, and boasted of it to us) had girded him with solid ignorance and stupidity, but had not corrupted or made him inhuman. He had believed and obeyed for his whole life, and was candidly convinced that blame for the catastrophe rested on two alone, the king and Galeazzo Ciano, who had just recently been shot in Verona: not Badoglio—he, too, was a soldier, who had sworn loyalty to the king and had to keep his vow. If it hadn't been for the king and Ciano, who had sabotaged the Fascist war from the start, everything would have gone well and Italy would have won. He considered me a reckless youth, ruined by bad company; in the depths of his class-conscious soul, he was sure that a university graduate could not be a true "subversive." He interrogated me out of boredom, to indoctrinate me, and to appear important, without any serious inquisitorial intent: he was a soldier, not a cop. He never posed embarrassing questions, and he didn't even ask if I was a Jew.

The interrogations of Cagni, on the other hand, were to be feared. Cagni was the spy who had had us captured: a total spy, in every ounce of his flesh, a spy by nature and inclination more than by Fascist conviction or

self-interest: a spy in order to do harm, with a sportsman's sadism, like a hunter killing game. He was a clever man. With good credentials, he had joined a partisan group adjacent to ours, and passed himself off as a repository of important German military secrets; he had revealed them, and they had later been shown to be phony, skillfully manufactured by the Gestapo. He organized the group's defenses, insisted on scrupulous firing practice (carried out in such a way that a good part of the ammunition was used up), then fled to the valley and reappeared at the head of the Fascist units assigned to the roundup. He was thirty and had soft, pale flesh. He began the interrogation by placing his Luger in plain sight on the desk, and continued for hours without rest; he wanted to know everything. He continuously threatened torture and execution, but luckily I knew almost nothing, and the names I did know I kept to myself. He alternated moments of simulated cordiality with equally simulated bursts of anger. To me he said (probably bluffing) that he knew I was Jewish, but that that was good for me: either I was a Jew or I was a partisan; if a partisan, he would shoot me; if a Jew, fine, there was a collection camp at Carpi, they were not bloodthirsty, I would remain there until the ultimate victory. I admitted that I was a Jew: in part out of weariness, in part also out of an irrational point of pride, but I didn't believe him in the least. Hadn't he himself said that the command of this very barracks would, in a few days, pass to the SS?

In my cell there was a single weak lamp, which stayed lit even at night; the light was barely enough to read by, but I read a lot just the same, because I thought that the time left to me was short. On the fourth day, during my hour outside, I secretly put a large rock in my pocket, because I wanted to try to communicate with Guido and Aldo, who were in the two adjoining cells. I succeeded, but it was exhausting: it took an hour to transmit a sentence, beating in code on the dividing wall, like the miners in *Germinal*, buried in the mine. With your ear to the wall to get the response, you heard instead the joyful, robust songs of the soldiers sitting at their mess above our heads: "the vision of—Alighieri," or "but I'll never leave my machine gun," or, poignant among all of them, "Come, there's a path in the wood."

In my cell there was also a mouse. It kept me company, but at night it gnawed on my bread. There were two cots: I took one apart, and got a long, smooth spar from it; I set it upright, and at night I put my bread on the tip, leaving a few crumbs on the floor for the mouse. I felt more mouse than he: I thought of paths in the woods, the snow outside, the indifferent mountains, the hundred splendid things that if I were free I would be able to do, and my throat constricted as if I had a lump in it.

It was very cold. I pounded on the door until the soldier who functioned as a cop arrived, and I begged him for a hearing with Fossa; the cop was the one who had hit me at the moment we were captured, but when he learned I was a "doctor" he apologized. Italy is a strange country. He didn't get me a hearing, but he obtained a blanket for me and the others, and permission to warm ourselves for half an hour every evening, before silence, near the boiler for the heating system.

The new regime began that very evening. The soldier came to get me, and he was not alone: with him was another prisoner, of whose existence I hadn't known. Too bad, it would have been much better if it had been Guido or Aldo; anyway, it was a human being with whom I could exchange a few words. He led us into the boiler room, which was dark with soot, squeezed by a low ceiling, and almost entirely taken up by the boiler, but warm: a relief. The soldier had us sit on a bench, and he himself sat on a chair in the doorway, so as to obstruct it: he kept his machine gun upright between his knees, yet a few minutes later he was dozing and uninterested in us.

The prisoner looked at me with curiosity. "Are you the rebels?" he asked. He was perhaps thirty-five, thin and slightly hunched; he had curly, uncombed hair, a roughly shaved beard, a big hooked nose, a mouth without lips, and furtive eyes. His hands were disproportionately large and gnarled, as if baked by the sun and the wind, and he couldn't keep them still: now he scratched, now he rubbed one against the other as if he were washing them, now he drummed on the bench or a thigh; I noticed that they trembled slightly. His breath smelled of wine, and I deduced from that that he had just been arrested; he had the accent of the valley but did not seem a peasant. I answered his questions generically, but he wasn't discouraged.

"That fellow's sleeping, you can talk if you want. I can get news out; and maybe I'll get out soon."

He didn't seem a very trustworthy type. "Why are you here?" I asked.

“Smuggling: I didn’t want to share with them, that’s all. We’ll come to an agreement, but meanwhile they keep me inside: it’s bad, with my job.”

“It’s bad with any job!”

“But I have a special job. Smuggling is one job, but only in winter, when the Dora freezes; anyway, I have several jobs, but no bosses. We are free people: my father was and my grandfather and all the great-grandfathers from the beginning of time, ever since the Romans.”

I hadn’t understood the reference to the frozen Dora, and I asked about it: maybe he was a fisherman?

“You know why it’s called the Dora?” he answered. “Because it’s made of gold—*d’oro*. Not all, of course, but it carries gold and when it freezes you can’t dig.”

“There’s gold in the bottom?”

“Yes, in the sand: not everywhere, but in many stretches. The water carries it down from the mountain and piles it up randomly, in one bend yes, in another nothing. Our bend, which we pass on from father to son, is the richest of all: it’s well hidden, very out of the way, but still it’s best to go at night, so no one comes poking around. That’s why, when there’s a strong freeze, like last year, for example, you can’t work, because as soon as you’ve made a hole in the ice it freezes again, and then, besides, your hands can’t stand it. If I were in your place and you in mine, word of honor, I’d explain to you where it is, our spot.”

I felt wounded by that phrase of his. I knew perfectly well how matters stood, but I didn’t like hearing a stranger tell me. The other, who realized his blunder, tried awkwardly to remedy it.

“All I meant is that these are private things, things you don’t even tell your friends. I live on this, and I’ve got nothing else in the world, but I wouldn’t change places with a banker. You see, it’s not that there’s so much gold: in fact there’s very little, you wash all night and get one or two grams —but it’s never used up. You go back when you want, the next night or the next month, according to your pleasure, and the gold has returned; and so it always has and always will, the way the grass returns to the meadows. And so there is no people freer than us: that’s why I feel I’m going mad in here.

“Then, you have to understand that not everyone is capable of washing sand, and that is satisfying. In fact, my father taught me, and only me, because I was the quickest; my brothers work in the factory. And he left his

pan to me alone”—and cupping his enormous right hand slightly, he made a professional rotating movement.

“Not all days are good: it goes best when it’s clear and the fourth quarter. I couldn’t tell you why, but it’s like that, if you ever have a mind to try.”

I appreciated his good wishes in silence. Of course, I would try: what would I not try? In those days, as I was waiting fairly courageously for death, I harbored a piercing hope for everything, for all imaginable human experiences, and I cursed my preceding life, which it seemed to me I had taken little and poor advantage of, and I felt time slipping through my fingers, escaping from my body minute by minute, like a hemorrhage that cannot be stanched. Of course, I would look for gold: not to get rich but to try a new skill, to revisit earth, air, and water, from which a chasm that grew wider every day separated me; and to find my chemical work in its essential and primordial form, the *Scheidekunst*, the art of separating metal from dross.

“I don’t sell it all,” the other continued. “I’m too fond of it. I keep a little apart and, twice a year, I melt it and work it: I’m not an artist but I like having it in my hands, beating it with the hammer, engraving it, scratching it. I don’t care about getting rich: what matters to me is to live free, not to have a collar like a dog, to work when I want, without anyone saying to me, ‘Get going.’ That’s why I suffer being inside here, and then, above all, the day’s wasted.”

The soldier slumped in his sleep and the machine gun between his knees fell to the ground with a clatter. The unknown man and I exchanged a rapid glance; we understood each other right away, and jumped up from the bench: but we didn’t have time to take a step before the soldier had retrieved his weapon. He composed himself, looked at the hour, cursed in Venetian, and told us gruffly that it was time to go back to our cells. In the corridor we met Guido and Aldo, who, escorted by another guard, were going to take our place in the dusty haze of the boiler: they greeted me with a nod.

In the cell solitude welcomed me, and the cold pure breath of the mountains that came through the little window, and the anguish for tomorrow. Straining my ears, in the silence of the blackout I could hear the murmur of the Dora, lost friend, and all friends were lost, and youth, and joy, and perhaps life: the river ran close by but indifferent, carrying gold in

its womb of melted ice. I was gripped by a painful envy for my equivocal companion, who would soon return to his precarious but monstrously free life, to his inexhaustible rivulet of gold, to a line of days without end.

Cerium

That I, a chemist, engaged in writing here my life as a chemist, lived a different experience, has been recounted elsewhere.

At a distance of thirty years, I find it difficult to reconstruct what sort of human specimen, in November of 1944, corresponded to my name, or, rather, my number: 174517. I must have overcome the harshest trial, that of inserting myself into the Lager system, and I must have developed a strange callousness, if I was then able not only to survive but also to think, to register the world around me, and even to undertake a fairly delicate job, in an environment infected by the daily presence of death and at the same time frenzied by the approach of the Russian liberators, who by now were within eighty kilometers of us. Despair and hope alternated in a rhythm that would have crushed any normal individual in an hour.

We were not normal because we were hungry. Our hunger at that time had nothing in common with the well-known (not entirely unpleasant) sensation of someone who has skipped a meal and is sure that he will not miss the next: it was a need, a lack, a yearning that had been with us for a year, had put down deep and permanent roots in us, lived in all our cells and conditioned our behavior. To eat, to get food, was the primary stimulus, which was followed, at a great distance, by all the other problems of survival, and, even farther back, memories of home and the very fear of death.

I was a chemist in a chemical factory, in a chemical laboratory (this, too, has been recounted), and I stole in order to eat. If you don’t start as a child, learning to steal isn’t easy; it took several months for me to repress the moral commandments and acquire the necessary techniques, and at a certain

point I realized (with a flash of laughter and a pinch of satisfied ambition) that I was reliving, I a respectable university graduate, the involution-evolution of a famous respectable dog, a Victorian and Darwinian dog who is deported and becomes a thief in order to live in his “Lager” of the Klondike, the great Buck, of *Call of the Wild*. I stole like him and like the foxes: on every favorable occasion, but with sly cunning and without exposing myself. I stole everything, except the bread of my companions.

In terms of substances that could be stolen with profit, that laboratory was virgin territory, all to be explored. There was gas and alcohol, banal and troublesome prey: many stole them, at various points of the worksite—the price was high and so was the risk, because liquids require containers. It’s the great problem of packaging, which every skilled chemist knows; the Heavenly Father also knew it, and resolved it brilliantly, for his part, with the cellular membranes, the eggshell, the multipart peel of the orange, and our skin, because in the end we, too, are liquids. Now, at that time polyethylene didn’t exist; it would have been useful to me because it is flexible, light, and splendidly impermeable, but it is also a little too incorruptible, and not for nothing the Heavenly Father Himself, who, though a master of polymerization, refrained from patenting it—He doesn’t like incorruptible things.

In the absence of suitable packaging and boxes, the ideal thing to steal should be, therefore, solid, not perishable, not bulky, and above all new. It had to be of a high unit value, that is, not voluminous, because often we were searched at the entrance to the camp after work; and it had finally to be useful to or desired by at least one of the social categories that made up the complex universe of the Lager.

I had made various attempts in the laboratory. I had stolen a few hundred grams of fatty acids, with difficulty obtained through the oxidation of paraffin by some colleague on the other side of the barricade: I had eaten half, and it had truly sated my hunger, but the taste was so unpleasant that I gave up on selling the rest. I had tried to make pancakes with cotton wool, which I pressed against the plate of an electric stove; they had a vague taste of burned sugar, but they were so unsightly that I did not judge them to be salable. As for selling the cotton directly to the infirmary in the Lager, I tried that once, but it was too bulky and had little value. I also tried to ingest and digest glycerin, relying on the simplistic reasoning that, as a product of the splitting of fats, it must surely in some way be metabolized and provide

calories: and perhaps it did provide them, but at the cost of disagreeable side effects.

There was a mysterious jar on a shelf. It contained twenty small gray, hard, colorless, tasteless cylinders, and it didn't have a label. This was very strange, because it was a German laboratory. Yes, of course, the Russians were a few kilometers away, and catastrophe was in the air, almost visible; every day there were bombing raids; everyone knew that the war was about to be over. But, finally, some constants must endure, and among these was our hunger, and the fact that the laboratory was German, and that the Germans never forget labels. In fact, all the other jars and bottles in the laboratory had clear labels, typewritten, or written by hand in beautiful Gothic lettering: that alone did not have one.

In the situation, I certainly did not have available the equipment or the peace and quiet needed to identify the nature of the cylinders. Anyway, I hid three in my pocket and at night brought them back to the camp. They were perhaps twenty-five millimeters long and had a diameter of four or five.

I showed them to my friend Alberto. Alberto took a knife out of his pocket and tried to cut into one: it was hard, and resisted the blade. He tried scraping it: we heard a small squeak and a sheaf of yellow sparks burst forth. At this point the diagnosis was easy: it was ferrocerium, the alloy used for common flints in cigarette lighters. Why were they so big? Alberto, who for several weeks had worked as a laborer with a team of solderers, explained that they were mounted on the tips of oxyacetylene torches, to light the flame. At this point I felt skeptical about the commercial possibilities of my stolen goods: maybe they could be used to light a fire, but in the camp (illegal) matches were certainly not in short supply.

Alberto reproached me. For him, giving up, pessimism, despair were abominable and culpable. He did not accept the concentration-camp universe, he rejected it with his instinct and his reason, he would not let himself be polluted. He was a man of strong goodwill, and had miraculously remained free, and his words and actions were free: he had not lowered his head, had not bowed his back. A gesture of his, a word, a laugh had liberating virtues, were a hole in the stiff fabric of the Lager, and all who came near him realized it, even those who didn't understand his language. I believe that no one, in that place, was more loved than he.

He reproached me: one must never be discouraged; it's harmful, and hence immoral, almost indecent. I had stolen the cerium: well, now it was a matter of selling it, promoting it. He would see to that, he would turn it into a novelty, an article of high commercial value. Prometheus had been foolish to give men fire rather than sell it: he would have made money, placated Jove, and avoided the trouble with the vulture.

We had to be more astute. This topic, the need to be astute, was not new between us. Alberto had often discussed it with me, and before him others in the free world, and still others repeated it to me later on, innumerable times, up until today, with modest results; indeed, with the paradoxical result of developing in me a dangerous tendency toward symbiosis with an authentically astute person, who would get (or consider that he had got) temporal or spiritual advantages from living with me. Alberto was an ideal symbiont, because he refrained from exercising his astuteness to my detriment. I didn't know, but he did (he always knew everything about everyone, and yet he had neither German nor Polish and very little French), that there existed a clandestine lighter industry at the worksite: unknown craftsmen, in their spare time, made lighters for the important people and the civilian workers. Now, for lighters flints are needed, and need to be a certain size: we would therefore have to make those I had in hand thinner. Make them thinner by how much, and how? "Don't create difficulties," he said. "I'll take care of it. You take care of stealing the rest."

I had no trouble following Alberto's advice the next day. Around ten in the morning, the sirens of the Fliegeralarm, the air-raid warning, broke out. It was nothing new by now, but every time it happened we felt—we and everyone else—stricken to the core by anguish. It was not an earthly sound, not like a factory siren, but a sound of tremendous volume that, simultaneously throughout the entire area, and rhythmically, rose to a spasmodic high note and descended to a rumbling of thunder. It couldn't have been an accidental discovery, because nothing in Germany was accidental, and, besides, it was too consistent with the purpose and the setting: I have often thought it was elaborated by an evil musician, who had put into it fury and lament, the wolf's howl at the moon and the typhoon's breath; the horn of Astolfo must have had such a sound. It caused panic, not only because it was announcing bombs but also because of its intrinsic horror, like the wail of a wounded beast that reaches as far as the horizon.

The Germans were more afraid than we were of the bomb attacks: we, irrationally, weren't afraid because we knew they were directed not against us but against our enemies. In seconds I was alone in the laboratory; I put all the cerium in my pockets and went outside to join my Kommando. The sky was already filled with the buzzing of the bombers, and falling from them, fluttering softly, yellow leaflets that bore atrocious words of mockery:

Im Bauch kein Fett,
Acht Uhr ins Bett;
Der Arsch kaum warm,
Fliegeralarm!

In your belly no fat,
At eight you go to bed;
When your ass is warm,
Air-raid alarm!

We were not allowed to enter the air-raid shelters: we gathered in the vast spaces that had not yet been built up, on the periphery of the worksite. As the bombs began to fall, and I lay on the frozen mud and sparse grass, fingering the cylinders in my pocket, I reflected on the strangeness of my destiny, of our destinies as leaves on a branch, and of human destinies in general. According to Alberto, a flint for a lighter was worth a ration of bread, that is, a day of life; I had stolen at least forty cylinders, from each of which could be made three finished flints. In total, a hundred and twenty flints, two months of life for me and two for Alberto, and in two months the Russians would have arrived and liberated us: and in the end the cerium would have liberated us. It was an element that I knew nothing about, apart from its single practical application, and that it belongs to the equivocal and heretical family of the rare earth elements, and that its name has nothing to do with wax, and evokes not its discoverer but, rather (great modesty of the chemists of the past!), the dwarf planet Ceres, the metal and the star having been discovered in the same year, 1801. And perhaps this was an affectionate and ironic homage to alchemical coupling: as the Sun was gold and Mars iron, so Ceres had to be cerium.

At night I brought out the cylinders, Alberto a piece of metal with a round hole in it: this was the stipulated caliber to which we would have to trim the cylinders in order to transform them into flints and hence into bread.

What followed should be judged with caution. Alberto said that we had to reduce the cylinders by scraping them with a knife, secretly, so that no competitor could steal the secret. When? At night. Where? In the wooden barrack where we slept, under the covers and on top of our pallets filled with shavings; that is, we risked starting a fire and, more realistically, risked hanging, since this was the punishment to which those who, among other things, lit a match in the barracks were sentenced.

One always hesitates to judge rash actions, one's own or others', after these have had a good outcome: perhaps they were not, then, so rash? Or perhaps it's true that there is a God who protects children, fools, and drunkards? Or perhaps again such actions have more weight and heat than the innumerable actions that come to a bad end, and so are recounted more willingly? But we did not then pose these questions: the Lager had given us a crazy familiarity with danger and with death, and to risk the noose for more to eat seemed to us a logical choice, indeed obvious.

While our companions slept, we worked with our knives, night after night. The scene was so grim you could weep: a single electric bulb weakly illumined the big wooden shed, and in the shadowy light, as in a vast cavern, the faces of our companions were visible, overcome by sleep and by dreams: tinged with death, they wiggled their jaws, in dreams of eating. Many had a bare, skeletal arm or leg hanging off the edge of their pallet; others groaned or talked in their sleep.

But the two of us were alive and did not succumb to sleep. We kept the blanket raised with our knees, and under that improvised tent we scraped the cylinders blindly, by feel; at every cut a faint squeak could be heard, and a sheaf of tiny yellow stars could be seen rising. At intervals, we tested the cylinder to see if it fit through the sample hole: if it didn't, we continued to scrape; if it did, we broke off the pared-down trunk and put it carefully aside.

We worked for three nights; nothing happened, no one was aware of our activity, neither the covers nor the pallet caught fire, and in this way we won the bread that kept us alive until the Russians arrived, and took comfort in the trust and friendship that united us. What happened to me is

written elsewhere. Alberto left on foot with the majority when the front was near: the Germans made them walk for days and nights in the snow and cold, killing all who could not continue; then they loaded them onto open train cars, which carried the few survivors to a new chapter of slavery, at Buchenwald and Mauthausen. No more than a quarter of those who left survived the march.

Alberto did not return, and of him no trace remains; for some years after the war ended, someone from his town, half visionary and half swindler, lived by peddling to his mother, for a price, false consoling news.

Chromium

The main course was fish, but the wine was red. Versino, the petty despot of maintenance, said that was all nonsense, provided the wine and the fish were good: he was sure that most supporters of the orthodoxy would not have been able to distinguish a glass of white from a glass of red with their eyes closed. Bruni, from the Nitro Department, asked if anyone knew why fish goes with white: various joking comments were heard, but no one could answer in a comprehensive way. Old Cometto added that life is full of customs whose root can no longer be traced: the blue color of the paper of a package of sugar, buttoning on different sides for men and women, the shape of a gondola prow, and the innumerable alimentary compatibilities and incompatibilities, of which the one under debate was a particular case: but why, for example, was ham obligatory with lentils and cheese with macaroni?

I took a rapid mental survey to make sure that none of those present had yet heard it, then began telling the story of the onion in boiled linseed oil. This, in fact, was a cafeteria for paint makers, and it's well-known that for many centuries boiled linseed oil (*ölidlinköit*, pronounced in the dialect of Piedmont) constituted the primary material of our art. It's an ancient art, and therefore noble: the most remote testimony is in Genesis 6:14, where it is told how, in accordance with precise instructions from the Almighty, Noah (likely using a brush) covered the Ark, inside and out, with molten pitch. But it's also a subtly fraudulent art, one that aims at hiding the substrate, endowing it with the color and appearance of what it is not: in this guise it's a relative of cosmetics and adornment, which are equally devious arts and almost equally ancient (Isaiah 3:16 ff.). Given these

multimillennial origins, then, it's not so very strange that the job of making paints contains in its recesses (in spite of the innumerable stimuli it has received in modern times from other, related technologies) rudiments of customs and procedures long since abandoned.

To return, then, to boiled linseed oil, I told the diners that in a book of formulas printed around 1942 I had found the instruction to introduce into the oil, near the end of the heating, two slices of onion, without any comment on the purpose of this curious additive. I had mentioned it in 1949 to Signor Giacomasso Olindo, my predecessor and teacher, who was then over seventy and had been making paints for fifty years, and he, smiling benevolently under his thick white whiskers, had explained to me that, in effect, when he was young and heated the oil himself, thermometers had not yet come into use: one judged the temperature by observing the smoke, or spitting in the oil, or, more rationally, dipping into it a slice of onion stuck on the tip of a skewer: when the onion began to brown, the heating was done. Evidently, with the passing of the years, what had been a crude method of measurement had lost its meaning, and been transformed into a mysterious and magical practice.

Old Cometto recounted an analogous episode. Not without nostalgia, he evoked his own good old days, the days of copals: he told how at one time the *ölidlinköit* was combined with these legendary resins to make fabulously durable and shiny paints. Their fame and their name survive now only in the expression *scarpe di coppale*, "patent-leather shoes," which alludes to a "paint" for leather that at one time was widespread but fell into disuse at least half a century ago; today the locution itself is almost extinct. Copals were imported by the English from remote and savage countries, from which they got their names, distinguishing one variety from another: Madagascar copal, Sierra Leone copal, Kauri copal (whose deposits, incidentally, ran out around 1967), the famous and noble Congo copal. Copals are fossil resins of vegetal origin, with a rather high melting point, and, in the state in which they're found and sold, insoluble in oils: to make them soluble and compatible, they were subjected to a violent, half-destructive heating, in the course of which their acidity diminished (they decarboxylated) and their melting point was reduced. The operation was carried out by hand in modest boilers of two or three quintals that could be heated over a direct flame and, having wheels, were movable; they were weighed at intervals during the heating, and when the resin had lost 16

percent of its weight in smoke, water vapor, and carbon dioxide, it was judged to be soluble in oil. Around 1940, the archaic copals, expensive and difficult to get during the war, were replaced by suitably modified phenolic and maleic resins, which, besides costing less, were directly compatible with the oils. Well, Cometto told us how, until 1953, in a factory whose name I will not mention, a phenolic resin, which replaced Congo copal in a formula, was treated exactly like copal itself, that is, it was heated on a flame, amid pestilential phenolic fumes, until it was 16 percent consumed and had achieved the solubility in oil that it already had.

Here I pointed out that languages are full of images and metaphors whose origin is being lost, along with the art they were derived from: since equitation has declined to the status of an expensive sport, by now the expressions “belly to the ground” and “champ at the bit” are unintelligible and sound strange; with the disappearance of mills using grindstones, also called *palmenti*, where for centuries grain was ground (and so were paints), the phrase *macinare* (“grind”) or *mangiare a quattro palmenti*, “to eat heartily,” has lost any reference, but is still mechanically repeated. In the same way, since Nature, too, is a conserver, we carry in our coccyx what remains of a vanished tail.

Bruni told us about a matter in which he himself was implicated, and as he was speaking I was overwhelmed by faint, sweet sensations that I will try to explain later: I should preface this by saying that from 1955 to 1965 Bruni worked in a big factory on the shore of a lake, the same place where I had learned the rudiments of paint-making in the years 1946–47. He said that, when he was in charge of the Synthetic Paints Department there, he had come upon a formula for an anti-rust agent for chromates that contained an absurd component: no less than ammonium chloride, the old alchemical sal ammoniac of the temple of Ammon, which is much more liable to corrode iron than to preserve it from rust. He had asked his superiors and the old people in the department: surprised and somewhat outraged, they answered that the salt “had always been there,” in that formula, which corresponded to at least twenty or thirty tons of production a month and had existed for at least ten years, and who did he think he was, so young in years and employment, to criticize the experience of the factory, and to look for trouble by asking the why and the wherefore. If ammonium chloride was in the formula, that was a sign that it was useful in some way; what it was useful for no one knew any longer, but he should be careful about

getting rid of it, because “you never know.” Bruni is a rationalist, and he was disappointed; but he is also a prudent man and had accepted the advice, and so in that formula, and in that lakeshore factory, in the absence of further developments, ammonium chloride is still added; and yet today it is totally useless, as I can declare with full knowledge of the case, because I was the one who introduced it into the formula.

The episode cited by Bruni, about the rust preventative for chromates and ammonium chloride, hurled me back in time, to the harsh January of 1946, when meat and coal were still rationed, nobody had a car, and never in Italy had there been so much hope and so much freedom in the air.

But I had been back from prison for three months, and I found life hard. The things I had seen and suffered burned inside me; I felt closer to the dead than to the living, and guilty for being a man, because men had built Auschwitz, and Auschwitz had swallowed up millions of human beings, many of them my friends, and a woman who was dear to me. It seemed to me that I would be purified by telling, and I felt like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, who grabs the wedding guest on the way to the wedding, to inflict on him his story of evil. I wrote short, bloody poems, I told my story giddily, speaking and writing, so that little by little a book was born: writing, I found a brief peace and I felt myself become a man again, a man like all men, neither martyr nor villain nor saint, one of those who start a family and look to the future rather than to the past.

Since one cannot survive on poems and stories, I looked anxiously for work, and found it in the big lakeshore factory, still damaged by the war, and besieged in those months by mud and ice. No one paid much attention to me: colleagues, director, and laborers had other things to think about, the son who hadn’t returned from Russia, the stove without wood, the shoes without soles, the warehouses without supplies, the windows without glass, the cold that burst the pipes, inflation, want, and virulent local feuds. I had kindly been granted a rickety desk in the laboratory, a noisy, drafty workplace full of people coming and going with rags and cans, and had been assigned no definite task; unoccupied as a chemist and in a state of complete alienation (though it was not called that at the time), I wrote, in no

order, page after page of the memories that were poisoning me, and my colleagues looked at me stealthily, as if I were a harmless lunatic. The book grew in my hands almost spontaneously, without plan or system, intricate and crowded as a termite nest. Every so often, driven by professional conscience, I got in touch with the director and asked for a job, but he was too busy to worry about my scruples: I should read, study. In the matter of paints I was still, if he might say, illiterate. Was I not employed? Well, I should praise God and stay in the library: if I really had the urge to make myself useful, here, there were articles to translate from German.

One day he called me in and with an oblique light in his eyes announced that he had a small job for me. He led me into a corner of the courtyard, near the boundary wall: there, piled up every which way, were thousands of square blocks, of a vivid orange color, the ones at the bottom crushed by those on top. He told me to touch them: they were gelatinous and soft, and had the unpleasant consistency of butchered guts. I said to the director that, apart from the color, they seemed to be livers, and he praised me: that was what was written in the paint manuals! He explained to me that the phenomenon that had produced them was in English called just that, "livering," and in Italian *impolmonimento*, "lung-ing"; under certain conditions, certain paints go from a liquid state to a solid state with the consistency of a liver or lung, and have to be thrown away. Those parallelepiped bodies had been cans of paint: the paint had "livered," the cans had been cut off, and the contents had been thrown onto the garbage pile.

That paint, he told me, had been produced during the war and immediately afterward; it contained a basic chromate and an alkyd resin. Perhaps the chromate was too basic or the resin too acid: those are precisely the conditions under which livering can happen. Here, he was giving me that pile of ancient sins; I was to think about it, conduct tests and examinations, and be able to tell him specifically why the problem had occurred, what to do so that it wasn't repeated, and whether it was possible to salvage the damaged product.

Laid out like that, half chemical and half detective work, the problem attracted me: I was considering it that evening (it was a Saturday), as one of the cold, smoky freight trains of the time was hauling me toward Turin. Now, it happened that the following day destiny had reserved for me a different and unique gift: a meeting with a young woman, of flesh and

blood, warm against my side through our coats, cheerful amid the damp fog of the avenues, patient, knowing, and confident as we passed through streets still lined with ruins. Within a few hours we knew that we belonged to each other, not for a meeting but for a lifetime, as in fact it has been. Within a few hours I felt new and full of new powers, washed clean and cured of the long illness, finally ready to enter life with joy and strength; likewise, the world around me was suddenly cured, and the name and face of the woman who had descended to hell with me and had not returned were exorcised. My writing itself became a different adventure, no longer the painful journey of a convalescent, no longer a beggar seeking compassion and friendly faces, but a lucid construction, and no longer solitary: the work of a chemist who weighs and divides, measures and judges on solid evidence, and does his best to respond to the whys. Along with the liberating relief that belongs to the veteran who tells his story, I felt in writing a complex, intense new pleasure, similar to that of the student who penetrates the solemn order of differential calculus. It was exhilarating to seek and find, or create, the right word, that is, fitting, concise, and strong; to draw things out of memory and describe them with the greatest rigor and the least mass. Paradoxically, my baggage of atrocious memories became a wealth, a seed; it seemed to me that, as I wrote, I was growing like a plant.

In the freight train the following Monday, crushed in the sleepy crowd and muffled in scarves, I felt happy and intent as never before or since. I was ready to challenge everything and everyone, just as I had challenged and defeated Auschwitz and solitude: prepared, in particular, to do joyful battle with the bulky pyramid of orange livers that awaited me on the shore of the lake.

It’s spirit that tames matter, right? Was that not what they had pounded into my head in the Fascist, Gentilian[8] high school? I threw myself into the work in the same spirit in which, in a not far-off time, we had attacked a wall of rock; the adversary was the same, the non-me, the Big Curve, Hyle: stupid matter, lazily hostile the way human stupidity is hostile and, like human stupidity, firm in its passive obtuseness. Our job is to wage and win this interminable battle: a livered paint is much more rebellious, more refractory to your will, than a lion in its mad attack; but of course it’s also less dangerous.

The first skirmish took place in the archives. The two partners, the two fornicators from whose embrace the orange monsters had emerged, were the chromate and the resin. The resin was made in the factory: I found the birth records of all the batches, and they presented nothing suspicious; the acidity varied, but was always less than 6, as prescribed. A batch found to have an acidity of 6.2 had been dutifully thrown out by an analyst with a flowery signature. In the first instance, the resin was not at issue.

The chromate had been acquired from various suppliers, and it, too, had been dutifully tested batch by batch. According to the purchase order, PDA 480/0, it was supposed to contain no less than 28 percent total chromium oxide; and, indeed, I had before my eyes the interminable list of tests from January 1942 up to the present (one of the least fascinating readings that can be imagined), and all the results satisfied the prescription; in fact, they were all the same—29.5 percent, not one percent more, not one less. I felt my fibers as a chemist twitching in the face of that abomination: you should know, in fact, that the natural oscillations in the method of preparation of a chromate like that, added to the inevitable analytic errors, make it extremely improbable that the many results found in different batches and on different days will coincide so exactly. Was it possible that no one had become suspicious? Well, yes, at that time I hadn’t yet become acquainted with the frightening anesthetic power of company papers, their capacity to hamper, muffle, blunt every flash of intuition and every spark of intelligence. Besides, the experts know that all secretions are harmful or toxic: in pathological conditions, it’s not unusual for paper, a company secretion, to be reabsorbed to an excessive degree, and to put to sleep, paralyze, or even kill the organism that exuded it.

The story of what had happened began to take shape: for some reason, some analyst had been betrayed by a faulty technique, or by an impure reagent, or by an incorrect method; he had diligently tabulated his results, so obviously suspicious but formally irreproachable; he had punctiliously signed every analysis, and his signature, expanding like an avalanche, had been reinforced by those of the head of the laboratory, the technical manager, and the general manager. I pictured him, the wretch, against the background of those difficult years: no longer young, because the young were soldiers; perhaps hunted by the Fascists, or maybe even a Fascist sought by the partisans; certainly frustrated, because analyst is a job for the young; entrenched in the laboratory in the fortress of his tiny knowledge,

since the analyst is by definition infallible; derided and disliked outside the laboratory for his very virtues, as an incorruptible guardian, a small pedantic Minos, with no imagination, a spoke in the wheels of production. To judge from the anonymous, polished handwriting, his job must have worn him down and, at the same time, led to a coarse perfection, like a pebble rolled over and over until it reaches the mouth of the stream. It wasn't surprising if, in time, he had developed a certain insensitivity to the true meaning of the operations he carried out and the notes he wrote. I resolved to investigate, but no one knew anything about him anymore: my questions evoked rude or distracted answers. Besides, I began to feel around me and my work a teasing and malevolent curiosity: who was this newcomer—this kid at 7000 lire a month, this maniacal scribbler who disturbed nights in the dormitory with his typing, of who knows what—to meddle in past errors and wash the dirty laundry of a generation? I even had a suspicion that the job assigned to me had the secret purpose of leading me to collide with something or someone: but by now the matter of the livering had absorbed me body and soul, *tripes et boyaux,* and in short I was in love with it almost the way I was with that girl I mentioned, who in fact was a little jealous of it.

It wasn't hard for me to obtain, besides the PDA, the equally inviolable PDC, the Rules for Testing: in a drawer in the laboratory there was a packet of greasy cards, typewritten and many times corrected by hand, each of which contained the method for testing a particular primary material. The card for Prussian blue was stained with blue, that for glycerin was sticky, and the one for fish oil stank of anchovies. I took out the card for chromate, which from long use had become the color of dawn, and read it carefully. It was all sensible enough, and conformed to fairly recent academic notions: only one point seemed strange to me. It was stipulated that, once the pigment had broken down, 23 drops of a certain reagent be added. Now, one drop is not a unit so well defined as to support such a definite numerical coefficient, and then, all things considered, the prescribed dose was absurdly high: it would have flooded the test, leading in every case to a result consistent with the specification. I looked at the back of the card: it bore the date of the last revision, January 4, 1944; the birth record of the first livered batch was the following February 22.

At this point I began to see the light. In a dusty file I found the collection of PDCs no longer in use, and there it was: the preceding version

of the card for chromate bore the instruction to add “2 or 3” drops, not “23”; the crucial “or” was half erased and, in the following transcription, had been lost. The events were logically connected: the revision of the card had carried an error of transcription, and the error had distorted all the successive analyses, leveling the results to a fictitious value because of the enormous excess of reagent, and thus allowing batches of pigment that should have been thrown away to be accepted; these, being too basic, had provoked the livering.

But woe to those who yield to the temptation to take an elegant hypothesis for a certainty: readers of detective stories know it. I got hold of the drowsy warehouseman, claimed from him the saved samples of all the batches of chromate from January ’44 on, and barricaded myself behind my desk for three days, to analyze according to the wrong method and the right one. As the results were tabulated, the boredom of the repetitive work was transformed into the nervous joy of when, as a child playing hide-and-seek, you make out your adversary squatting awkwardly behind the hedge. Using the wrong method I consistently found the fateful 29.5 percent; with the right method, the results were widely dispersed, and a good quarter of them, being lower than the prescribed minimum, corresponded to batches that should have been rejected. The diagnosis was confirmed and the pathogenesis discovered: now it was a matter of discovering the cure.

This I found fairly soon, by drawing on solid inorganic chemistry—a distant Cartesian island, a lost paradise for us organic muddlers and macromoleculists. I had to somehow neutralize in the sick body of that paint the excess alkalinity caused by the free lead oxide. Acids appeared harmful for other reasons; I thought of ammonium chloride, which can combine in a stable manner with lead oxide, yielding an insoluble and inert chloride, and releasing ammonia. Tests on a small scale gave promising results: quick, get hold of chloride—*cloruro d’ammonia* (or *demonio*, as it was designated in the inventory)—come to an agreement with the head of the Grinding Department, put two of the livers, which were disgusting to see and touch, in a small ball mill, add a weighed quantity of the presumed medicine, give the starting signal to the mill under the skeptical gaze of the bystanders. The usually noisy mill, obstructed by the gelatinous mass gumming up the balls, started off almost unwillingly, in an ominous silence. I had only to go back to Turin and wait for Monday, recounting giddily to the patient girl the hypotheses that had been made, the things that had

happened on the shore of the lake, the agonizing wait for the sentence that the facts would pronounce.

The following Monday the mill had found its voice: in fact, it was roaring happily, with a full, continuous tone, and no sign of that rhythmic collapse that in a ball mill announces bad maintenance or bad health. I stopped it, and cautiously loosened the screws of the hatch: an ammoniac gust emerged, whistling, as it should have. I removed the hatch. Angels and ministers of grace! The paint was fluid and smooth, completely normal, reborn from its ashes like the Phoenix. I composed a report in good company jargon, and the management increased my salary. Further, by way of gratitude, I received an allotment of two *côrasse* (tires) for my bicycle.

Since the warehouse contained many batches of dangerously basic chromate, which had to be used, since they had passed the test and could no longer be returned to the supplier, chloride was officially introduced into the formula for that paint as an anti-livering agent. Eventually I resigned, decades passed, the postwar years ended, the noxious, too basic chromates disappeared from the market, and my report met the end of all flesh: but formulas are as sacred as prayers, law decrees, and dead languages, and not an iota in them can be changed. Thus, my Demon Chloride, the twin of a happy love and a liberating book, now completely useless and probably a bit harmful, is still ground religiously into the anti-rust agent for chromates on the shore of that lake, and no one any longer knows why.

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8. Giovanni Gentile, known as “the philosopher of fascism,” served as Mussolini’s minister of education and in 1923 reformed all the schools.

Sulfur

Lanza hitched his bicycle to the rack, stamped the card, went to the boiler, started up the agitator, and lit the flame. The jet of pulverized naphtha ignited with a violent thud and a treacherous flare backward (but Lanza, knowing that furnace, had swerved in time); it continued to burn with a good taut, full roar, like a continuous thunder, which muffled the faint hum of engines and gears. Lanza was still sleepy, and cold from waking suddenly; he crouched in front of the furnace, whose red blaze, in a succession of rapid flashes, made his enormous, contorted shadow dance on the wall behind him, as if in a primitive movie theater.

After half an hour the thermometer began to move, as it was supposed to; the polished steel needle, gliding like a snail on the yellow face, stopped at 95°. This, too, was good, because the thermometer was wrong by five degrees. Lanza was satisfied, and obscurely at peace with the boiler, with the thermometer, and, in short, with the world and with himself, because all the things that were supposed to happen were happening, and because in the factory he alone knew that that thermometer was wrong: maybe someone else would have turned up the flame, or sat there studying goodness knows what to make it climb to 100°, as the work order instructed.

The thermometer therefore remained fixed for a long time at its 95°, and then it started off again. Lanza stayed near the fire, and since, with the warmth, sleep began to bear down again, he allowed it to gently invade some of the chambers of his consciousness. Not, however, the one that was behind his eyes and watching the thermometer: that had to stay awake.

With a sulfur diene you never know, but for the moment everything was going normally. Lanza tasted sweet repose, and yielded to the dance of

thoughts and images that is a prelude to sleep, but without letting it overpower him. It was warm, and Lanza saw his village: his wife and son, his field, the tavern. The warm air of the tavern, the heavy air of the stable. Water trickled into the stable during every storm, water that came from above, from the hayloft: maybe from a crack in the wall, because the roof tiles (he had checked them himself at Easter) were all sound. There would be room for another cow, but (and here everything grew dim in a fog of tentative and inconclusive figures and calculations). Every minute of work, ten lire in his pocket: now the fire seemed to be roaring for him, and the agitator turning for him, like a machine for making money.

Get up, Lanza: we've reached 180°, you have to unscrew the hatch and throw in the B 41; it's really ridiculous, having to keep calling it B 41 when the whole factory knows it's sulfur, and during the war, when everything was in short supply, many people brought it home and sold it on the black market to the farmers, who spread it on their vines. But, after all, the chief is the chief and you have to do what he wants.

He turned off the fire, slowed the agitator, unscrewed the hatch, and put on the protective mask, which made him feel part mole and part boar. The B 41 was already weighed, in three cardboard boxes: he added it cautiously, and, in spite of the mask, which maybe leaked a little, he immediately smelled the foul, depressing odor that came from the heating, and thought that the priest might even be right when he said that hell had the smell of sulfur: besides, even dogs don't like it, everyone knows that. When he had finished, he closed the hatch and started things up again.

At three in the morning, the thermometer was at 200°: he had to create a vacuum. He raised the black handle, and the high, grating noise of the centrifugal pump was superimposed on the deep thunder of the burner. The needle of the vacuum gauge, which was vertical, at zero, began to decline, sliding to the left. Twenty degrees, forty degrees: good. At this point you could light a cigarette and relax for more than an hour.

There are those whose destiny is to become millionaires, and those whose destiny is to die in an accident. As for Lanza, his destiny (and he yawned noisily, to keep himself company) was to make day out of night. Even if they didn't know it, during the war they had immediately sent him off to do that nice job of sitting on the rooftops at night to shoot airplanes out of the sky.

Abruptly he stood up, his ears straining and all his nerves alert. The sound of the pump had suddenly grown slower and thick, as if laboring: and in fact the needle of the vacuum gauge, like a threatening finger, had climbed back to the zero and, degree by degree, was beginning to lean to the right. Little to be done, pressure was building up in the boiler.

“Turn it off and get out.” “Turn everything off and get out.” But he didn’t get out: he grabbed a wrench and tapped the vacuum pipe along its whole length: it must be obstructed, there was no other possible reason. He hit it and hit it again: not a thing; the pump continued to grind to no purpose, and the needle was bobbing at around a third of an atmosphere.

Lanza felt all his hair standing on end, like the tail of an angry cat: and he was angry, a violent, bloody rage at the boiler, at that balky beast sitting on the fire, bellowing like a bull: red-hot, like an enormous hedgehog with its spines erect, so that you don’t know from which side to attack and capture it, and you’d like to fly at it kicking. His fists clenched and his head hot, Lanza went, delirious, to open the hatch and release the pressure. He began to loosen the screws and from the crack a yellowish spit sprayed out, hissing, with puffs of fetid smoke: the boiler must be full of foam. Lanza closed it quickly, with a tremendous desire in his body to grab the telephone and call the chief, call the firemen, call the Holy Spirit, to come out of the night and give him some help or some advice.

The boiler was not made for pressure, and it might explode at any moment: or at least that was what Lanza thought, and maybe, if it had been day or if he hadn’t been alone, he wouldn’t have thought that. But fear had turned into anger, and when the anger cooled it left his head cold and clear. And then he thought of the most obvious thing: he opened the valve of the intake fan, started the fan, closed the vacuum breaker, and stopped the pump. With relief and pride, because he had worked it out correctly, he saw the needle climb back to zero, like a lost sheep returning to the fold, and incline gently again toward the vacuum side.

He looked around, with a great need to laugh and talk about it, and with a sensation of lightness in all his limbs. He saw his cigarette on the floor, reduced to a long, narrow cylinder of ash: it had smoked itself. It was five twenty, dawn was breaking behind the roof of the empty racks, the thermometer was at 210°. He took a sample from the boiler, let it cool, and tested it with the reagent; the sample was clear for a few seconds, and then turned white, like milk. Lanza turned off the fire, stopped the agitation and

the fan, and opened the vacuum breaker: he heard a long angry hiss, which slowly dwindled to a rustling, a murmur, and then was silent. He screwed on the suction pipe, started the compressor, and gloriously, amid white smoke and the usual acrid odor, the thick stream of resin settled in the collection basin in a shiny black mirror.

Lanza set off for the gate and ran into Carmine, who was coming in. He told him that everything was fine, left him the instructions, and began to pump the tires of his bicycle.

Titanium

For Felice Fantino[9]

In the kitchen there was a very tall man, dressed in a fashion that Maria had never seen before. He was wearing a boat made from a newspaper on his head, he was smoking a pipe, and he was painting the cupboard white.

It was incomprehensible how all that white could be in a can so small, and Maria was dying with curiosity to look inside. Every so often the man set his pipe down on the cupboard and whistled; then he stopped whistling and began to sing; every so often he took two steps back and closed one eye, and sometimes he also went and spat in the garbage can and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. In other words, he did so many strange new things that it was very interesting to stand there and watch him: and when the cupboard was white he picked up the can and the many newspapers that were on the floor and took everything over to the sideboard and began to paint that, too.

The cupboard was so shiny, clean, and white that it was almost obligatory to touch it. Maria approached the cupboard, but the man noticed and said, “Don’t touch. You mustn’t touch.” Maria stopped, disconcerted, and asked, “Why?” and the man replied, “Because there’s no need to.” Maria thought about it, then asked, “Why is it so white?” The man, too, thought for a bit, as if the question seemed difficult to him, and then said, in a deep voice, “Because it’s titanium.”

Maria felt a delicious shiver of fear run through her, as when the ogre arrives in a fairy tale. Observing carefully, she determined that the man didn’t have a knife, in his hand or nearby: he might, however, have one hidden. So she asked, “*Mi tagli che cosa?*—What are you going to cut off?”

and at this point he should have answered, "*Ti taglio la lingua*—I'll cut off your tongue." Instead he said only, "Not *ti taglio*: titanium."

She concluded that he must be a very powerful man: yet he didn't appear angry but, on the contrary, rather kind and friendly. Maria asked, "What is your name, sir?" He answered, "My name is Felice." He hadn't taken the pipe out of his mouth, and when he spoke it danced up and down, yet didn't fall. Maria stood quietly for a while, watching alternately the man and the cupboard. She was not at all satisfied with the answer and would have liked to ask why he was called Felice, but she didn't dare, because she remembered that children should never ask why. Her friend Alice was called Alice and she was a child, and it was truly strange that a big man like that should be called Felice. But little by little it began instead to seem natural that the man was called Felice, and she felt, in fact, that he could not have had any other name.

The painted cupboard was so white that the rest of the kitchen looked yellow and dirty in comparison. Maria decided that there was nothing wrong with going to see the cupboard up close: just to look, without touching. But as she approached, on tiptoe, an unpredictable and terrible event occurred: the man turned around and in two steps was beside her; he took a piece of white chalk from his pocket and drew a circle around her on the floor. Then he said, "You mustn't go outside of this." Then he struck a match, lit the pipe, with strange contortions of his mouth, and began painting the sideboard again.

Maria sat on her heels and considered the circle carefully for a long while: but she had to conclude that there was no exit. She tried rubbing it with her finger in one place, and she observed that the chalk line did disappear; but she realized perfectly well that the man would not consider that system valid.

The circle was plainly magical. Maria sat quietly and peacefully on the floor; every so often she tried to move forward until she could touch the circle with the tip of her toe, and she leaned over so far that she almost lost her balance, but she quickly saw that she still had a good handsbreadth before she would be able to reach the cupboard or the wall with her fingers. So she sat and watched as, little by little, the sideboard, the chairs, and the table also became beautifully white.

After a very long time the man put down the brush and the can and took the newspaper boat off his head, and she saw that he had hair like all other

men. Then he went out on the balcony side, and Maria heard him rummaging around and walking up and down in the next room. Maria began to call “Sir!” first in a whisper, then louder, but not too loud, because really she was afraid that the man would hear.

Finally the man returned to the kitchen. Maria asked, “May I come out now, sir?” The man looked down at Maria and the circle, laughed heartily, and said many things that she couldn’t understand, but he didn’t seem to be angry. At last he said, “Yes, of course, you can come out now.” Maria looked at him in bewilderment and didn’t move; then the man took a rag and very carefully erased the circle, to undo the spell. When the circle had disappeared Maria got up and went skipping away, feeling very happy and satisfied.

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9. Felice Fantino was a paint technician whom Levi met at the paint factory “by the shore of a lake” where he worked just after the war.

Arsenic

He had an unusual aspect for a client. A variety of people came to our humble, daring laboratory—men and women, old and young—to have the most disparate goods analyzed, but they were all obviously connected to the large shrewd and shadowy network of commerce. Those who buy and sell by profession are easily recognizable: they have a sharp eye and a tense expression, are afraid of a scam or planning one, and are on their guard like a cat at dusk. It's a profession that tends to destroy the immortal soul; there have been philosophers who were courtiers or lens cleaners, even philosophers who were engineers and army generals, but no philosopher, as far as I know, was a wholesaler or shopkeeper.

I received him, since Emilio was out. He could have been a farmer philosopher: he was a robust, ruddy old man, with heavy hands disfigured by work and by arthritis; his eyes were clear, mobile, and youthful, in spite of the large, delicate pouches that hung empty below the eye sockets. He wore a vest, with a watch chain dangling from the pocket. He spoke Piedmontese, which immediately made me uneasy: it's not polite to answer in Italian when someone speaks to you in dialect; right away it puts you behind a barrier, on the side of the aristocrat, of respectable people, of the *luigini*, as an illustrious fellow with the same name as me called them:[10] and yet my Piedmontese, correct in form and pronunciation, is so smooth and enervated, so pale and polite, that it scarcely appears authentic. Rather than a genuine atavism, it seems the fruit of diligent study at a desk, by lamplight, of grammar and lexicon.

In excellent Piedmontese, then, with penetrating traces of Asti, he told me that he had some sugar to be chemically analyzed: he wanted to know if

it was sugar or not, or if there might be some muck (*saloparía*) in it. What sort of muck? I explained to him that if he could be precise about his suspicions it would make the task easier, but he responded that he didn't want to influence me, that I should do the analysis as well as I could, and he would tell me his suspicions afterward. He left in my hands a paper bag with a good half kilo of sugar in it, told me that he would be back the next day, said goodbye, and went out: he did not use the elevator, but walked in leisurely fashion down the four flights of stairs. He must have been a man without worries and in no hurry.

Few clients came to us, we did few analyses, and we earned little money: so we couldn't buy modern, fast instruments, our responses were slow, our analyses took much longer than normal; we didn't even have a sign on the street, and so the circle narrowed and the clients became even fewer. The samples that they left for analysis constituted a not negligible contribution to our sustenance: Emilio and I were careful not to let it be known that generally a few grams were sufficient, and we happily accepted the liter of wine or milk, the kilo of pasta or soap, the package of *agnolotti*.

Still, given the case history, that is, the old man's suspicions, it would have been imprudent to consume that sugar blindly, or even just to taste it. I dissolved a little in distilled water: the solution was cloudy—something was certainly not right. I weighed a gram of sugar in the platinum crucible (the apple of our eyes) to reduce it to ash over a flame: the domestic, childhood odor of burned sugar rose in the polluted air of the laboratory, but immediately afterward the flame became livid and a very different odor was perceptible, metallic, garlicky, inorganic, indeed, counter-organic—a chemist who doesn't have a nose is in trouble. At this point, it's hard to make a mistake: filter the solution, acidify it, take the Kipp generator, pass hydrogen sulfide through it. There it was, the yellow precipitate of sulfur: arsenous anhydride, that is, arsenic—the Masculine, Mithridates' arsenic and Madame Bovary's.

I spent the rest of the day distilling pyruvic acid and speculating about the old man's sugar. I don't know how pyruvic acid is prepared these days; at that time we melted sulfuric acid and soda in an enameled casserole, obtaining bisulfate, which we threw on the bare floor to harden and then ground in a coffee grinder. We then heated to 250°C a mixture of that bisulfate and tartaric acid, by means of which the latter dehydrates to pyruvic acid and is distilled. We first attempted this operation using glass

receptacles, breaking a prohibitive quantity; then we bought from the ironmonger ten metal canisters, of ARAR[11] provenance, of the type used for gas before the advent of polyethylene, which proved suitable for our purpose. Since the client was satisfied with the quality and promised new orders, we took the leap and had the neighborhood blacksmith construct for us a crude cylindrical reactor of black steel, equipped with a hand agitator. We embedded it in a well of solid brick, which had on the bottom and the sides four 1000-watt resistors connected illegally outside of the meter. Colleagues who read this, don't be too amazed at our pre-Columbian junk-shop chemistry: in those years we were not the only ones, and not the only chemists, who lived like that; all over the world, six years of war and destruction had caused many civilized habits to regress and had attenuated many needs, primarily the need for decorum.

From the tip of the coil condenser, the acid fell into the collector in heavy gilded drops, glistening like gems: "distilling," in other words, drop by drop—*stilla per stilla*—every ten drops a lira of profit: and meanwhile I was thinking about arsenic and the old man, who didn't seem the type to plot poisonings or to suffer them, but I couldn't figure it out.

The man returned the next day. He insisted on paying the fee, even before learning the result of the analysis. When I told him about it, his face lit up in an intricate wrinkled smile, and he said, "I'm really pleased. I always said it would end like that." It was clear that he was waiting only for a slight nudge from me to tell a story; I didn't fail him, and the story is this, a little impoverished because of the translation from Piedmontese, a language essentially spoken, into the marble of Italian, which is good for tombstones.

"I'm a shoemaker. If you start out as a young man, it's not a bad job: you're sitting down, it's not too much work, and you meet people and exchange a word or two. Of course, you don't make a fortune, and you sit all day with other people's shoes in your hands: but you get used to that, and even to the smell of old leather. My shop is on Via Gioberti at the corner of Via Pastrengo: I've worked there for thirty years, the shoemaker"—but he said "*'l caglié*," "*caligarius*": venerable words that are disappearing—"the shoemaker of San Secondo is me; I know all the difficult feet, and for my work a hammer and thread are all I need. Well, a young man arrived, not from around here: tall, handsome, and ambitious. He set up shop a stone's throw away, and filled it with machines. For

lengthening, widening, sewing, resoling: I wouldn't even know how to tell you, I never went to look, they told me about it. He put cards with his address and telephone number in all the mailboxes of the neighborhood: yes, the telephone, too, as if he were a midwife.

"You can believe that business went well for him right away. The first months yes, partly out of curiosity, partly to put us in competition, some people went to him, and also because in the beginning he kept the prices low: but then he had to raise them, when he saw that he was losing money. Note that I'm telling you all this without any ill will toward him: I've seen so many like him, take off at a gallop and break their neck, shoemakers and not only shoemakers. But he, they said, bore me ill will: they tell me everything, and you know who? The old ladies, the ones whose feet hurt and they don't feel like walking anymore and have only one pair of shoes: they come to me, they sit and wait while I fix the problem, and meanwhile they keep me up to date, they tell me all the news.

"He detested me, and he spread around a heap of lies. That I resole with cardboard. That I get drunk every night. That I murdered my wife for the insurance. That a nail came through the sole of one of my customers' shoes and he died of tetanus. And then, with things at this point, you know, I wasn't at all surprised when, one morning, in the midst of the day's shoes, I found this bag. I immediately got the game, but I wanted to be sure: so I gave a little to the cat, and after two hours it went into a corner and vomited. Then I put a little in the sugar bowl, yesterday my daughter and I put it in our coffee, and after two hours we both vomited. Now then, I have your confirmation, and I'm satisfied."

"Do you want to file charges? Do you need a statement?"

"No, no. I told you, he's only a poor devil, and I don't want to ruin him. For our trade, the world is big and there's room for two; he doesn't know it, but I do."

"So?"

"So tomorrow I'll send the bag back by way of one of my old ladies, with a note. Rather, no: I'll take it myself, so I can see his face and explain a few things." He looked around, as one would in a museum, then added, "Good trade, yours, too: it takes an eye and patience. If you don't have that, you're better off finding another."

He said goodbye, picked up the package, and went down by the stairs, with the tranquil dignity that became him.

10. Carlo Levi (1902–1975), in his novel *The Clock*, called the uncultured, arrogant bourgeoisie *luigini*.
11. The Azienda Rilievo e Alienazione Residuati, the postwar agency charged with disposing of unused war materials.

Nitrogen

. . .And finally the dreamed-of client arrived, the one who wanted professional advice from us. Professional advice is the ideal job: you gain prestige and money without having to get your hands dirty, or break your back, or risk being burned or poisoned; you have only to take off your lab coat, put on a tie, and listen in attentive silence to the question, and you feel like the Delphic Oracle. You then have to weigh your response carefully and formulate it in vague, pompous language, so that the client, too, considers you an oracle, worthy of his trust and of the fee established by the Order of Chemists.

The dream client was around forty, small, compact, and obese; he had a mustache like Clark Gable and tufts of black hair everywhere, in his ears, in his nostrils, on the backs of his hands, and on the bones of his fingers, up to the nails. He was perfumed and pomaded and had a vulgar look: he was like a pimp, or, rather, a bad actor playing a pimp; or a bully from the slums. He explained to me that he was the owner of a cosmetics factory and had troubles with a certain kind of lipstick. Fine, he should bring us a sample. But he said no, it was a particular problem and had to be seen in the place; it would be better if one of us could visit him, in order to grasp the difficulty. Tomorrow at ten? Tomorrow.

It would have been nice to arrive at the place in a car, but, well, if you were a chemist with a car, rather than a poor survivor, a writer in your spare time, and, besides, just married, you wouldn’t be here distilling pyruvic acid and chasing after dubious makers of lipstick. I put on the better of my (two) suits, and left the bicycle in a nearby courtyard, thinking it best to pretend to have arrived in a taxi, but when I entered the factory I realized I needn’t

have had any scruples about appearances. The factory was a dirty, disorganized, drafty warehouse, where a dozen arrogant, indolent, slovenly, and heavily made-up girls wandered around. The owner explained things to me, proudly, boastfully: he called the lipstick “rouge,” aniline “anellina,” and benzoic aldehyde “adelaide.” The process was simple: one girl melted some waxes and fats in an ordinary enameled pan, added a little perfume and coloring, then poured the whole thing into a tiny ingot mold. Another girl cooled the molds under running water and took out of each twenty small scarlet cylinders of lipstick; others took care of the wrapping and packing. The owner rudely grabbed one of the girls, put a hand behind her neck in order to bring her mouth close to my eyes, and invited me to observe the outline of her lips carefully: there, see, a few hours after you put it on, especially when it’s hot, the color runs, gets into the tiny wrinkles that even young women have around their lips, and so forms an ugly spiderweb of red filaments, which blurs the outline and ruins the whole effect.

I observed, not without embarrassment: the red threads were indeed there, but only on the right half of the girl’s mouth, which chewed gum as it submitted impassively to the inspection. Of course, the owner explained: the left half of her mouth, and that of all the other girls, was made up with an excellent French product, the very one he was vainly trying to imitate. It’s the only way a lipstick can be evaluated, by a practical comparison: every morning, all the girls had to put on lipstick, on the right his, on the left that other one, and he kissed each one of them eight times a day to check whether the product was solid to the kiss.

I asked the bully for the lipstick formula and a sample of both products. Reading the formula, I immediately had a suspicion of what was causing the problem, but it seemed to me more opportune to verify it and let the response come a bit loftily, and I asked for two days “for the analysis.” I retrieved my bicycle and as I pedaled thought that if the business went well I might perhaps exchange it for a moped and stop pedaling.

Returning to the laboratory, I took a piece of filter paper, made two tiny red dots with the two samples, and placed it all in an oven at 80°C. After a quarter of an hour, you could see that the dot of the left lipstick had remained a dot, although it was surrounded by an oily halo, whereas the dot of the right lipstick had faded and spread—had become a pink aureole as big as a coin. A soluble dye figured in my man’s formula; it was clear that

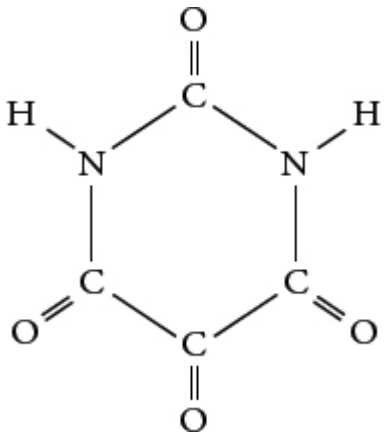
when the fat, thanks to the heat of the women's skin (or my oven), reached the melting point, the dye spread with it. The other lipstick must have contained a red pigment instead, evenly dispersed but insoluble and therefore not migratory. I checked this by diluting the lipstick with benzene and centrifuging it, and there was the pigment, deposited on the bottom of the test tube. Thanks to the experience I had gained in the factory on the lakeshore, I could even identify it: it was an expensive pigment, difficult to disperse, and anyway my bully did not have the proper equipment for dispersing a pigment. Well, that was his problem, let him figure it out, with his harem of girl guinea pigs and his revolting timed kisses. I, I had done my professional duty; I made a report, attached the invoice, stamped it and added the picturesque filter-paper proof, returned to the factory, handed it over, collected the fee, and prepared to take my leave.

But the bully detained me: he was satisfied with my work, and he wanted to propose a deal. Could I get some kilograms of alloxan for him? He would pay well, provided I contracted to supply it only to him. He had read in some journal or other that when alloxan is in contact with the mucous membranes it gives them an extremely long-lasting red color, because it's not an overlay, a paint, like lipstick, but a real dye, such as you use for wool and cotton.

I gulped, but anyway said that I would see: alloxan is not a very common compound or very well-known, and it didn't seem to me that my old organic chemistry book devoted more than five lines to it; at that moment I vaguely recalled only that it was a derivative of urea and had something to do with uric acid.

As soon as possible I went to the library: I mean, to the venerable library of the Chemistry Institute of the University of Turin, which at that time was as impenetrable to infidels as Mecca, and scarcely penetrable even to the faithful, like me. You might think that the administration was following the sage principle according to which it's a good thing to discourage the arts and sciences: only one who was driven by absolute need, or by overwhelming passion, would willingly undergo the trials of self-denial that were required to consult the volumes. The hours were brief and irrational; the illumination scant; the indexes in disarray; in winter no heat; no chairs but, rather, uncomfortable, noisy metal stools; and, finally, the librarian was an insolent, incompetent, brazenly ugly boor, placed at the threshold to frighten with his look and his bark those who claimed entrance.

I gained admission, overcame the trials, and hastened first to refresh my memory about the composition and structure of alloxan. Here is its portrait:



where O is oxygen, C carbon, H hydrogen (hydrogenium) and N nitrogen (nitrogenium). It's a graceful structure, isn't it? It makes you think of something solid, stable, well connected. In fact, in chemistry, too, as in architecture, "beautiful" buildings, that is, symmetrical and simple, are also the most solid: molecules are like the dome of a cathedral or the arches of a bridge. And it may be that the explanation is not so remote or metaphysical: to say "beautiful" is to say "desirable," and ever since man began building, he has desired to build with the least expense and for the longest duration, and the aesthetic enjoyment that he feels in contemplating his works comes later. Certainly it hasn't always been like this: there have been centuries when beauty was identified with decoration, overlay, embellishment; but those were probably deviant epochs, and true beauty, the beauty in which every age recognizes itself, is that of upright stones, ships' hulls, the blade of an ax, and the wing of an airplane.

Now that the structural virtue of alloxan has been acknowledged and admired, it's high time for you, young chemist, so fond of digressions, to get back on track: to fornicate with the material in order to earn your living, and not just yours anymore. I respectfully opened the bookcases that held the *Zentralblatt* and began to consult it, year by year. Hats off to the *Chemisches Zentralblatt*: it's the Review of Reviews, which, ever since chemistry existed, has reported, in the form of an angrily concise abstract, everything published on a chemical subject in every review in the world. The first years are thin volumes of three or four hundred pages; today, fourteen volumes, of thirteen hundred pages each, are served up annually. It

is accompanied by one majestic index of authors, one of subjects, and one of formulas, and there you can find venerable fossils, such as the legendary records in which our father Wöhler narrates the first organic synthesis, or Sainte-Claire Deville describes the first isolation of metallic aluminum.

From the *Zentralblatt* I was bounced to Beilstein, an equally monumental, continually updated encyclopedia in which, as in a registry office, every new compound is described, along with the methods for its preparation. Alloxan had been known for almost seventy years, but as a laboratory curiosity: the methods of preparation described had purely academic value, and started with costly primary materials that (in those years, immediately after the war) it would be vain to hope to find on the market. The only reasonable preparation was the oldest; it didn't seem so difficult to carry out, and consisted in breaking down uric acid by oxidation. Just that: uric acid, produced by the gouty, the incontinent, and kidney stones. It was a decidedly unusual primary material, but perhaps not so prohibitively expensive as the others.

In fact, further research on those very clean shelves, smelling of camphor, wax, and age-old chemical labors, taught me that uric acid, while it is very scarce in the excretions of man and other mammals, constitutes 50 percent of the excrement of birds and 90 percent of the excrement of reptiles. Very well. I telephoned the bully to say that the thing could be done, that he should just give me several days: within the month I would bring him my first sample of alloxan, and at the same time give him an idea of the price and of how much I could produce a month. That alloxan, intended to embellish ladies' lips, should emerge from the excrement of hens or pythons was a thought that did not disturb me in the least. The occupation of chemist (reinforced, in my case, by the experience of Auschwitz) teaches us to overcome, indeed to ignore, certain kinds of disgust, which have nothing necessary or natural about them: matter is matter, neither noble nor vile, and infinitely transformable; its immediate origin is utterly unimportant. Nitrogen is nitrogen, it passes miraculously from the air to plants, from these to animals, and from animals to us; when its function in our body is exhausted, we eliminate it, but nitrogen it remains, aseptic, innocent. We, I mean to say we mammals, who in general do not have problems taking in water, have learned to embed nitrogen in the urea molecule, which is soluble in water, and we get rid of it as urea; other animals, for whom water is precious (or was for their distant ancestors),

have come up with the ingenious invention of packaging their nitrogen in the form of uric acid, which is insoluble in water, and of eliminating it in its solid state, without needing to resort to water as a vehicle. In an analogous mode, people think today of eliminating urban garbage by making compressed blocks, which, at little expense, can be hauled to the dump or buried.

I will go further: far from outraging me, the idea of getting a cosmetic from an excrement, or, rather, *aurum de stercore*, gold from dung, amused me and warmed my heart, like a return to origins, when alchemists extracted phosphorus from urine. It was a novel, happy adventure, and noble, too, because it ennobled, restored, and renewed. Nature does likewise: it derives the grace of the fern from the rotting underbrush, and pasture from manure, *letame*, and doesn't the Latin *laetamen* perhaps mean *allietamento*, gladness? So I was taught in school, so it was for Virgil, and so it became again for me. I returned home at night, explained to my very new wife the business of the alloxan and the uric acid, and told her that the next day I would be going on a business trip: that is, I would take the bicycle and go on a tour of the farms on the city's outskirts (at that time they still existed) in search of chicken manure. She didn't hesitate: she likes the country, and a wife should follow her husband; she would come, too. It was a kind of supplement to our honeymoon, which for reasons of economy had been humble and hurried. But she warned me not to delude myself: finding chicken dung in its pure state would not be so easy.

In fact it was difficult. In the first place, chicken manure (*pollina*, it's called: we urbanites didn't know it, nor did we know that, precisely because of the nitrogen, it's extremely valuable as a fertilizer for vegetable gardens) is not given away; indeed, it's sold at a high price. In the second place, the buyer has to collect it, crawling on all fours into the chicken coop and gleaning in barnyards. In the third place, what you are in effect collecting can be immediately used as a fertilizer but does not lend itself to further operations: it's a mixture of manure, earth, stones, feed, feathers, and, in Piedmontese, *përpôjín* (these are chicken lice, which nest under the wings: I don't know what they're called in Italian). In any case, paying not a little, struggling and dirty, my fearless wife and I returned in the evening along Corso Francia, with a kilo of hard-earned chicken dung in the bicycle basket.

The next day I examined the material: much of it was gangue, yet something could perhaps be extracted from it. But at the same time I had an idea: an exhibit of snakes had just opened in the metro tunnel (which has existed in Turin for forty years, while the metro still doesn't). Why not go and see? Snakes are a clean breed, they don't have feathers or lice and don't scratch in the dirt; then, too, a python is a lot bigger than a hen. Perhaps their excrement, at 90 percent uric acid, could be obtained in abundance, in pieces that were not too small, and in conditions of reasonable purity. This time I went alone: my wife is a daughter of Eve and she doesn't like snakes.

The director of the exhibit and the attendants received me with astonishment and disdain. What were my credentials? Where did I come from? Who did I think I was, to show up like that, as if it were nothing, asking for python dung? But nothing to discuss, not even a gram; pythons are sober, they eat twice a month and vice versa: especially when they have little exercise. Their very scant dung is sold at the weight of gold: anyway, they, and all the exhibitors and owners of serpents, had permanent, exclusive contracts with the big pharmaceutical companies. I should clear off, and not waste any more of their time.

I devoted a day to roughly picking through the manure, and two more trying to oxidize the acid contained in it to alloxan. The virtue and patience of the old chemists must have been superhuman, or maybe it was only that my inexperience in organic preparations was immense. All I got was foul gasses, tedium, humiliation, and a cloudy black liquid that irremediably stopped up the filters and did not show any tendency to crystallize, as, according to the text, it should have. The dung remained dung, and the alloxan with its resounding name a resounding name. That was not the way out of the swamp: by what path would I then emerge, I the discouraged author of a book that to me seemed good but that no one read? Better to return to the colorless but secure schemes of inorganic chemistry.

Tin

“It’s a bad thing to be born poor,” I was reflecting, as I held an ingot of tin from the Straits over the flame of a Bunsen burner. Very slowly, the tin melted, and the drops fell hissing into a basin of water: on the bottom of the basin a fascinating metallic tangle was forming, with constantly changing shapes.

There are friendly metals and hostile metals. Tin was a friend: not only because, for some months, Emilio and I had been living on it, converting it into stannous chloride to sell to mirror makers, but for other, less overt reasons. Because it marries with iron, transforming it into gentle tinplate and depriving it of its bloodthirsty quality as *nocens ferrum*; because the Phoenicians traded it, and because it’s still extracted, refined, and loaded on ships in fabled distant countries (the Straits, indeed: as if someone should say the Sleeping Sunda, the Happy Isles, and the Archipelagos); because it is alloyed with copper to make bronze, an eminently respectable material, notoriously lasting and well established; because it melts at a low temperature, almost like an organic compound, that is, almost like us; and, finally, because it has two unique properties, with picturesque and barely credible names, properties never seen or heard (that I know of) by human eye or ear, yet faithfully handed down, from generation to generation, by all school texts, tin “pest” and tin “cry.”

The tin had to be granulated so that it would be easier to attack with hydrochloric acid. It serves you right. You were sheltered by the wings of that factory on the lakeshore—a bird of prey, but its wings were broad and strong. You wanted to leave its protection, fly with your own wings: serves you right. Now fly: you wanted to be free and you are free, you wanted to

be a chemist and you are a chemist. Go on, grub among poisons, lipsticks, and chicken dung; granulate tin, pour hydrochloric acid, concentrate, decant, and crystallize, if you don't want to suffer hunger, and you know about hunger. Buy tin and sell stannous chloride.

Emilio had set up the laboratory in his parents' apartment; they were pious people, imprudent and patient, and, certainly, giving him the use of their bedroom they had not foreseen all the consequences. But you can't go back: now the front hall was a warehouse of demijohns of concentrated hydrochloric acid, the kitchen stove (outside of mealtimes) was used to concentrate the stannous chloride in six-liter beakers and Erlenmeyer flasks, and the entire apartment was saturated with our fumes.

Emilio's father was a majestic, benign old man, with a white mustache and a thundering voice. He had had many occupations in his life, all adventurous or at least strange, and at seventy he still had an alarming eagerness for experiment. At that time, he held a monopoly on the blood of all the cows killed at the old Municipal Slaughterhouse on Corso Inghilterra: he spent many hours of the day in a foul cave, its walls brown with coagulated blood, the floor soaked in putrefied sewage and frequented by rats as big as rabbits; even the invoices and the ledger book were bloody. From the blood he made buttons, glue, pancakes, blood sausage, murals, and polishing paste. He read exclusively Arabic magazines and newspapers, which he had sent from Cairo, where he had lived for many years, where his three children were born, where, with gunfire, he had defended the Italian consulate from an angry mob, and where his heart remained. Every day he went on his bicycle to Porta Palazzo to buy herbs, sorghum flour, peanut oil, and sweet potatoes: with these ingredients, and the blood from the slaughterhouse, he prepared different experimental dishes every day; he boasted of them and made us taste them. One day he brought home a rat, cut off the head and paws, told his wife it was a guinea pig, and roasted it. Since his bicycle didn't have a chain guard, and his back was a little stiff, he put clips on the bottom of his pants in the morning and didn't take them off all day. He and his wife, the sweet and imperturbable Signora Ester, born in Corfu of a Venetian family, had accepted our laboratory in their house as if keeping acids in the kitchen were the most natural thing in the world. We transported the demijohns of acid to the fourth floor in the elevator: Emilio's father had such a respectable and authoritative look that no tenant had dared to object.

Our laboratory resembled a junk shop or the hold of a whaler. Apart from its offshoots, which invaded the kitchen, the hall, and even the bathroom, it consisted of a single room and the balcony. Scattered around the balcony were the parts of a DKW motorcycle that Emilio had acquired disassembled, and that, he said, he would some day or other put back together: the scarlet gas tank was astride the railing, and the motor, in a food safe, was rusting, corroded by our exhaust fumes. There were also some canisters of ammonia, relics of an epoch that preceded my arrival, when Emilio scraped along by releasing gaseous ammonia into demijohns of drinkable water, selling these, and polluting the neighborhood. Strewn everywhere, on the balcony and in the house, was an incredible quantity of junk so old and worn as to be nearly unrecognizable; only on careful examination could the professional components be distinguished from the domestic.

In the middle of the laboratory was a large wood-and-glass fume hood, our pride and our only defense against death by gas. Not that hydrochloric acid is really toxic: it’s one of those forthright enemies that come upon you shouting from afar, and so it’s easy to protect yourself. It has an odor so penetrating that anyone who can take cover doesn’t hesitate; and you can’t confuse it with anything else, because after breathing in a gulp you emit from your nose two quick plumes of white smoke, like a horse in an Eisenstein film, and you feel your teeth pucker in your mouth as if you’d eaten a lemon. In spite of our eager hood, the fumes from the acid invaded all the rooms: the wallpaper changed color, the handles and metal fixtures became dull and scaly, and every so often a sinister thud made us jump. A nail had become completely corroded, and a painting, in some corner of the apartment, had crashed to the floor. Emilio put in a new nail and hung the picture back in its place.

So we dissolved the tin in the hydrochloric acid: then we had to concentrate the solution to a fixed specific weight and let it crystallize by cooling. The stannous chloride separated out into small, graceful prisms, colorless and transparent. Since the crystallization was slow, we needed many receptacles, and since hydrochloric acid eats into metals, these receptacles had to be of glass or ceramic. In periods when we had a lot of orders, we had to mobilize reserve receptacles, which Emilio’s house had in abundance, anyway: a soup tureen, an enameled iron pot, a Novecento-style chandelier, and a chamber pot.

The next morning we collected the chloride and drained it: you have to be careful not to touch it with your hands, or a disgusting odor clings to you. This salt is odorless in itself, but it reacts in some way with the skin, perhaps reducing the disulfide bridges of the keratin, and releases a persistent metallic stink that announces you as a chemist for several days. It's aggressive, but also delicate, like certain unpleasant sporting opponents who cry when they lose: you can't force it, you have to let it dry in the air at its convenience. If you try to dry it, even in the gentlest way, for example with a hair dryer or over a radiator, it loses its water of crystallization and becomes opaque, and your foolish clients don't want it anymore. Foolish, because it would suit them: with less water there's more tin and hence a better yield; but so it is—the client is always right, especially when he doesn't know much chemistry, as is precisely the case with mirror makers.

Nothing of the generous good nature of tin, Jove's metal, survives in its chloride (besides, chlorides in general are riffraff, mostly ignoble by-products, hygroscopic and not good for much of anything: with the sole exception of common salt, which is another subject entirely). This salt is an energetic reducing agent, that is to say, it's eager to free itself from two of its electrons, and does so on the slightest pretext, sometimes with disastrous results. A single splash of the concentrated solution, which had dripped on my pants, was enough to cut them cleanly, like a scimitar's swipe; it was the period after the war, so I didn't have any others except my Sunday ones, and there wasn't much money at home.

I would never have left the factory beside the lake, but would have remained forever correcting abnormalities in paints, if Emilio hadn't insisted, boasting of the adventure and glory of working for oneself. I had quit with absurd audacity, distributing to colleagues and superiors a will in quatrains full of gay impertinences: I was well aware of the risk I ran, but I knew that the freedom to make a mistake grows restricted with the years, and if you want to take advantage you mustn't wait too long. On the other hand, there's no need to wait too long to realize that a mistake is a mistake: at the end of each month we did the accounts, and it became increasingly clear that man cannot live on stannous chloride alone, or at least I couldn't, who was just married and had no authoritative patriarch behind me.

We didn't give in right away; we struggled for a good month in an effort to obtain vanillin from eugenol with a yield that would allow us to survive, and didn't succeed; we secreted several quintals of pyruvic acid, produced

with troglodytic equipment and on a schedule of hard labor, after which I raised the white flag. I would find a job, maybe go back to paints.

Emilio accepted with sorrow, but manfully, our shared defeat and my desertion. For him it was different: in his veins ran the paternal blood, rich in remote pirate enzymes, in mercantile initiatives, and with a restless passion for the new. He wasn't afraid of making a mistake, or of changing occupation, place, and style of life every six months, or of becoming poor; he had no fixations about caste, either, and felt no uneasiness in going on a tricycle and in a gray uniform to deliver our laborious chloride to clients. He accepted, and the next day already had other ideas in mind, other deals with people more experienced than me; he immediately began the dismantling of the laboratory, and wasn't even very unhappy, while I was—I felt like crying, or howling at the moon the way dogs do when they see the suitcases closing. We got started on the sad task helped (or rather, distracted and impeded) by Signor Samuele and Signora Ester. Familiar objects, sought in vain for years, came to light, along with other, exotic ones, buried geologically in the recesses of the apartment: a silencer for a Beretta 38A machine gun (from the time when Emilio was a partisan and traveled the valleys distributing spare parts to the groups), a miniature Koran, an extremely long porcelain pipe, a Damascene sword with an inlaid silver hilt, an avalanche of yellowed papers. Among these surfaced a proclamation from 1785, which I greedily appropriated, and in which F. Tom. Lorenzo Matteucci, Grand Inquisitor of Marca Anconitana, specially Delegated against Heretical Depravity, with much arrogance and little clarity, "orders, prohibits, and expressly commands, that no Jew dare to take from Christians lessons in any sort of Instrument, and even more in Dancing." We put off until the next day the most agonizing job, taking down the fume hood.

Emilio's opinion to the contrary, it was immediately clear that our forces would not be sufficient. It was painful to us to enlist a couple of carpenters, whom Emilio instructed to uproot the hood from its anchorage without dismembering it: this hood was in short a symbol, the sign of a profession and a condition, indeed an art, and it was to be deposited in the courtyard intact and in its entirety, to find new life and use in a future for now not specified.

A scaffolding was constructed, a hoist mounted, guide ropes tightened. While Emilio and I watched from the courtyard, the hood emerged

solemnly from the window, balanced ponderously, was silhouetted against the gray sky of Via Massena, was skillfully hooked to the chain of the hoist, and the chain groaned and broke. The hood plummeted four stories, to land at our feet, reduced to splinters of wood and glass; it still smelled of eugenol and pyruvic acid, and with it our every desire and daring in enterprise was reduced to splinters.

In the brief instants of flight the instinct for preservation made us jump back. Emilio said, “I thought it would make more noise.”

Uranium

You can’t send the new employee to do customer service and sales. It’s a delicate, complex job, not very different from what diplomats do: to perform it successfully you have to instill trust in the client, and so it’s indispensable to have trust in ourselves and in the products we sell; it’s therefore a salutary exercise, which helps one to know oneself and strengthens one’s character. It’s perhaps the most hygienic of the specialties that constitute the decathlon of the factory chemist: the one that best trains you in eloquence and improvisation, in quickness of reflexes and in the capacity to understand and make yourself understood; furthermore, it lets you travel around Italy and the world, and brings you face-to-face with a variety of people. I must also mention another curious and beneficial consequence for the customer service and sales representative: after some years of this occupation, of making a show of respecting our fellow man and finding him likable, we end up by doing so truly, just as someone who feigns madness often becomes mad.

In most cases, at the first contact you have to obtain or gain a rank superior to that of your interlocutor: but gain it stealthily, in a friendly way, without frightening or outclassing him. He should feel that you’re superior, but only a little: reachable, understandable. It’s no good, for example, to have chemical conversations with a non-chemist: this is the ABC of the job. But the opposite danger is much more serious, which is that the client outclasses you. It can easily happen, because he’s on his home field; that is, it’s he who employs in a practical way the products that you sell, and so he knows their virtues and defects the way a wife knows her husband’s, while you usually have only a painless, disinterested knowledge, often optimistic,

acquired in the laboratory or the training course. The most favorable constellation is the one where you can present yourself as a benefactor in some way or other: convincing him that your product can satisfy an old need or desire of his, perhaps unnoticed; that, all things considered, at the end of the year it will cost him less than that of the Competition, which, besides, as everyone knows, is fine in the beginning but, well, don't make me say too much. You can, however, help him in different ways (and here the imagination of the candidate for customer service is revealed): solving a technical problem that is only slightly relevant, or maybe not at all; providing him with an address; inviting him to lunch "at a traditional local place"; having him visit your city and helping him or advising him in the purchase of souvenirs for his wife or his girl; finding him at the last minute a ticket for the derby, at the stadium (ah yes, even this is done). My colleague in Bologna possesses a continually updated collection of bawdy stories and diligently reviews them, along with the technical bulletins, before setting off on his round of visits in town and country; since he has a short memory, he makes a note of the ones he's told to every single client, because to dispense the same tale twice to the same person would be a serious lapse.

All these things are learned with experience, but there are some technician-salesmen who seem that from birth, born reps, like Minerva. This is not my case, and I am sadly aware of it: when it falls to me to work as a rep, at headquarters or traveling, I do it unwillingly, with hesitation, compunction, and little human warmth. Worse: I tend to be brusque and impatient with clients who are impatient and brusque, and to be meek and compliant with suppliers, who, being, in turn, reps themselves, appear compliant and meek. In short, I am not a good rep, and I'm afraid that by now it's too late to become one.

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Tabasso had told me: "Go to the *** and ask for Bonino, who is the department head. He's a good man, he already knows our products, everything has always gone well, he's not a genius, we haven't paid him a visit in three months. You'll see, you won't have technical difficulties; if he

talks about prices, stick to generalities—tell him you'll report, it's not your business."

I had myself announced, was given the form to fill out, and was handed the card that, attached to your buttonhole, identifies you as a foreigner and immunizes you against rejection by guards. They had me sit down in a waiting room; after no more than five minutes Bonino appeared and led me to his office. This is an excellent sign, and things don't always go like that: there are people who, coldly, make the reps wait thirty or forty minutes even if they have an appointment, with the deliberate aim of putting them down and imposing rank; it's the same aim that, with more ingenious and obscene techniques, the baboons in the big cage at the zoo have. But the analogy is more general: the strategies and tactics of the rep can all be described in terms of sexual courtship. In both cases there is a relationship between two; a courtship or a negotiation among three would be unthinkable. In both cases, you note at the start a sort of dance or ritualized opening, in which the buyer accepts the seller only if he keeps strictly to the traditional ceremony; if that happens, the buyer joins the dance, and if the pleasure is mutual they achieve coupling, and that is the purchase, with both partners visibly satisfied. Cases of unilateral violence are rare; not coincidentally, they are often described in terms borrowed from the sexual sphere.

Bonino was a round, untidy little man, vaguely doglike, with a poorly shaved beard and a toothless smile. I introduced myself and began the propitiatory dance, but he said to me immediately, "Ah yes, you're the one who wrote a book." I have to confess my weakness: this irregular opening does not displease me, no matter how little use it may be to the company I represent; in fact, at this point the conversation tends to degenerate, or at least get lost in anomalous considerations, which distract from the purpose of the visit and cause professional time to be wasted.

"It's really a fine novel," Bonino continued. "I read it during the holidays, and made my wife read it, too. Not the children, no, because it might have upset them." Such opinions normally irritate me, but when you're acting as a rep you can't be too sophistic: I thanked him suavely and tried to get the conversation back on the proper track, that is, our paints. Bonino put up resistance.

"Just as you see me before you, I was in danger of ending up like you. They had already shut us up in the courtyard of the barracks, in Corso

Orbassano, but at a certain point I saw him come in, you know who I mean, and then, when no one was looking, I climbed the wall, jumped down on the other side, a good five meters, and slipped away. Then I went to Val Susa with the Badogliani."

I had never yet happened to hear a Badogliano call the Badogliani Badogliani.[12] I withdrew into defense, and in fact surprised myself by taking a deep breath, like someone preparing for a long submersion. It was clear that Bonino's story would not be short: never mind, I thought back to how many long stories I had inflicted on my neighbor, on the ones who did and the ones who did not want to listen; I recalled that it is written (Deuteronomy 10:19), "You will love the stranger, since you too were strangers in the land of Egypt"; and I settled myself in my chair.

Bonino was not a good narrator: he wandered, he repeated himself, he digressed, and digressed from digressions. And then he had the curious vice of omitting the subject of a clause and replacing it with the personal pronoun, which made his story even hazier. While he spoke, I distractedly examined the place where he had received me, which had evidently been his office for many years, because it seemed shabby and disorderly, like his person. The glass in the windows was offensively dirty, the walls were smoke-darkened, and the stagnant air had a depressing odor of stale tobacco. Rusty nails were stuck in the walls, some apparently unused, others holding yellowed papers. One of these, legible from my observation post, began like this: "Subject: Rags. With ever-increasing frequency . . ."; elsewhere could be seen old razor blades, receipts from the soccer pool, forms from the health service, illustrated postcards.

". . . so he told me that I should go behind him, or, rather, in front: he was behind me, with his gun pointed. Then the other one arrived, the accomplice, who was around the corner waiting for him; and between the two of them they brought me to Via Asti, you know, where Aloisio Smit was. He called me in every so often, and said to me, You might as well talk, since your companions have already talked, it's pointless for you to play the hero . . ."

On Bonino's desk there was a horrible aluminum-alloy reproduction of the Tower of Pisa. There was also an ashtray made from a shell, full of butts and cherry pits, and an alabaster pen holder in the form of Vesuvius. It was a miserable desk: no more than six-tenths of a square meter, at a generous estimate. There is no experienced rep who does not know this sad science

of desks, maybe not at a conscious level, but in the form of a conditioned reflex: a small desk inexorably announces a worthless occupant; as for the employee who has not been able to acquire a desk within eight or ten days of being hired, well, he's a lost man—he can't count on more than a few weeks of survival, like a hermit crab without a shell. On the other hand, I've known people who at the end of their career had at their disposal seven or eight square meters with a polyester finish, obviously excessive, but appropriate as a coded expression of the measure of their power. What objects lie on the desk is not significant in quantitative terms: there are some who express their authority by keeping the desktop in the greatest disarray, with the largest pile of papers; there are others who instead, more subtly, assert their status by means of emptiness and meticulous neatness, as it is said Mussolini did at Palazzo Venezia.

". . . but none of them realized I had a pistol in my belt. When they began to torture me, I pulled it out, stood them all with their faces to the wall, and came away. But he . . ."

He who? I was puzzled; the story was getting more and more tangled, time was marching on, and of course the client is always right, but there is a limit even to selling your own soul, and to faithfulness to the company's orders: beyond this limit one becomes ridiculous.

". . . as far as I could: half an hour, and I was already in the neighborhood of Rivoli. I was walking along the street, and what do I see landing in the fields nearby but a German airplane, a stork, one of the type that land in fifty meters. Two fellows get out, very polite, and ask me please which direction is Switzerland. I'm familiar with the area and I told them right away: straight like this to Milan, then turn left. *Dànche*, they answer, and get back in the plane; but then one of them has a second thought, rummages under his seat, gets out, and comes toward me with something like a rock in his hand; he gives it to me and says, 'This is for your trouble: take care of it—it's uranium.' You know, it was the end of the war, they felt lost, they were too late to make the atomic bomb, and the uranium was no use to them anymore. They were only thinking of saving their skin and escaping to Switzerland."

There is also a limit to control of one's own features: Bonino must have caught on mine some sign of incredulity, because he interrupted himself and in a slightly offended tone said, "You don't believe it?"

“Of course I believe it,” I answered heroically. “But was it really uranium?”

“Certainly: anyone would have known. It was incredibly heavy, and hot to the touch. Anyway, I still have it at home; I keep it on the balcony, in a locker, so the children don’t touch it; every so often I show it to friends, and it has stayed hot, it’s still hot.” He hesitated a moment, then added, “You know what I’ll do? Tomorrow I’ll send you a piece: so you’ll be convinced, and maybe you, you’re a writer, maybe, besides your stories, some day or other you’ll write about this, too.”

I thanked him, dutifully gave him my number, explained a certain new product, marked down a fairly substantial order, said goodbye, and considered the business finished. But the next day I found a package deposited on my desk of 1.2 square meters, addressed to my kind attention. I opened it, not without curiosity: it contained a block of metal, half the size of a cigarette pack; rather heavy, in fact, and exotic in appearance. The surface was silvery white, with a faint yellowish patina: it didn’t seem to be hot, but it couldn’t be easily mistaken for any of the metals that long habit —outside chemistry as well—has made familiar to us, like copper, zinc, aluminum. Perhaps an alloy? Or maybe it really was uranium? No one has ever seen metallic uranium around here, and in the treatises it’s described as silvery-white; and it’s not as if a small block like that would be permanently warm—maybe only a mass as big as a house can maintain its warmth at the expense of the energy of disintegration.

As soon as reasonably possible, I hurried into the laboratory, which, for a chemist from among the reps, is an unusual and vaguely inappropriate undertaking. The laboratory is a place for youths, and returning there one returns to one’s youth: with the same passion for adventure, discovery, and the unexpected that one has at seventeen. Naturally, it’s a while since you were seventeen, and, besides, a long career of para-chemical activities has humbled you, you’re atrophied, clumsy, ignorant of the location of the reagents and the equipment, forgetful of everything but the basic reactions: yet for those very reasons the laboratory revisited is a source of joy, radiates an intense fascination, which is that of youth, of a future that is undetermined and full of potential—that is, of freedom.

But the years of non-use do not allow you to forget certain professional tics, certain stereotypical behaviors that identify you as a chemist in any circumstances: testing the unknown material with your nail, with a

pocketknife, smelling it, feeling with your lips whether it's "cold" or "hot," seeing if window glass scratches it or not, observing it in reflected light, weighing it in the hollow of your hand. Evaluating the specific weight of a material is not so easy, but, come on, uranium has a specific weight of 19, much higher than lead's, twice that of copper: the gift made to Bonino by the Nazi aeronaut-astronauts could not be uranium. I began to glimpse, in the paranoiac tale of the little man, the echo of a persistent and recurring local legend, of UFOs in Val Susa, of flying saucers bearing omens, like comets in the Middle Ages, erratic and ineffectual, like the spirits of spiritualists.

And if not uranium, what was it? With a small saw I cut off a slice of metal (it could be sawed easily) and introduced it to the flame of the Bunsen burner: something unusual happened—a thread of brown smoke rose from the flame, curling in spirals. In an instant of voluptuous nostalgia, I felt the reflexes of the analyst, withered through long inertia, reawakening in me: I found a glazed porcelain evaporating dish, filled it with water, placed it over the smoky flame, and saw, forming on the bottom, a brown deposit that was an old acquaintance. I touched the deposit with a drop of solution of silver nitrate, and the blue-black color that developed confirmed that the metal was cadmium, the distant son of Cadmus, sower of the dragon's teeth.

Where Bonino had found the cadmium wasn't very interesting: probably in the Cadmium Plating Department of his factory. More interesting, but indecipherable, was the origin of his story: profoundly his, his own, since, as I later found out, he told it often and to everyone, but without the contribution of the material to substantiate it, and with details increasingly more colorful and less credible as the years passed. It was clearly impossible to get to its source; but I—caught in the net of sales and customer service, of social and business duties and those of verisimilitude—envied in him the boundless freedom of invention, of one who has broken down the barriers and is now master of constructing the past that most pleases him, of sewing for himself the hero's robes, and flying like Superman through the centuries, the meridians, and the parallels.

12. The reference is to partisans loyal to General Pietro Badoglio. The term was not liked by the partisans themselves, and was used by the Fascists and the Germans.

Silver

We usually throw a mimeographed letter in the wastebasket without reading it, but this one, I immediately realized, did not deserve the common fate: it was an invitation to a dinner in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of receiving our degrees. Its language offered something to think about: the recipient was addressed with the familiar *tu*, and the sender made a show of musty old school terms, as if those twenty-five years hadn't passed. With involuntary humor, the text concluded by saying, "In an atmosphere of renewed camaraderie we will celebrate our silver anniversary with Chemistry by narrating in turn the chemical events of our daily life." What chemical events? The precipitation of sterols in our fifty-year-old arteries? The membrane equilibrium of our membranes?

Who could the author be? I mentally reviewed the twenty-five or thirty surviving colleagues: I mean, who were not only still alive but hadn't disappeared beyond the headland of other professional activities. First of all, eliminate the women: all mothers of families, all demobilized, no longer in possession of "events" to recount. Eliminate the climbers, the ones who had climbed, the favorites, the former favorites who had become givers of favor: these are people who do not like confrontations. Eliminate the frustrated, who do not like confrontations, either; the shipwrecked may come to a gathering like this, but to ask for sympathy or help—it's unlikely that they would take the initiative to organize it. From the small group remaining a probable name emerged: Cerrato, the honest, clumsy, and eager Cerrato, to whom life had given so little and who had given life so little. I had met him by chance, briefly, after the war, and he was inert, not shipwrecked: shipwrecked is someone who departs and sinks; who proposes

a goal, doesn’t reach it, and suffers. Cerrato had proposed nothing, had exposed himself to nothing, had remained shut in his house, and certainly must have continued to cling to the “golden” years of his studies because all his other years had been lead.

At the prospect of that dinner I felt a two-pronged reaction: it wasn’t a neutral event; it attracted and repelled me at the same time, like a magnet brought near a compass. I wanted to go and I didn’t want to go: but the motivations for both decisions, looked at carefully, were not very noble-minded. I wanted to go because it appealed to me to compare myself to the others and feel that I was more open, less attached to earnings and idols, less resigned, less defeated. I didn’t want to go because I didn’t want to be the same age as the others, that is, my age: I didn’t want to see wrinkles, white hair, memento mori. I didn’t want to count on it, or count the absent, or do any reckoning.

And yet Cerrato excited my curiosity. We had sometimes studied together: he was serious and not self-indulgent; he studied without genius and without joy (he seemed to be unacquainted with joy), successively knocking down the chapters of the texts like a miner in a tunnel. He had not compromised with fascism and had reacted well to the reagent of the racial laws. As a boy he had been opaque but self-assured, someone who could be trusted: and experience teaches that precisely this, trustworthiness, is the most constant virtue, and is neither acquired nor lost over the years. One is born worthy of trust, with an open face and steady eyes, and remains so for life. Those who are born warped and slack remain that way: someone who lies to you at six lies to you at sixteen and at sixty. The phenomenon is noteworthy, and explains how certain friendships and marriages survive for many decades, in spite of habit, boredom, and the depletion of subjects: I was interested in testing it on Cerrato. I paid the amount, and wrote to the anonymous committee that I would attend the dinner.

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His figure was not much changed: he was tall, bony, dark-complexioned; his hair still thick, his face clean-shaven, his forehead, nose, and chin heavy and as if crudely drawn. He still moved clumsily, as in the past, with the

abrupt yet hesitant gestures that in the laboratory had made him a proverbial breaker of glassware.

As is customary, we devoted the first minutes of conversation to bringing each other up to date. I learned that he was married, without children, and simultaneously realized that this was not a welcome subject. I learned that he had always worked in photographic chemistry: ten years in Italy, four in Germany, then again in Italy. It was indeed he who had been the organizer of the dinner and the author of the invitation. He felt no shame in admitting it: if I would allow him a professional metaphor, the years of school had been his professional Technicolor, the rest was black-and-white. As for “events” (I restrained myself from pointing out to him the awkwardness of the expression), they really did interest him. His career had been rich in events, even if for the most part, in fact, they had been only in black-and-white: mine, too? Yes, I confirmed: chemical and nonchemical, but in recent years the chemical events had prevailed, in frequency and intensity. They give you a sense of the *nicht dazu gewachsen*, of impotence, of inadequacy, isn’t that true? They give you the impression of fighting an interminable war against an opposing army that is obtuse and slow but tremendous in number and weight; of losing all the battles, one after another, year after year; and you must content yourself, to soothe your injured pride, with those few occasions when you glimpse a break in the enemy ranks, rush into it, and hit the target with a single rapid shot.

Cerrato, too, knew this army: he, too, had experienced the inadequacy of our preparation, and the need to substitute for it luck, intuition, stratagems, and a stream of patience. I told him that I was in search of events, mine and others’, that I wanted to put on display in a book, to see if I could convey to the uninitiated the strong and bitter flavor of our occupation, which is a particular case, a more strenuous version, of the occupation of living. I told him that it didn’t seem right to me that the world knew everything about how the doctor lives, the prostitute, the sailor, the assassin, the countess, the ancient Roman, the conspirator, and the Polynesian, and nothing about how we transmuters of matter live; but that in this book I would deliberately ignore grand chemistry, the triumphant chemistry of enormous facilities and dizzying profits, because that is collective and therefore anonymous work. I was more interested in stories of solitary, unarmed, pedestrian chemistry, on a human scale, which with few exceptions had been mine: but it was also the chemistry of the

founders, who worked not in teams but alone, amid the indifference of their times, for the most part without gain, and who confronted matter without helpers, with their brains and their hands, with reason and imagination.

I asked him if he would like to contribute to this book: if so, would he tell me a story, and, if he would let me make a suggestion, it should be a story of ours, in which you muddle along in the dark for a week or a month, you think it will be dark forever, and you feel like throwing it all away and changing occupations: then you glimpse a ray of light in the darkness, you grope in that direction, and the light gets brighter, and, finally, order follows chaos. Cerrato said to me seriously that in fact sometimes things did go like that, and that he would try to satisfy me; but that in general it was always dark, one never saw the ray of light, one beat one's head more and more often against a ceiling that kept getting lower, and ended up crawling out of the cave on all fours and backward, a little older than when one had entered. While he interrogated his memory, gazing up at the pretentiously frescoed ceiling of the restaurant, I glanced rapidly at him and saw that he had aged well, without disfigurement, in fact growing and maturing: he was still heavy, as in the past, having been denied the refreshment of mischief and laughter, but this was no longer offensive; it was more acceptable in a fifty-year-old than in a twenty-year-old. He told me a story about silver.

"I'll tell you the essential: you can add the trimmings, for example how an Italian lives in Germany; besides, you've been there. I was in charge of the department where X-ray paper is made. Do you know anything about it? That doesn't matter: it's not a very sensitive material, and doesn't cause trouble (trouble and sensitivity are proportional); hence the department was also fairly peaceful. But you have to remember that, if film malfunctions for amateurs, nine times out of ten the user thinks it's his fault; or, if not, at worst he'll curse you out in a letter, which doesn't arrive because the address was incomplete. On the other hand, if an X ray goes wrong, maybe after the barium liquid or the descending urography, and then a second goes wrong, and then the whole package of paper—well, it doesn't end there. The trouble mounts, getting bigger as it goes up, and it lands on you like a plague. My predecessor had explained all this to me, with the pedagogic talent of the Germans, to justify in my eyes the fantastic ritual of cleanliness

that had to be observed in the department, from beginning to end of the process. I don't know if it interests you: just imagine that . . ."

I interrupted him: minute precautions, maniacal cleanings, purity with eight zeroes are things that make me suffer. I know perfectly well that in some cases these are necessary measures, but I also know that, more often, mania prevails over common sense, and that next to five sensible precepts or prohibitions lurk ten senseless, useless ones, which no one dares to revoke only on account of mental laziness, superstition, or a morbid fear of complications—when in fact it isn't like the military, where the rules serve to smuggle in a repressive discipline. Cerrato poured me some wine: his large hand headed hesitantly toward the neck of the bottle, as if it were fluttering over the table in an effort to escape him; then he inclined it toward my glass, which he kept bumping. He confirmed that things were often like that: for example, the women in the department he was talking about were forbidden to use powder, but one time a girl's powder compact had fallen out of her pocket and opened as it fell, and a lot of powder had blown around in the air; the production for that day had been tested with special rigor, and it was fine. Well, powder was still banned.

". . . but there is one detail I must tell you, or you won't understand the story. That is the religion of hairs (which is justified, I assure you): the department is slightly pressurized, and the air that's pumped in is carefully filtered. You always wear special overalls over your clothes and a cap over your hair: overalls and caps are washed every day, to remove growing hairs or hairs trapped accidentally. Shoes and socks are taken off at the entrance and replaced by anti-dust slippers.

"So that is the scene. I must add that for five or six years there had been no major accidents: a few isolated complaints from a few hospitals on account of a change in sensitivity, but it was almost always a matter of material that had already passed the expiration date. Troubles, you must know, do not come at a gallop, like the Huns, but quietly, stealthily, like epidemics. This began with a special-delivery letter from a diagnostic center in Vienna; the language was very civil, I would say it was more a signal than a complaint, and appended was an explanatory X ray: regular as far as the grain (of the emulsion) and the contrast were concerned, but sprinkled with oblong white spots, the size of beans. We answered with a contrite letter, in which we apologized for the involuntary, etc., but after the first lansquenet has died of plague[13] it's better not to deceive yourself: the

plague is the plague, it's pointless to bury your head in the sand. The next week there were two more letters: one came from Liège and hinted at damages to pay, the other from the Soviet Union, I no longer remember (maybe I've censored it) the complex logo of the commercial entity that sent it. When it was translated, it made everyone's hair stand on end. The flaw, naturally, was the same one of the bean-shaped spots, and the letter was extremely harsh: it mentioned three operations that had had to be delayed, shifts lost, quintals of questionable sensitive paper, an investigation and an international controversy at the Court of I don't know where; we were enjoined to send a *Spezialist* right away.

"In such situations you at least try to close the barn door after some of the horses have escaped, but you don't always succeed. Obviously all the paper had passed the exit test: therefore we were dealing with a defect that showed up later, during storage with us or with the client, or during transport. The director summoned me; he discussed the case with me, very politely, for two hours, but I felt as if he were flaying me, slowly and methodically, and enjoying it.

"We made arrangements with the testing laboratory, and retested, batch by batch, all the paper in storage. Every batch for the previous two months was in order. In the rest, the flaw was found, but not in all: there were hundreds of batches, and around a sixth presented the problem of the beans. My deputy, a young chemist who wasn't really too quick, made a curious observation: the defective batches followed one another with a certain regularity, five good and one bad. It seemed to me a trail, and I tried to get to the end of it: indeed, that's how it was, it was almost exclusively the paper made on Wednesdays that was ruined.

"You certainly must know, too, that late problems are by far the most malignant. While you're looking for the causes, you have to continue to produce, but how can you be sure that the cause (or causes) isn't still at work, and the material you're producing a harbinger of other troubles. Of course, you can keep it in quarantine for two months and then retest it, but what will you say to the warehouses all over the world, when they don't see the goods arrive? And the interest payments to the bank? And the name, the Good Name, the *Unbestrittener Ruf*? Then, there is that other complication: with any variation you make in the composition or the technology, you have to wait two months before you know if it's useful or not, if it eliminates the flaw or makes it worse.

“Naturally I felt innocent: I had respected all the rules, I hadn’t allowed any leniency. Above and below me, all the others felt equally innocent: those who had said the primary material was good, who had prepared and tested the silver bromide emulsion, those who had wrapped, packed, and stored the packages of paper. I felt innocent, but I wasn’t: I was guilty by definition, because the head of a department answers for his department, and because if there is damage there is sin, and if there is sin there is a sinner. It’s a matter just like original sin: you haven’t done anything, but you are guilty and have to pay. Not with money, but worse: you lose sleep, you lose your appetite, you get an ulcer or eczema, and you take a big step toward a serious workplace neurosis.

“While letters and telephone calls of complaint continued to arrive, I persisted in the fact of the Wednesdays: surely it must have a meaning. Tuesday night a guard I didn’t like was on duty; he had a scar on his chin and the face of a Nazi. I didn’t know whether or not to talk to the director about it: trying to unload fault onto others is always bad politics. So I had the pay books brought in, and saw that the Nazi had been with us for only three months, while the problem of the beans had begun showing up on the paper made ten months earlier. What new thing had happened ten months earlier?

“About ten months earlier we had accepted, after thorough checking, a new supplier of the black paper that is used to protect sensitive paper from the light: but the defective material turned out to be packed indifferently in black paper provided by both suppliers. Also ten months earlier (nine, to be exact) a group of Turkish women had been hired; I interviewed them one by one, to their great astonishment: I wanted to establish if on Wednesday, or Tuesday evening, they did something different from usual. Did they wash? Or *not* wash? Did they use some particular cosmetic? Did they go dancing and sweat more than usual? I didn’t dare ask if on Tuesday evening they made love: anyway, neither directly nor through the interpreter did I learn anything.

“You will understand that in the meantime the affair was becoming known in the whole factory, and people were looking at me oddly, partly, too, because I was the only Italian department head, and I could easily imagine the comments they must have been making behind my back. The crucial clue came to me from one of the porters, who spoke a little Italian because he had fought in Italy; in fact, he had been imprisoned by partisans

in the neighborhood of Biella, and then exchanged with someone. He felt no rancor, he was talkative, and he rattled on about this and that without ever winding down: well, it was just this harmless chatter that functioned as Ariadne's thread. One day he told me that he was a fisherman, but that for almost a year, in the nearby stream, you couldn't catch a fish—ever since, five or six kilometers upstream, a tannery had been built. He said that on certain days the water turned brown. At the moment I didn't pay attention to his observations, but I thought about them again a few days later, when from the window of my room, in the factory guesthouse, I saw the truck that brought the overalls from the laundry returning. I investigated: the tannery had started operating ten months earlier, and the laundry washed the overalls in water from the river where the fisherman could no longer fish, but they filtered it and passed it through an ion-exchange purifier. They washed the overalls during the day, dried them at night in a dryer, and delivered them the next morning, before the starting whistle.

"I went to the tannery: I wanted to know when, where, on what schedule, on what days they emptied the vats. They sent me away rudely, but I returned two days later with the doctor from the Health Department; well, the biggest of the tanning vats they emptied every week, the night between Monday and Tuesday! They didn't want to tell me what it contained, but you know perfectly well, organic tanning agents are polyphenols, there is no ion-exchange resin that can contain them, and what a polyphenol can do to silver bromide even you who are not in the business can imagine. I got a sample of the tanning bath, went to the experimental laboratory, and tried to atomize a 1:10,000 solution in the darkroom where a sample of radiographic paper was exposed. The effect could be seen a few days later: the paper's sensitivity had disappeared, literally. The head of the laboratory couldn't believe his eyes: he told me he had never seen an inhibitor so potent. We tried with increasingly diluted solutions, the way homeopaths do: with solutions of about one part per million, bean-shaped spots were obtained, which appeared only after two months. The bean effect, the *Bohneffekt*, had been reproduced exactly. In the end, it was clear that a few thousand molecules of polyphenol, absorbed by the fibers of the overalls during washing, and carried in flight from the overall to the paper by a tiny, invisible hair, were enough to cause a spot."

The other diners were chatting noisily around us about children, holidays, and salaries; we ended by retreating to the bar, where we gradually became sentimental and promised each other to renew a friendship that in fact had never existed. We would stay in touch, and would collect for each other stories like this, in which obtuse matter displays a cunning inclined to the bad, to obstruction, as if it were rebelling against the order dear to man: like the reckless outcasts in a novel who, thirsting more for the ruin of others than for their own triumph, arrive from the ends of the earth to cut short the adventure of the good heroes.

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13. In The Betrothed, Alessandro Manzoni recounts how the plague was introduced into Milan by the lansquenets coming from Germany and Switzerland; the first such mercenaries who died were deliberately ignored by the authorities.

Vanadium

A paint is by definition an unstable substance: in fact, at a certain point in its career, it has to turn from a liquid to a solid. This has to happen at the right moment and in the right place. The opposite case can be unpleasant or dramatic: it can happen that a paint solidifies (we say, brutally, “separates”) during its sojourn in the warehouse, and then the product is thrown away; or that the base resin solidifies during synthesis, which, in a reactor of ten or twenty tons, can tend toward the tragic; or, instead, that the paint doesn’t harden at all, even after its application, and then it becomes a laughingstock, because a paint that doesn’t “dry” is like a gun that doesn’t shoot or a bull that doesn’t inseminate.

In many cases, the oxygen in the air has a role in the process of hardening. Among the various tasks, vital or destructive, that oxygen can accomplish, what interests us paint makers most is its capacity to react with certain small molecules, such as those in some oils, and to create bridges between them, transforming them into a compact and therefore solid network: that, for example, is how linseed oil “dries” in the air.

We had imported a batch of resin for paints, in fact one of those resins that solidify at ordinary temperatures by simple exposure to the atmosphere, and we were worried. Tested by itself, the resin dried normally, but after it was ground with a certain (irreplaceable) type of lampblack, the capacity to dry diminished until it vanished; we had already set aside several tons of black enamel that, in spite of all the corrections attempted, remained sticky indefinitely after it was applied, like a lugubrious flypaper.

In cases like these, before formulating accusations you have to proceed cautiously. The supplier was W., a large and respectable German

manufacturer, one of the limbs left when, after the war, the Allies dismembered the omnipotent I.G. Farben: people like this, before admitting their guilt, throw on the scale pan all the weight of their prestige and their full delaying capacity. But there was no way to avoid the controversy: the other batches of resin behaved well with that same batch of lampblack, the resin was of a special type, which only W. produced, and we were bound by a contract, and absolutely had to continue to supply that black enamel, without missing deadlines.

I wrote a polite letter of complaint, setting forth the main points of the issue, and a few days later a response arrived: it was long and pedantic, suggested obvious stratagems that we had already adopted without result, and contained a superfluous and deliberately obscure explication of the mechanism of the oxidation of resin; it ignored our urgency, and on the essential point said only that the obligatory tests were under way. There remained nothing to do but order another batch immediately, urging W. to test with particular care the behavior of the resin with that type of lampblack.

Along with the confirmation of the last order came a second letter, almost as long as the first, and signed by the same Doktor L. Müller. It was a little more relevant than the first, recognizing (with much circumspection and many reservations) the justness of our grievance, and containing a suggestion less obvious than the preceding ones: "*ganz unerwarteterweise*," that is, in a completely unexpected way, the gnomes of their laboratory had found that the disputed batch was cured by the addition of 0.1 percent of vanadium naphthenate—an additive that, until that moment, had never been heard of in the world of paints. The unknown Dr. Müller invited us to verify the assertion immediately; if the effect was confirmed, this observation would enable both sides to avoid the irritations and uncertainties of an international controversy and reexportation.

Müller. There was a Müller in a preceding incarnation of mine, but Müller is a very common name in Germany, like Molinari in Italy, of which it is the exact equivalent. Why continue to think about it? And yet, rereading the two letters with their extremely ponderous sentences, stuffed with technical terms, I couldn't silence a doubt, of the sort which can't be set aside, which squirm inside you like worms. But really, there must be two hundred thousand Müllers in Germany, forget it and think about the paint that has to be fixed.

. . . and then, suddenly, there returned to my eye a peculiarity of the last letter that had escaped me: it wasn't a typing mistake; it had been repeated twice. He had written *naptenat*, not *naphthenat*, as he should have. Well, of the encounters I had in that now remote world I preserve pathologically precise memories; and that other Müller, in an unforgotten laboratory permeated by cold, hope, and fear, said *beta-Naptylamin*, rather than *beta-Naphthylamin*.

The Russians were at the gates, and two or three times a day the Allied planes arrived to batter the factory of Buna: no window was unbroken, and there was a shortage of water, steam, and electricity; but the order was to start producing Buna rubber, and the Germans do not question orders.

I was in a laboratory with two other specialist prisoners, like the educated slaves whom the rich Romans imported from Greece. Work was as impossible as it was useless: our time was almost entirely spent taking apart the equipment at every air-raid alarm and putting it back together at the all-clear. But orders are not questioned, and every so often some inspector advanced upon us through the ruins and the snow to make sure that the work of the laboratory was proceeding according to instructions. Sometimes it was a stone-faced SS officer, at other times an old soldier from the Territorial units, as frightened as a mouse, at still other times a civilian. The civilian who appeared most often was called Doktor Müller.

He must have been fairly important, because everyone greeted him first. He was a tall, corpulent man, around forty, with an aspect rather coarse than refined; with me he had spoken only three times, and all three with a timidity rare in that place, as if he were ashamed of something. The first time, only about matters of work (about the amount of the *naptilamina*, in fact); the second time he had asked me why my beard was so long, and I had answered that none of us had a razor, indeed not even a handkerchief, and that our beard was shaved officially every Monday; the third time he had given me a clear, typewritten note that authorized me to be shaved on Thursdays as well, and to get from the *Effektenmagazin* a pair of leather shoes, and he had asked, addressing me formally, "Why do you look so troubled?" I, who at that time thought in German, had concluded to myself, *Der Mann hat keine Ahnung*, the man has no idea.

Duty first. I hastened to inquire among our usual suppliers for a sample of vanadium naphthenate, and realized that it wouldn't be easy: the product wasn't manufactured regularly, it was prepared in small quantities and only to order; I ordered it.

The return of that "pt" had thrown me into a violent agitation. To find myself settling accounts, man to man, with one of the "others" had been my most vivid and permanent desire of the post-Lager period. It had been appeased only in part by letters from my German readers: they didn't satisfy me, those honest and generic declarations of regret and solidarity on the part of people I had never seen, whose other side I didn't know, and who probably weren't implicated except sentimentally. The encounter I was waiting for, with such intensity that I dreamed it (in German) at night, was an encounter with someone from that place, someone who had disposed of us, who had not looked us in the eye, as if we didn't have eyes. Not out of revenge: I am no Count of Monte Cristo. Only to restore the balance, and to say "So?" If this Müller was my Müller, he wasn't the perfect antagonist, because in some way, maybe only for a moment, he had had pity, or even just a rudiment of professional solidarity. Maybe still less: maybe he had only resented the fact that that strange hybrid of colleague and instrument, who was also, after all, a chemist, frequented a laboratory without the *Anstand*, the decorum, that a laboratory requires; but the others around him had felt not even this. He wasn't the perfect antagonist: but, as we all know, perfection is one of those things which are recounted, not experienced.

I got in touch with the representative of W., with whom I was fairly friendly, and asked him to discreetly investigate Dr. Müller. How old was he? What did he look like? Where had he been during the war? The answer was not long in arriving: the age and aspect coincided, the man had worked first at Schkopau, to get training in the technology of rubber, then at the Buna works, in Auschwitz. I got his address, and sent him, from private citizen to private citizen, a copy of the German edition of *If This Is a Man*, along with a letter in which I asked if he was really the Müller of Auschwitz, and if he remembered "the three men of the laboratory"; well, if he would forgive the brutal intrusion, the return from the void, I was one of

the three, in addition to being the client concerned with the resin that wouldn't dry.

I prepared to wait for the response, while on the business side, like the oscillation of an enormous, very slow pendulum, the exchange of chemical-bureaucratic letters about the Italian vanadium, which did not work as well as the German, continued. Would you therefore send us, please, as a matter of urgency, the specifications of the product, and deliver to us by air 50 kg, whose cost you will deduct, etc. On the technological level the matter seemed well on its way, although the fate of the defective batch of resin wasn't clear: keep it, with a discount on the price, or reexport it at the expense of W., or resort to arbitration; meanwhile, in customary fashion, we threatened each other, in turn, to have recourse to legal means, *gerichtlich vorzugehen*.

I continued to wait for the "private" response, which was almost as irritating and nerve-racking as the business dispute. What did I know of my man? Nothing: in all probability he had obliterated everything, deliberately or not; my letter and my book were for him a rude and irksome intrusion, a clumsy invitation to stir up a sediment by now settled, an attack on the *Anstand*. He would never respond. Too bad: he was not a perfect German, but do perfect Germans exist? or perfect Jews? They are an abstraction: the passage from the general to the particular always has in store some stimulating surprises, when the partner without definition, larva-like, takes shape before you, little by little or in a single stroke, and becomes the *Mitmensch*, the fellow man, with all his thickness, tics, anomalies, and inconsistencies. Now almost two months had passed: the response would never arrive. A pity.

It arrived dated March 2, 1967, on fine paper with a letterhead in vaguely Gothic characters. It was an opening letter, brief and reserved. Yes, the Müller of Buna was indeed he. He had read my book, recognized with emotion persons and places; was happy to know that I had survived; asked for information about the other two "men in the laboratory," and so far there was nothing strange, since they had been named in the book. But he also asked about Goldbaum, whom I had not named. He added that he had reread, in the circumstances, his notes on that period: he would like to discuss them in a hoped-for personal meeting, "useful to me, to you, and necessary for the purposes of overcoming that terrible past" (*im Sinne der Bewältigung der so furchtbaren Vergangenheit*). He declared, finally, that

among all the prisoners he had met at Auschwitz, it was I who had made the strongest and most enduring impression on him. That might well be a blandishment: from the tone of the letter, and especially from that phrase on "overcoming," it seemed that the man expected something from me.

Now it was up to me to respond, and I felt embarrassed. There: the enterprise had succeeded, the adversary was hooked; he was before me, almost a fellow paint maker, he wrote, like me, on letterhead, and he even remembered Goldbaum. He was still quite shadowy, but it was clear that he wanted from me something like absolution, because he had a past to overcome and I did not: I wanted from him merely a discount on the bill for a defective resin. The situation was interesting but not typical: it coincided only in part with that of the criminal before the judge.

In the first place: in what language should I respond? Certainly not in German; I would make ridiculous mistakes, which my role did not permit. Better always to fight on the home field: I wrote in Italian. The two men of the laboratory had died, I didn't know where or how; so, too, Goldbaum, of cold and hunger, during the evacuation march. As for me, he knew the main things from the book, and from the business correspondence on vanadium.

I had many questions for him: too many, and too heavy for him and for me. Why Auschwitz? Why Pannwitz? Why children gassed? But I felt that it was not yet the moment to cross certain lines, and I asked only if he accepted the judgments, implicit and explicit, of my book. If he thought that I.G. Farben had employed slave labor of its own accord. If he knew at the time about the "facilities" of Auschwitz, which swallowed up ten thousand lives a day seven kilometers from the facilities for Buna rubber. Finally, since he referred to his "notes on that period," would he send me a copy?

Of the "hoped-for encounter" I did not speak, because I was afraid of it. Pointless to look for euphemisms, to speak of shame, disgust, reluctance. Fear was the word: as I did not feel myself a Monte Cristo, so I did not feel myself a Horatius-Curiatius; I didn't feel capable of representing the dead of Auschwitz, and neither did it seem reasonable to see in Müller the representative of the executioners. I know myself: I do not possess polemical quickness, the adversary distracts me, interests me more as a man than as an adversary, I listen to him and risk believing him; contempt and the proper judgment come to me later, on the stairs, when they are no longer any use. It suited me to continue by letter.

On the business side Müller wrote that the fifty kilos had been sent, and that W. had confidence in a friendly settlement, etc. Almost simultaneously the letter I had been expecting arrived at home: but it was not what I had been expecting. It wasn't a model letter, a paradigm. At this point, if my story were invented, I would have been able to introduce only two types of letter: one humble, warm, Christian, from a redeemed German; one vile, arrogant, icy, from a stubborn Nazi. Now, this story is not invented, and reality is always more complex than invention: rougher, less combed, less rounded. Rarely does it lie on a flat surface.

The letter was eight pages long and contained a photograph that startled me. The face was *that* face: aged, and yet ennobled by a clever photographer, I felt it high above me uttering those words of casual and momentary compassion: "Why do you look so troubled?"

It was obviously the work of an inexpert writer: rhetorical, half sincere, full of digressions and excessive praise, moving, pedantic, and clumsy: it challenged any summary, global judgment.

He attributed the facts of Auschwitz to Man, without differentiating; he deplored them, and found consolation in the thought of other men cited in my book, Alberto, Lorenzo, "against whom the weapons of darkness were blunted": the phrase was mine, but repeated by him it sounded to me hypocritical and false. He told his story: "initially drawn in by the general enthusiasm for Hitler's regime," he had joined a nationalist student association, which shortly afterward had been incorporated officially into the SA;[14] he had obtained a discharge, and commented that "even this was therefore possible." In the war, he had been mobilized in the anti-air corps, and only then, confronting the ruins of the cities, had he felt "shame and contempt" for the war. In May of '44 he had been able (like me!) to assert his qualifications as a chemist, and had been assigned to the I.G. Farben Schkopau factory, of which the factory at Auschwitz was an enlarged copy. At Schkopau he had trained a group of Ukrainian girls in the laboratory work; in fact I had met them at Auschwitz, and had been unable to make sense of their peculiar familiarity with Dr. Müller. He had been transferred to Auschwitz, with the girls, only in November 1944: the name Auschwitz, at that time, had no meaning, not for him or for his acquaintances; yet, upon his arrival, he had had a brief meeting with the technical director (presumably the engineer Faust), who had warned him that "the Jews in

Buna were to be assigned only to the most menial jobs, and compassion was not tolerated."

He had been placed directly under Doktor Pannwitz, the one who had subjected me to a curious "state examination" to determine my professional capacities: Müller seemed to have a very low opinion of his superior, and told me that he had died in 1946 of a brain tumor. He, Müller, was in charge of the organization of the laboratory at Buna: he declared that he had known nothing of that exam, and that it was he who had chosen us three specialists, and me in particular; according to this information, improbable but not impossible, I should therefore have been indebted to him for my survival. With me, he declared, he had had relations almost of friendship between equals; he had talked to me about scientific problems, and had meditated, in this situation, on what "precious human values were destroyed by other men out of pure brutality." Not only did I not remember any conversations of the sort (and my memory of that period, as I've said, is very good) but merely to imagine them, against that background of ruin, mutual distrust, and mortal exhaustion, was completely outside reality, and explicable only by a very ingenuous posthumous wishful thinking; perhaps it was a situation that he recounted to many, and didn't realize that the only person in the world who could not believe it was me. Maybe, in good faith, he had constructed for himself a comfortable past. He didn't remember the two details of the beard and the shoes, but he remembered others, equivalent and, in my opinion, plausible. He had known about my scarlet fever, and had been worried about my survival, especially when he learned that the prisoners were evacuated on foot. On January 26, 1945, he had been assigned by the SS to the Volkssturm, the ragtag army of men unfit for military service, old people, and children that was supposed to resist the Soviet advance: the technical director mentioned above had, happily, saved him, authorizing him to escape behind the lines.

To my question about I.G. Farben he responded emphatically that yes, he had hired prisoners, but only to protect them: indeed, he formulated the (crazy!) opinion that the entire Buna-Monowitz factory, eight square kilometers of cyclopean plants, had been constructed with the intention of "protecting the Jews and helping them to survive," and that the order not to have compassion for them was *eine Tarnung*, a mask. *Nihil de principe*, no accusation against I.G. Farben: my man was still dependent on W., which was its offspring, and you don't spit on the plate you eat from. During his

brief stay at Auschwitz, he “had never learned of any unit that seemed designed for the killing of the Jews.” Paradoxical, offensive, but not to be ruled out: at that time, among the silent German majority, it was a common technique to try to know as little as possible, and therefore not to ask questions. He, too, evidently, had not asked anyone for explanations, not even himself, although the flames of the crematorium, on clear days, were visible from the Buna factory.

Shortly before the final collapse, he had been captured by the Americans and held for several days in a camp for prisoners of war that, with involuntary sarcasm, he described as having “primitive facilities”: just as at the time of our encounter in the laboratory, Müller, even now as he was writing, continued to have *keine Ahnung*, no idea. He had returned to his family at the end of June 1945. The contents of his notes, which I had asked to know, were substantially this.

He perceived in my book an overcoming of Judaism, a fulfillment of the Christian precept to love one’s enemies, and a testimony to faith in Man, and he concluded by insisting on the necessity of our meeting, in Germany or Italy, where he was ready to come when and where I pleased: preferably the Riviera. Two days later, through business channels, a letter arrived from W. that, certainly not coincidentally, bore the same date of the long private letter, in addition to the same signature; it was a conciliatory letter, recognizing the company’s fault and declaring it agreeable to any offer. We were given to understand that every cloud has a silver lining: the incident had brought to light the virtue of vanadium naphthenate, which from now on would be incorporated directly into the resin, for whatever client it was intended.

What to do? The character Müller had *entpuppt*, had come out of the chrysalis, was sharp, in focus. Neither wicked nor heroic: with the rhetoric and the lies, in good or bad faith, filtered out, he remained a typically gray human specimen, one of the not few one-eyed men in the kingdom of the blind. He gave me undeserved credit by attributing to me the virtue of loving my enemies: no, notwithstanding the long-ago privileges he had secured for me, and although he wasn’t an enemy in the strict sense of the term, I did not feel that I loved him. I didn’t love him, and didn’t wish to see him, and yet I felt a certain measure of respect for him: it’s not easy to be one-eyed. He wasn’t a coward or deaf or a cynic, he hadn’t adapted, he drew up his accounts with the past and the accounts didn’t balance: he tried

to balance them, and maybe he cheated a little. Could one ask much more of a former SA? The comparison, which I had had many occasions to make, with other honest Germans met on the beach or in the factory, was completely in his favor: his condemnation of Nazism was timid and periphrastic, but he had not looked for excuses. He was looking for a conversation: he had a conscience, and he did his best to keep it quiet. In his first letter he had spoken of "overcoming the past," *Bewältigung der Vergangenheit*: I learned later that this is a stereotype, a euphemism of the Germany of today, where it is universally understood as "redemption from Nazism"; but the root *walt*, which is contained in it, appears also in words that mean "domination," "violence," and "rape," and I think that translating the expression as "distortion of the past," or "violence done to the past," would not be so far from its deepest sense. And yet this escape into clichés was better than the florid obtuseness of other Germans: his efforts at overcoming were clumsy, slightly ridiculous, irritating, and sad, yet decent. And hadn't he procured for me a pair of shoes?

On the first free Sunday, full of misgivings, I prepared to write a response as sincere, balanced, and dignified as possible. I wrote a draft: I thanked him for having brought me into the laboratory; I declared myself ready to forgive my enemies and maybe even to love them, but only when they showed sure signs of repentance—that is, when they ceased to be enemies. In the opposite case, of the enemy who remains such, who persists in his desire to create suffering, certainly he should not be forgiven: one can try to redeem him, one can (one must!) discuss with him, but it is our duty to judge him, not forgive him. As for a specific judgment of his behavior, which Müller implicitly asked for, I discreetly cited two cases known to me of his German colleagues who had done something much more courageous on our behalf than what he claimed. I admitted that not everyone is born a hero, and that a world in which *all* were like him, that is, honest and defenseless, would be tolerable, but that is an unreal world. In the real world armies exist, they build Auschwitz, and the honest and defenseless smooth the way for them. Therefore every German must answer for Auschwitz, indeed, every man; and after Auschwitz we are not permitted to be helpless. Of the meeting on the Riviera I did not say a word.

That very night Müller called me on the telephone from Germany. There was some disturbance on the line, and, besides, it's no longer easy for me to understand German on the telephone: his voice was labored and as if

broken, the tone excited. He announced that in six weeks, at Pentecost, he was coming to Finale Ligure: could we meet? Caught unprepared, I said yes; I asked him to let me know at the proper time the details of his arrival, and set aside the now superfluous draft.

Eight days later I received from Frau Müller the announcement of the unexpected death of Dr. Lothar Müller, in his sixtieth year of life.

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14. Sturmabteilung, or storm troopers: the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party.

Carbon

The reader will have been aware for some time now that this is not a chemistry treatise: my presumption does not reach so far, "*ma voix est foible, et même un peu profane*." Nor is it an autobiography, except in the partial and symbolic limits within which every piece of writing—in fact every human work—is an autobiography: but history it surely is in some way. It is, or would have liked to be, a micro-history, the history of an occupation and its defeats, victories, and sufferings, such as everyone wishes to recount when he feels close to the end of the arc of his career, and art ceases to be long. If, as a chemist, having reached this point in life, you have before you the chart of the Periodic Table, or the monumental indexes of Beilstein or Landolt, do you not see scattered there the sad shreds or the trophies of your own professional past? You have only to leaf through any treatise, and the memories rise in clusters; among us are those whose destiny has been bound, indelibly, to bromide or propylene or the -NCO group or glutamic acid. Every student of chemistry, confronting any treatise, should be aware that on one of those pages, perhaps in a single line or formula or word, is written his future, in characters that are indecipherable but will become clear "later"—after success or error or failure, victory or defeat. Every chemist who is no longer young, reopening that same treatise to the *verhängnisvoll* page, is stricken by love or revulsion, rejoices or despairs.

So it happens, then, that every element says something to someone (something different to each), like the valleys or beaches visited in youth. We must perhaps make an exception for carbon, because it says everything to everyone; that is, it's not specific, just as Adam is not specific as an

ancestor, unless you can find today (why not?) the chemist-stylite who has devoted his life to graphite or diamonds. And yet it is precisely with carbon that I have an old debt, contracted in days that were momentous for me. My first literary dream was addressed to carbon, the element of life, and was persistently dreamed in a time and place where my life was not worth much: I wanted to tell the story of a carbon atom.

Can we speak of “a particular” carbon atom? For the chemist, there exists some doubt, because as of now (1970) techniques are not known that would allow us to see, or anyway isolate, a single atom; no doubt exists for the narrator, who therefore gets ready to narrate.

For hundreds of millions of years, then, our character, bound to three atoms of oxygen and one of calcium, has been lying in the form of calcareous rock; he already has a long cosmic history behind him, but we’ll ignore that. For him time does not exist, or exists only in the form of lazy variations in temperature, daily and seasonal, since, for the success of this story, his position is not too far from the ground’s surface. His existence, whose monotony one cannot think of without horror, is a remorseless alternation of heat and cold, that is, of oscillations (always at the same frequency) that are a little closer together or a little farther apart: for him, who is potentially alive, a prison worthy of the Catholic inferno. Up to here, therefore, the tense that suits him is the present, which is the tense of description, rather than one of the past tenses, which belong to the storyteller: he is frozen in an eternal present, scarcely touched by the modest tremors of thermal agitation.

But, precisely for the success of the storyteller, who in a different situation would have ended the story, the calcareous bed that the atom is part of lies on the surface. It lies within reach of man and his pick (praise to the pick and its more modern equivalents: they are still the most important intermediaries in the millennial dialogue between man and the elements): at an ordinary moment, which I the narrator decide, purely arbitrarily, is in the year 1840, a strike of the pick detached him and started him off toward the lime kiln, hurling him into the world of things that change. He was baked, so that he separated from the calcium, which remained so to speak with its feet on the ground and met a less brilliant destiny that we will not recount; he, still firmly rooted in two of the three previous companion oxygens, came out through the chimney and took the path of air. His story, which had been motionless, became turbulent.

He was picked up by the wind, flattened against the soil, lifted up to ten kilometers. He was inhaled by a falcon, and descended into its hardworking lungs but did not penetrate its rich blood, and was expelled. He was dissolved three times in seawater, once in the water of a tumbling stream, and again was expelled. He traveled with the wind for eight years, now high, now low, over the sea and in the clouds, above forests, deserts, and boundless expanses of ice; then he fell into captivity and his organic adventure.

Carbon is, in fact, a singular element: it's the only one that can bind with itself in long stable chains without great expense of energy, and for life on earth (the only one we know so far) long chains are precisely what is necessary. Therefore carbon is the key element of a living substance: but its progress, its entrance into the living world, is not easy, and must follow a fixed and intricate path, which has been elucidated (and still not definitively) only in recent years. If the transformation of carbon into organic compounds didn't take place around us daily, on the scale of billions of tons a week, wherever the green of a leaf appears, it would fully deserve to be called a miracle.

Then, in the year 1848, the atom we're talking about, accompanied by his two satellites, which kept him in a gaseous state, was carried by the wind along a row of vines. He had the good fortune to graze a leaf, penetrate it, and be bound to it by a ray of sun. If my language here becomes imprecise and allusive, it's not only because of my ignorance: this decisive event, this instantaneous three-way accomplishment, of carbon dioxide, light, and vegetable green, has not up to now been described in conclusive terms, and perhaps will not be for a long time still, it is so different from that other "organic" chemistry which is the cumbersome, slow, and ponderous work of man; and yet this refined, rapid chemistry was "invented" two or three billion years ago by our silent sisters the plants, which do not experiment and do not discuss, and whose temperature is identical to that of the environment they live in. Making an image may be useful to understanding, but we'll never make an image of a happening whose scale is a millionth of a millimeter, whose timing is a millionth of a second, and whose actors are in their essence invisible. Every verbal description will be deficient, and one as good as another: so let the following serve.

He enters the leaf, colliding with innumerable other (but here useless) molecules of nitrogen and oxygen. He adheres to a large and complicated molecule that activates him, and simultaneously receives the crucial message from the sky, in the dazzling form of a package of solar light: in an instant, like an insect that is a spider's prey, he is separated from his oxygen, combined with hydrogen and (it is believed) phosphorus, and finally inserted into a chain, whether long or short doesn't matter, but it's the chain of life. All this happens rapidly, in silence, at the temperature and pressure of the atmosphere, and it's free: dear colleagues, when we learn to do likewise we will be *sicut Deus*, and will have solved the problem of hunger in the world.

But there is more, and worse, to our shame and that of our art. Carbon dioxide, that is, the aerial form of carbon that we have up to now been talking about: this gas, which constitutes the primary material of life, the permanent store that every growing thing draws on, and the ultimate destiny of all flesh, is not one of the principal components of air but, rather, a ridiculous scrap, an "impurity," thirty times less abundant than argon, which no one notices. The air contains 0.03 percent: if Italy were the air, the only Italians qualified to build life would be, for example, the fifteen thousand inhabitants of Milazzo, in the province of Messina. This, on the human scale, is an ironic feat of acrobatics, a juggler's trick, an incomprehensible display of omnipotence and arrogance, since it is from this constantly renewed impurity in the air that we come: we animals and plants, and we human species, with our four billion discordant opinions, our millennia of history, our wars and shames and nobility and pride. Besides, our very presence on the planet becomes laughable in geometric terms: if all of humanity, around 250 million tons, were distributed like a covering of a homogeneous thickness over all the lands above sea level, the "stature of man" would not be visible to the naked eye—the thickness obtained would be around sixteen-thousandths of a millimeter.

Now our atom is inserted: he forms part of a structure, in the architectural sense; he becomes related and bound to five companions, so identical to him that only the fiction of the story allows me to distinguish them. It's a beautiful ring-shaped structure, which, however, is subject to complicated exchanges and balances with the water it's dissolved in: because by now it is dissolved in water, rather, in the sap of the vine, and this—to be dissolved—is the obligation and privilege of all substances that

are destined (I was about to say “desire”) to be transformed. If someone wanted to know why a ring, and why hexagonal, and why soluble in water, well, he had better resign himself: these are among the few questions that our knowledge can respond to with a discourse that is persuasive and accessible to all but out of place here.

He has joined a molecule of glucose, just to clarify: a destiny in the middle, neither fish nor fowl, which prepares him for his first contact with the animal world but does not authorize him for higher responsibility, which is to join a protein structure. He traveled, therefore, at the slow pace of vegetable juices, from the leaf through the leaf stalk and the stem to the trunk, and from there descended to an almost ripe cluster of fruit. What followed is relevant to winemakers; to us it’s of interest only to explain that he escaped (to our benefit, because we wouldn’t know how to put it in words) alcoholic fermentation, and reached the wine without changing his nature.

It’s the fate of wine to be drunk, and the fate of glucose to be oxidized. But it wasn’t oxidized right away: its drinker kept it in his liver for more than a week, peacefully curled up in a ball, as reserve nourishment for an unexpected effort: an effort that he was compelled to make the following Sunday, chasing a horse that had turned skittish. Farewell to the hexagonal structure; in the space of a few instants the ball was unwound and became glucose again, which was carried by the flow of blood to a muscle fiber in the thigh and there brutally broken into two molecules of lactic acid, the sad herald of fatigue. Only later, a few minutes afterward, could the panting of the lungs obtain the oxygen necessary to patiently oxidize the lactic acid. Thus a new molecule of carbon dioxide returned to the atmosphere, and a parcel of the energy that the sun granted to the leaf stem passed from the state of chemical energy to that of mechanical energy and then settled into the slothful condition of heat, imperceptibly warming the air shifted by the run and the blood of the runner. “That’s life,” although it’s rarely described that way: an insertion, a descent to its own advantage, a parasite on the downward path of energy, from its noble solar form to the degraded state of low-temperature heat. On this downward path, which leads to equilibrium, that is, to death, life draws a curve and nests in it.

We are again carbon dioxide, for which we apologize; this, too, is an obligatory passage; others can be imagined or invented, but on Earth that’s how it is. Again the wind, which this time carries him far away, crossing the

Apennines and the Adriatic, Greece, the Aegean, and Cyprus; we are in Lebanon and the dance repeats. The atom we are concerned with is now trapped in a structure that promises to last a long time: the venerable trunk of a cedar, one of the last. The atom has passed again through the stages that we have already described, and the glucose it's part of belongs, like the bead of a rosary, to a long chain of cellulose. It's not the astounding geologic fixedness of rock, not millions of years, but we can speak of centuries, because the cedar is a long-lived tree. We are at liberty to abandon it there for one year or five hundred: let's say that after twenty years (we are in 1868) a woodworm gets busy. He has dug his tunnel between the trunk and the bark, with the blind and obstinate voracity of his kind; drilling, he has grown, as his tunnel expanded. There he swallowed the subject of this story and embedded it in himself; then he pupated, and emerged in the spring in the form of an ugly gray butterfly that is now drying in the sun, bewildered and dazzled by the splendor of the day: he is there, in one of the insect's thousand eyes, contributing to the cursory, crude vision with which it orients itself in space. The insect is fertilized, lays eggs, and dies: the little corpse lies in the underbrush, and its fluids drain away, but the shell of chitin lasts a long time, almost indestructible. Snow and sun return to it without making a dent: it is buried by dead leaves and soil, has become a corpse, a "thing," but the death of atoms, unlike ours, is never irrevocable. You see at work the omnipresent, tireless, and invisible gravediggers of the underbrush, the microorganisms of the humus. The shell, its eyes now blind, slowly disintegrates, and the former drinker, former cedar, former woodworm has again taken flight.

We'll let him fly around the world three times, until 1960, and, to justify this interval, which is so long with respect to human measure, we'll point out that, on the other hand, it's much shorter than the average: which, we are assured, is two hundred years. Every two hundred years, every carbon atom that is not frozen in a now stable material (like limestone, or a carbon fossil, or a diamond, or certain plastic materials) enters and reenters the life cycle, through the narrow door of photosynthesis. Do other doors exist? Yes, some syntheses created by man; they give man the maker a reason to feel proud, but so far their quantitative importance has been negligible. These doors are even narrower than that of vegetable green: consciously or not, man has not yet sought to compete with nature on this terrain, that is, he has not endeavored to obtain from the carbon dioxide of the air the

carbon necessary to nourish himself, clothe himself, warm himself, and the hundred other more sophisticated needs of modern life. He has not done it because he has not needed to: he has found, and is still finding (but for how many more decades?), gigantic reserves of carbon already in the form of organic compounds or at least reduced. Beyond the vegetable and animal world, these reserves consist of beds of fossil carbon and oil, but these, too, are an inheritance of photosynthetic activity carried out in distant epochs, and so it can be firmly stated that photosynthesis is not only the unique means by which carbon becomes living but also the only means by which the sun's energy can be chemically utilized.

One can demonstrate that this story, while completely arbitrary, is nevertheless true. I could recount innumerable different stories, and they would all be true: all literally true, in the nature of the transitions, in their order, and in their date. The number of atoms is so large that one would always find one whose story coincides with any story invented at random. I could tell stories without end, of carbon atoms that become color or scent in flowers; of others that, from minute algae to small crustaceans to increasingly larger fish, return carbon dioxide to the waters of the sea, in a perpetual frightening round of life and death, where every devourer is immediately devoured; of others that, instead, reach a decorous semi-eternity in the yellowed pages of some document in an archive, or in the canvas of a famous painter; of those which had the privilege of being part of a grain of pollen, and left their fossil imprint in the rocks for us to wonder at; of still others that descended to join the mysterious messengers of form in human seed, and took part in the subtle process of division, duplication, and fusion from which each of us is born. Instead I'll tell only one more, the most personal, and tell it with the humility and modesty of someone who knows from the start that his theme is desperate, his means weak, and the occupation of clothing facts in words failure in its deepest essence.

Again he is among us, in a glass of milk. He's inserted in a long, very complex chain, yet such that almost all its rings are accepted by the human body. He is swallowed; and since every living structure harbors a wild distrust toward every injection of other material of living origin, the chain is

meticulously fragmented, and the fragments, one by one, accepted or rejected. One, the one important to us, crosses the intestinal threshold and enters the bloodstream: he migrates, knocks at the door of a nerve cell, enters and supplants another carbon that was part of it. This cell belongs to a brain, and this is my brain, of me who writes, and the cell in question, and in it the atom in question, is assigned to my writing, in a gigantic tiny game that no one has yet described. It is this cell which at this instant, out of a labyrinthine tangle of yeses and nos, causes my hand to run along a certain path on the paper, to mark it with these swirls that are signs; a double snap, up and down, between two levels of energy guides this hand of mine to impress upon the paper this point: this.

The Wrench

Translated by Nathaniel Rich

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TRANSLATOR’S AFTERWORD

Though this knave came something saucily into the world . . .
there was good sport at his making.

KING LEAR, ACT 1, SCENE 1

“With Malice Aforethought”

“No way—I’m not going to tell you everything. Either I tell you about the country or I give you the facts: if I were you, I’d take the facts, because they’re pretty good. Then, if you want to pass the story on to someone else, you can work it over, straighten it out, hone it, file off the burrs, flatten it with a hammer—and that way you’ll make it your own. You know, I might be younger than you, but I’ve got lots of stories. Okay: maybe you’ll figure out what country I’m talking about, that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. But if I tell you its name—the country, that is—I’ll get in trouble, ’cause the people there are nice, but a bit sensitive.”

I had known Faussone for only two or three nights. We’d met by chance in the cafeteria—the cafeteria for foreign staff in a factory very far away, where I had been brought by my job as a paint chemist. The two of us were the only Italians at the factory; he had already been there for three months, but he’d been to the region several times before, and he could get by all right with the language, which—like the four or five others he knew—he spoke imperfectly but fluently. He’s about thirty-five years old, tall, slender, nearly bald, tanned, always clean-shaven. He has a serious face, fairly rigid and not particularly expressive. He’s not a great storyteller: he’s rather monotonous, and relies too much on understatement and elliptical speech, as if he’s worried that he might be perceived as exaggerating, but he usually just drones on, and ends up exaggerating without even realizing it. He has a limited vocabulary and often expresses himself in platitudes that to him seem penetrating and original; if his interlocutor doesn’t smile, he repeats himself, as if he were talking to a moron.

“. . . because, you know, I didn’t end up in this profession—going to construction sites, factories, and ports all over the world—by chance. It’s what I wanted to do. Every child dreams of going to the jungle or to the desert or to Malaysia, and I did, too, but I like to have my dreams come true, otherwise they’re like a disease you carry around your whole life, or a surgical scar that aches whenever the air gets damp. So I had two options: wait to get rich, and become a tourist; or go into construction. I chose construction. Of course there were other options, like smuggling, stuff like that, but that’s not for me—though I like to travel the world, I’m really just a regular guy. I’ve made such a habit of it now that if I ever slowed down I’d get sick; the way I see it, the world is beautiful because it’s diverse.”

He watched me closely for a minute, with peculiarly inexpressive eyes, and then patiently repeated himself.

“If you stay at home, maybe you’ll be relaxed, but it’s like sucking on a nail. The world is beautiful because it’s diverse. What I’m trying to say is that I’ve seen all kinds of different things, but the single strangest thing that ever happened to me happened this past year, in that country I can’t name—though I can tell you it’s very far from here and far from our homeland, too, and when we’re freezing cold, down there it’s murderously hot, at least nine months out of twelve; the other three months it’s windy. I was there to work at the port, but down there it’s not like it is back home: the port doesn’t belong to the state, but to a family, and that family is run by the head of the family. Before I could start my job I had to go before him dressed up in a jacket and tie, have dinner with him, make conversation, and smoke, all leisurely; imagine that—no easy feat for someone who always has an eye on the clock. Our work doesn’t come cheap for a reason—and we’re proud of that. This head of the family was a half-and-half kind of guy: half modern and half old-fashioned. He had a beautiful white shirt, the kind you don’t need to iron, and when he entered his house he took off his shoes, and made me take mine off as well. He spoke English better than the English (which isn’t saying much), but he didn’t introduce me to the women of the house. Even as a boss he had to be half and half, kind of like a progressive slavemaster: if you can believe it, he had his framed photograph hung in every office in the land, and even in every warehouse, as if he were Jesus Christ! But the whole country is like that. There are donkeys and teletype machines; there are airports that make Caselle look like a joke, but often the

quickest way to get somewhere is by horse. There are more nightclubs than bakeries, but you see people on the street with trachoma.

"You probably know that rigging a crane is a tough job, and a bridge crane even more so, but the job can't be done solo: you need one person who knows all the tricks and can direct the operation, someone like me, and then you find local workers to help out. This is where it starts to get interesting. In that port I was telling you about, the union situation is a total mess. You see, it's the kind of country where a thief gets his hand cut off in the public square: the right or the left, depending on how much he stole, or perhaps even an ear, but with anesthesia, and with surgeons on hand to stanch the bleeding right away. This is true, I'm not making it up; and if someone spreads nasty rumors about an important family, they cut off his tongue, no questions asked.

"Well, in spite of all this they have some pretty serious workers' organizations, and you have to worry about them, too: the workers carry a transistor radio at all times, as if it were a good-luck charm, and if the radio tells them that there's a strike they drop everything. Not a single one of them would dare to raise a finger: if anyone so much as tried, he'd probably get stabbed, maybe not immediately but within two or three days; or a girder would fall on his head, or he'd drink his morning coffee and keel over. I'd never want to live there, but I'm glad I went, because there are certain things you simply have to see to believe.

"Anyway, like I was saying, I was down there to mount a crane on a jetty, one of those huge bastards with a retractable arm, and a fantastic bridge crane, with a forty-meter-wide span and a hundred-and-forty-horsepower lifting motor—Christ, what a machine, tomorrow night you have to remind me to show you the photos. When I finished putting it up, and we'd done the tests, and it looked like it was walking in the air, as smooth as silk, I felt like they'd anointed me their leader, and I bought drinks for everybody. No, not wine—it was that nasty stuff they call *cumfàn*—it tastes like mold, but it's refreshing and good for you. But let me tell this in the right order. Erecting the crane wasn't easy. Not because of any technical problems—that was straightforward from the first bolt—no, you could sense something in the atmosphere, like heavy air right before a storm. People were muttering on the street corners, making signs and faces at one another that I didn't understand; every so often a newspaper bulletin was posted on a wall and everybody would crowd around to read it or listen

to it being read aloud, and I'd be left standing alone on top of the scaffolding, like an idiot.

"Then the storm hit. I noticed that the people were calling out to one another, with gestures and whistles; they all ran off and finally, since I couldn't get anything done by myself, I climbed down off the scaffolding and went to see where they'd gone. I found them in a warehouse that was under construction. In the back they had built a kind of stage, with beams and boards, and, one by one, people were going onstage to speak. I barely understood their language, but it was clear that they were angry, that they felt they'd been wronged. At a certain point an older man, apparently a local leader, stood up; this guy seemed confident about what he was saying, he spoke evenly and with authority, without raising his voice like the others; he had no need to anyway, since as soon as he took the stage they all got silent. After his speech, they seemed persuaded. At the end he asked a question, and they all raised their hands, shouting who knows what; when he asked whether anybody was opposed, not a single hand went up. Then the old guy called on a boy standing in the front row, and gave him an order. The boy hurried off to a toolshop and returned a minute later, holding in his hand one of the photographs of the boss and a book.

"Near me stood an inspector; he was a native, but he could speak English. We were sort of friendly with each other because it's always wise to be on good terms with inspectors: every saint demands his candle."

Faussone had just finished a huge portion of roast beef, but he had called the waitress over and was getting a second helping. His story interested me more than his proverbs, but he repeated, with determination:

"In every country in the world, there's no two ways about it, saints demand their candles: I had given this inspector a fishing rod, because it's always wise to be on good terms with inspectors. So he explained to me that they'd been discussing a silly issue: the workers, for quite a while, had been asking the construction site's kitchen to adhere to their religion's dietary restrictions; the boss was making himself out to be a modern thinker, but in truth he was a bigot who had a different faith—but there are so many religions in that country you can't keep track of them all. Anyway, through the head of personnel he had made it known that if the workers didn't accept the cafeteria as it was, he'd get rid of it altogether. There had already been two or three strikes, and the boss hadn't even given it a second

thought, because sales were poor. Now someone had brought up the idea of getting physical with him, as retribution."

"What exactly do you mean by 'getting physical'?"

Faussone patiently explained that it would be like putting a curse on him, giving the evil eye, or casting a spell:

". . . maybe not even with the intention of killing him: in fact, at the time they surely didn't want him to die, because his little brother was even worse than him. They just wanted to give him a scare—I don't know, maybe make him sick, have an accident, something that might change his mind, and show him that they knew how to be persuasive.

"So now the old man held up a knife, and he unscrewed the frame and detached it from the portrait. It seemed like he had a lot of practice in this sort of job; he opened the book, closed his eyes, and put his finger on a page, then he opened his eyes and read something in the book that neither my inspector friend nor I could understand. Then he took the photograph, rolled it up, and crushed it in his hands. He had someone bring him a screwdriver, heated it over a spirit stove, and inserted it into the crumpled photograph. He smoothed out the photograph and showed it to the crowd, and they all clapped their hands: the photo had six holes burned into it, one in the forehead, one near the right eye, one on the corner of the mouth. The other three had landed in the background, away from the face.

"Then the old man put the photo back into its frame, just as it was, creased and pierced. The little boy returned it to its place, and everybody went back to work.

"So, at the end of April, the boss fell sick. It was never clear what exactly he had, but the rumors got around in a hurry—you know how these things go. From the start it seemed serious. No, he had nothing wrong with his face, this story is strange enough already. His family wanted to put him on a plane to Switzerland, but there wasn't enough time: he had something in his blood, and ten days later he was dead. And to think, he was a robust guy, who never got sick—always traveling around the world on an airplane, and between flights always chasing women, or gambling all night until the sun came up.

"The family accused the workers of murder, or, rather, of 'murder with malice aforethought'—that's what they told me it's called down there. They have criminal courts, of course, but it's best not to fall into their clutches. They don't have one legal code, but three of them, and they choose which

one to use depending on which works best for the more powerful side—or the side that pays more. The family, like I said, maintained that he'd been assassinated: there was a motive for murder, there were actions taken to cause a death, and there was the death. The defense lawyer responded that the workers' actions did not implicate them in murder—if anything they were only intended to bring about some kind of skin problem, I don't know, a breakout of acne or boils. He said that if the photograph had been cut in half, or had been drenched in gas and set on fire, then, yes, that would have had grave implications. Because apparently that's how this type of spell goes—from a hole comes a hole, from a cut a cut, and so on. We might find this kind of thing amusing, but they believed it all, even the judges, and even the defense lawyers."

"How did the trial end?"

"You must be kidding. It's still going on, and it will continue until who knows when. In that country, trials never end. But that inspector I told you about promised to keep me posted, and, if you like, I'll keep you posted, since the story seems to interest you."

The waitress came over to serve the prodigious portion of cheese that Faussone had ordered. She was about forty, skinny and hunched over, her straight hair greased with some substance or other, and she had a sad face, like that of a frightened goat. She stared insistently at Faussone, and he returned her gaze with an ostentatious show of indifference. When she left, he said to me, "Poor girl, she looks a little like the Jack of Clubs. But what can you do? You have to take what life gives you."

Gesturing toward the cheese with his chin, he asked me, without much enthusiasm, whether I wanted some. He then attacked it greedily and, between the workings of his jaw, continued:

"As you know, here, as far as the female situation goes, well, we're a bit hard up. You have to take what life gives you. Or rather, what the construction site gives you."

Cloister

“. . . Yeah, this stuff is incredible: I can see why you want to write it all down. I did know about some of these things from my father, because he was in Germany, too, but for different reasons than you; anyway, the point is that I’ve never taken a job in Germany. I’ve never liked Germany, and though I’ve made an effort to learn a lot of languages, even a little Arabic and Japanese, I don’t know a single word of German. One day I’m going to have to tell you the story of my father, a prisoner of war, but it’s nothing like your story—no, it’s more something to laugh at. I’ve never been in prison myself, because nowadays you have to do something really stupid in order to end up in prison. That said—and I know it’s hard to believe—I once found myself in a job that, for me, was worse than prison. (But if I ever had to go to prison for real, I don’t think I’d last two days. I’d bang my head against the wall, or I’d die of a broken heart, like a nightingale or a sparrow locked in a cage.) And it’s not like this happened in some distant land; I was pretty close to our country, in a place where, when the wind blows and the air is clean, you can see Superga and the Mole[1]—but over there the air usually isn’t very clean.

“They asked me—me and some other guys—to do a job that really wasn’t anything special: it wasn’t in an unusual place, it wasn’t particularly difficult. I told you about the place, though I didn’t get very specific; the fact is that we riggers have to maintain some element of professional secrecy, just like doctors or priests in confession. As for the difficulty, it was only a truss tower, thirty meters high, with a six-by-five-meter base, and I wasn’t working alone; it was autumn, not too cold or too hot—in other words, it wasn’t really much of a job at all, more like a job that

allowed you to recover from other jobs and breathe again the air of our homeland; and I needed it, because I'd just come back from a terrible gig, the building of a bridge in India—one of these days I'll tell you all about it.

"Even the design wasn't especially tricky: it was all standard-issue steelwork, L and T beams, no tricky welding required, UNI-formatted floor grilles; and the plan was to assemble the tower while it lay on the ground, so that we never had to climb higher than six meters up or put ourselves in a harness. At the end of the job, a crane would hoist the whole structure and set it upright. At first I had no idea what the tower was for; I had seen from the blueprints that it was intended to support a rather complex chemical plant, which had small, thick columns, heat exchangers, and a bunch of pipes. They told me only that it was a distillation plant, for recovering a certain acid from waste water, but—"

Without meaning to, and without being aware of it, I must have assumed a particularly rapt expression, because Faussone broke off and, in a tone that was halfway between stunned and irritated, said, "You know you're going to have to tell me, if it's not some big secret, what your business is, and what you're doing all the way out here—" But then he continued with his story.

"Even though I didn't have enough expertise to figure out what was going on, I liked seeing it grow, day by day; it seemed to me I was watching a child, a fetus I mean, when it's still in its mother's belly. Though I guess it's a little strange to think of it as a baby, since the steel alone weighed sixty tons, and it didn't grow any which way, like a weed—no, it came along in the ordered, precise manner marked out by the blueprints, so that when we'd built the steps that led between one story and the next, which were rather complex, they fit right away, without us having to make cuts or splices—a satisfying thing, just like when they made the Fréjus tunnel; the job took thirteen years, but when the French section and the Italian section met they were off by no more than twenty centimeters, such a success that they went on to build that monument in Piazza Statuto, the black one with the flying woman on top.

"Like I said, I wasn't alone on the job, though with a job like that, if they gave me three months and a couple of capable workers, I'd be able to manage well enough on my own. But there were four or five of us, because the client was in a hurry and wanted the truss to be standing in twenty days maximum. No one asked me to be the team's leader, but from the first day it

seemed natural for me to take over, since I was the one with the most experience; in our line, experience is the only thing that counts—it's not like we get service stripes on our sleeves. I didn't speak much with our client, because he was always in a hurry and I was, too, but we were instantly in agreement, since he was one of those guys who aren't pretentious about it but know their stuff and are capable of leading without ever raising their voice, the type who don't scrimp on payment, and who, if you make a mistake, don't get too angry, and when they make a mistake they're gracious about it and apologize. He was from our country, a small guy like you, but slightly younger.

"When all thirty meters of the truss were complete, it filled the whole yard, and it looked a bit clumsy, ridiculous even, like anything that's meant to stand up when it's lying on the ground: in fact it was pitiful, like a fallen tree, and we hurried to call for the cranes so that it could be raised. It was so long that we needed two cranes, which hooked it at each end and transported it, very slowly, to the reinforced-concrete foundation, which had already been laid in position, with the anchorages ready, and one of the two cranes, with its telescopic arm, was to pull it up and lower it. Everything went well, it made the trip safely from the assembly yard to the warehouses; in order to pivot it around the corner of the warehouses we had to take off a little bit of the masonry, but nothing serious, and when the bottom of the tower was set on the foundation the smaller crane was sent away, and the other one extended its arm fully, with the truss hanging from it, and little by little the tower was set in place. Even for someone like me, who's seen his fair share of cranes, this was an impressive spectacle, partly because the motor was humming so quietly that the crane barely had to exert itself. It lowered its cargo precisely, the openings clicking right onto the anchorages; we bolted it in, had a drink, and left. But then our client came running after me—he said that I'd earned his respect and that there was a more difficult job he'd like me to do. He asked whether I had any other obligations and if I knew how to weld stainless steel, and anyway, to get to the point, since I didn't have any other obligations and I liked him, and I liked the work, I told him yes, and he hired me as the construction director for the distillation tubes and the service and work ducts. The service ducts are what transport the cooling water, the steam, and the compressed air; the work ducts convey the acids—anyway, that's what they called them.

“There were four tubes in all, three small and one large, and the large one was very large, but it wasn’t hard to assemble. It was just a vertical pipe of stainless steel, thirty meters high—that is, as tall as the truss that was supposed to hold it up—and a meter in diameter. It came in four sections, so we had to make three joins, one flanged and the other two welded on the edges, one of which we’d slipped on over the outside and the other on the inside, because the sheet metal was ten millimeters thick. To slip it over the inside part I had to be lowered into the pipe from the top, in something that resembled a parrot’s cage, tied to a cord, and it wasn’t very pleasant, but it only took a few minutes. When I began with the ducts, however, I thought I’d lose my mind, because I’m really just a rigger, and I’d never seen a job as complicated as that. There were more than three hundred ducts of all different diameters, from a quarter of an inch to ten inches; of every length, with three, four, even five joints per duct, and not all of them at right angles, either; and they were made out of every kind of material. There was even a pipe made out of titanium, a thing I didn’t know existed, and that one really had me sweating bullets. This was the duct that was used for the most concentrated acids. All the ducts connected the large tube with the smaller ones and with the exchangers, but the arrangement was so complicated that, though I studied it for a whole morning, by evening I’d already forgotten it. To be honest, I never really figured out how the whole plant was supposed to work.

“Most of the ducts were made of stainless steel, and of course stainless steel is a fine material, but it’s not agreeable; what I mean is that when it’s cold it gets stiff. You didn’t know that? It doesn’t give, and if you heat it then it’s not so ‘stainless’ anymore. Sorry, I figured they taught you guys that stuff in school. Anyway, there was a lot of assembling, pulling, filing down, and then dismantling all over again; and when no one was looking I’d go over it again with a hammer, because a hammer fixes everything, which is why the guys at the Lancia plant call it ‘the engineer.’ By the time we’d finished this business with the ducts, the place looked like Tarzan’s jungle; it was exhausting just to try to walk through it. Then the insulators came to insulate and the painters to paint, so, when all was said and done, the whole project took a month.

“One day I’m standing on top of the tower with a box wrench, making sure the bolts are tight, and I see my client coming up, though he’s taking his time, because thirty meters is about the height of an eight-story building.

He was holding a small paintbrush and a piece of paper, and had a sly little look on his face; he was collecting dust from the main panel of the tube that I had finished assembling a month earlier. I started to get suspicious, and said to myself, ‘This guy’s looking for trouble.’ But no: a little later he called up and said he wanted to show me a bit of gray dust that he had brushed onto the paper.

“‘Do you know what this is?’ he asked me.

“‘Dust,’ I replied.

“‘Yes, but the kind of dust you’d find in the street or in your house doesn’t get all the way up here. No—this dust comes from the stars.’

“I figured he was messing with me, but then we climbed down and he showed me through a magnifying glass that it was composed of round particles, and he showed me that these particles could be attracted by a magnet—they were iron, in other words. And he explained that the dust was from shooting stars that had ended their journey: if you go to a high place that’s clean and isolated, you’d always find this type of dust, as long as you’re not on an incline and the rain doesn’t wash it away. You don’t buy this, and in that moment I didn’t believe it, either; but in my profession I’m often finding myself in high places, and I’ve seen that this dust is always there, and the more years that pass, the more there is, so that it functions like a clock, or, rather, like one of those hourglasses you use for timing eggs. I’ve collected samples of this dust in every part of the world, and I keep it at home in a little case; I mean I take it to my aunts’ house, because a home, well, I don’t have one. If we ever find ourselves back in Turin together, I’ll show you. If you think about it, it’s a melancholy thing, those shooting stars that are like the comets over Baby Jesus’ manger, you see one and you make a wish—but then they fall down, cool off, and become little iron particles, two-tenths of a millimeter. But don’t let me get sidetracked.

“So, as I was saying, when we finished the job that tower looked like a forest; it also resembled those diagrams you see in a doctor’s waiting room, THE HUMAN BODY: one diagram is just the muscles, one is the bone structure, one is the nervous system, and one is all the organs. Our body didn’t really have muscles, because there was nothing in it that moved, but it had all the rest, and the veins and the organs I had assembled myself. The main organ, I mean the stomach or guts, was that large duct that I told you about. We filled it to the brim with water, and then we dumped into the

water two truckloads of small ceramic rings, each one as big as your fist. The water was there so that the rings would sink slowly without breaking, and the rings, once the water was drained, were supposed to serve as a kind of filtration system, so that the mixture of water and acid that came in through the middle of the column had time to separate: the acid would drain out the bottom of the duct, while the water would escape from the top, as vapor, and then condense in an exchanger and end up I don't know where; as I told you, I didn't understand all that chemistry stuff very well. It was important, though, that the rings not break, that they sink very slowly, on top of one another, and ultimately fill the duct all the way to the top. It was fun to put the rings in the duct: we pulled them up in a bucket and dropped them in the water real slow, like children when they form wet sand into little Tomino cheese wheels, and the grown-ups say, 'Watch out or you'll get all wet'; and in fact I did get all wet, but it was hot out, so it felt nice. This took about two days. There were also the smaller ducts that we had to fill with rings, and I can't tell you exactly what those were for, but the whole job only took another two or three hours. Then I said my goodbyes, went to the cashier to get my money, and, since I had a week of vacation saved up, I went to the Lanzo Valley to go trout fishing.

"When I'm on vacation I never leave behind my address, because I know exactly what can happen. And in fact, on this occasion, I came home to find my aunts terrified; they'd been passing back and forth a telegram from my client and, poor women, a telegram is all it takes to work them up into a frenzy. It said, 'Mr. Faussone, please contact us immediately.' What could I do? I 'contacted' him, which sounds elegant but just means I called him on the phone, and right away I could tell from his voice that something was wrong. He sounded like someone who's calling for an ambulance and doesn't show any emotion because he doesn't want to seem ruffled. I was to drop everything and come right away, there was an important meeting. I tried to find out what type of meeting this could be and what it had to do with me, but I wasn't able to because he was too busy insisting that I leave immediately. It sounded like he was about to burst into tears.

"So I drop everything and go back, and I find that all hell has broken loose. The client, he had the face of someone who's been out carousing all night, though in fact he'd been at the plant, which was going insane; the previous evening he'd let himself become overwhelmed by fear—it was like when you've got a sick person at home, and don't know what's wrong,

so you lose your head and call six or seven doctors when it'd probably be better to call just a single good one. He had summoned the designer, the builder of the ducts, two electricians who were eyeing each other like a dog and a cat, his chemist—who had also been on vacation but had left behind his contact information—and a guy with a belly and a red beard who was speaking perfect Italian and I couldn't figure out why he was there, but then it became clear that he was a lawyer who was friends with my client; I'm pretty sure he hadn't summoned him in his capacity as a lawyer, however, but rather to boost his courage. So all these people were standing at the base of the duct, looking up, pacing around, treading on one another's toes, trying to calm the client and generally talking nonsense. In fact, even the duct was talking—it was kind of like when you're sick with a fever and start saying bizarre things but since you may drop dead soon everybody takes what you say seriously.

"Yeah, that duct was sick, all right, anyone could've seen that, and I realized it too, even though it wasn't my area of expertise and the client had called me only because I was the one who had dropped the rings into it. It was having a kind of attack every five minutes: first there was a light, soft buzzing noise, which got increasingly loud and irregular, like a huge, winded beast; the duct started to vibrate, and after a bit the whole truss also began to vibrate, and it seemed like there was going to be an earthquake, and even though everyone acted as if nothing was happening—one guy retied his shoe, another lit a cigarette—they moved away. Then you could hear something that sounded like a drumbeat, but muffled, as if it came from under the ground, and the sound of a backwash, I mean like falling gravel, then nothing else; and then you heard only the buzzing from before. This happened every five minutes, like clockwork; and I can tell you this because, though I really had little to do with it, of all the people there, only me and the designer had kept our composure and could see what was happening without losing our heads. The longer I was there, the stronger was my impression of having a sick child on my hands. It might've been because I had seen it grow up and I'd even gone inside it to do the welding; it might've been because it was groaning so oddly, like a kid who can't speak but is obviously sick; it might also have been that I was approaching the situation like a doctor who, faced with a sick patient, first puts his ear to the person's back, then taps him all over and takes his temperature, and in fact that's exactly what the designer and I started to do.

“Putting your ear against sheet metal, with disaster looming, is not for the faint of heart; it sounded like a case of intestinal distress, and my own bowels got a little disturbed themselves—they didn’t move, but that was only because I held them tight, so as not to lose my dignity—and as for the thermometer, well, obviously it wasn’t a thermometer like the one you put in your mouth, or elsewhere, when you have a fever. It was a multiple thermometer, with a lot of bonded metals strategically placed in different parts of the plant, a display, and thirty buttons so you could choose where, exactly, you wanted to read the temperature; it was, in other words, a rather sophisticated affair. But since the center of the large duct—the sick duct, that is—was the heart of the entire system, in that spot they had also affixed a thermocouple, which controlled a thermograph, which, as I’m sure you know, is a stylus that charts the fluctuations in temperature on a roll of graph paper. Anyway, that was even scarier, because we could see its whole clinical history, beginning with the evening when they had started up the plant.

“We could see the starting point, where the line began at twenty degrees Celsisus and climbed in two or three hours to eighty, and then it leveled out, very flat, for about twenty hours. After that there was something like a shudder—so fine it was barely visible, and it lasted only five minutes—and then there was a whole series of shudders, getting stronger and stronger, each one lasting exactly five minutes. And the last ones, the ones from the previous night, were not shudders so much as waves that oscillated ten or twelve degrees, rising sharply and falling abruptly; and then we were riding one of these waves, the designer and me, we saw the line rise as, on the inside, everything began to stir, and then it plunged dramatically and we heard the drumbeat and the sound of cascading gravel. The designer—he was a young guy, but he knew his stuff—told me that the client had called him in Milan the previous night to get the authorization to shut everything down; but the designer didn’t trust the guy, so he decided to get in his car and come up himself, because it wasn’t a simple thing to shut down the whole plant, and he was worried that the client might make a mistake. Now, however, there was nothing else to do. So he did the job himself, and in half an hour everything had stopped, you heard a loud silence, the thermograph line descended like an airplane landing, and it seemed like the whole plant breathed a sigh of relief—like when a sick person gets a shot of morphine and falls asleep, and, at least for a little while, he ceases to suffer.

“I kept telling him that I had nothing to do with it, but the client sat us all down around a table so each of us could speak his mind. At first I really didn’t dare to speak mine, though I did have one thing to say, as the person who had dropped in the rings: since I have a pretty good ear, I noticed that the sound of the moving intestines was the same sound that the rings made when we dropped them from the buckets into the duct: a roar. It was like when a truck unloads gravel, and there’s a hum that gets louder, and louder, until all of a sudden the gravel starts sliding out and crashes down like an avalanche. Ultimately I whispered this theory of mine to the designer, who was sitting next to me, and he rose to his feet and repeated it, as if it were his own idea, but using fancier language, and adding that, according to him, the duct’s sickness was a case of flooding. You know how it is when someone has a propensity for self-aggrandizement, he takes advantage of every possible opportunity. So the duct was flooding, and we needed to open it up, drain it, and look around inside.

“As soon as he said that, everyone started talking about flooding, except the lawyer, who was laughing to himself like an imbecile and telling the client some private joke; maybe he was already thinking about filing a lawsuit. And everyone was looking at yours truly, as if it had already been decided that I was the man to take care of the situation; and I have to say that deep down I wasn’t unhappy about this, partly out of curiosity, and partly because that duct, which was groaning and collecting stardust and doing its business all over itself—oh, perhaps I haven’t mentioned that part yet. It was obvious that the pressure was building, because at the height of every wave you could see brown waste seeping out of the manhole gasket at the bottom and dripping onto the foundation. Well, I felt sorry for the thing—it reminded me of someone who’s suffering too much to speak. I felt sorry and also irritated, the way you are with a sick person who, even if you don’t particularly like him, you end up caring for, just so he stops complaining.

“I’m not going to tell you about our efforts to explore the interior of the duct. It turned out that it contained two tons of acid, which cost a certain amount of money; besides, we couldn’t just flush the acid into the sewer, because it would have polluted the whole region; and since it was acid, after all, you couldn’t even store it in any kind of cistern—it had to be one made out of stainless steel, and even the pump had to be acid-proof because the stuff had to drain upstream, since there was no incline that would allow it to

drain naturally. But by working together we figured it out—we drained the acid, scoured the duct with steam so that it didn't stink too badly, and then let it cool.

"At this point, for better or worse, it was my turn to take over the situation. There were three manholes: one at the top of the duct, one toward the middle, and the other at the base: as you know, they're called manholes because they're round openings that a man can pass through; you also see them on the boiler of a steam engine, but a man can't get through one of those very comfortably because they're only fifty centimeters in diameter. I know some guys who have a bit of a belly that either couldn't get through one or tried and got stuck. I, however, have no such problem, as you can see for yourself. I followed the designer's instructions and began, very slowly, to unscrew the bolts of the manhole at the top of the duct. I had to work slowly to ensure that, no matter what, the rings wouldn't come out. I push on the flange, I test it with my finger, then with my whole hand—nothing. But it made sense that the rings would have settled farther down. I remove the flange, and I see blackness. They pass me a light, and I stick my head in, and I still can only see blackness, no rings—it was like I'd dreamed up the whole experience of dropping them in. I could only see what looked like a bottomless well, and it wasn't until my eyes had adjusted to the darkness that I saw a pale glow at the bottom, just barely visible. We lowered a weight attached to a string, and it touched down at twenty-three meters: thirty meters' worth of rings had been reduced to seven.

"There was a lot of talk and discussion, and by the end we'd gotten to the bottom of it—which is not just a figure of speech, because the rings were ground up at the bottom of the duct. Consider for a second what must have happened: like I told you, the rings were ceramic, and fragile, so fragile that we had to drop them through water, which served as a kind of shock absorber. Clearly some of them had begun to break apart, and the shards settled in a layer at the bottom of the duct; so the steam was trying to escape, until suddenly it broke through, and the force shattered the other rings, and so on. If you did the math—as the designer had, on the basis of the rings' dimensions—it was clear that there couldn't have been more than a few left intact. This indeed was the case: I opened the manhole in the middle of the column and found it empty; then I opened the one at the bottom, and could see only a mush of sand and gray gravel, which was all

that remained of the rings—a mush so thick that when I removed the flange it didn't even move.

"There was nothing to do but arrange a funeral. I've seen a few of these funerals, the kind where you have to make something disappear, eliminate a mistake, a thing that stinks like a corpse, which, if you leave it there to decompose, is like a never-ending harangue, or a court ruling, a reminder to all those involved: 'Don't forget, you're responsible for this mess.' It's no coincidence that the people most anxious to hold the funeral are precisely the ones who feel the most guilty; and this was the case with the designer, who came over to me and said, in the most casual manner, that all it needed was a nice rinse with water. All the grit would wash away in a second and then we'd plop in some new stainless-steel rings—at the client's expense, naturally. The client had no problem with the rinse, or the funeral, but when he heard us talking about additional rings he went crazy, saying that the designer ought to hang a portrait of the Madonna in gratitude for not being sued, there'd be no more rings, and he'd have to come up with a better idea, and fast, because he'd already wasted a full week of work.

"I wasn't to blame for any of this, but being around all these grim people I became melancholy myself, especially since the weather had turned rotten and it seemed more like winter than fall. It suddenly became clear that it wasn't such an easy job: that the mush—I mean the broken rings—was composed of rough shards, and they were all mixed together, so that the water we had squirted on them with a hose seeped out from underneath, completely clean, and all that sediment wasn't being dislodged one bit. The client began to suggest that maybe one of us could go down inside the duct with a shovel—but he was talking to himself, without making eye contact, and in a voice so timid it was clear that he couldn't even convince himself. We tried a few different things, and it became obvious that the best idea was to flood the duct with water from below, the way you always do when you're constipated; so we screwed the hose to the mouth of the duct's drain and turned the water pressure all the way up; for a second we didn't hear anything, then there was something like a loud hiccup, and the mush began to shift and come out of the manhole like mud. I felt like a doctor, or maybe a veterinarian, because at that point, instead of a baby, the sick duct was beginning to resemble one of those beasts that lived in prehistoric times, as big as a house, but then one day the whole

species drops dead, and no one knows why. Perhaps because of constipation.

"I might be wrong, but I think I began this story in a different way, and let myself get sidetracked. I began by telling you about prison, and a job that was worse than prison. Of course if I had known beforehand how the job was going to affect me, I would have never accepted it, but, as you know, it takes a lot of experience to learn how to turn down a job, and to tell the truth, to this day I still haven't learned how to do it. I was younger then, and they had offered me a figure that immediately made me imagine a two-month vacation with my girlfriend; and then, you know, self-advancement, especially while everyone else lags behind, was always pleasing to me—and it still is—and they understood full well what kind of guy I was. They buttered me up all right, saying that they could never find another rigger like me, they trusted me, they needed someone responsible, etc. So I said yes, but that was because I didn't realize what was going on.

"The bottom line is that the designer, though he was competent, had made a mammoth blunder: I could infer as much from the conversations going on around me, but I could also read it on his face. It seems that, with ducts like that one, rings would never work, whether they were ceramic or any other material, because they created an obstacle for the steam. The only thing to do was to use plates instead, or, rather, perforated discs, made of stainless steel, installed at half-meter intervals up the height of the duct, meaning about fifty plates in total. You know about these? These duct plates? Yes? Fine, but I guarantee you don't know how they're installed; okay, maybe you do, but you don't know what it's *like* to install them. That's normal, after all. When you drive a car, you don't think for a second about all the work that's gone into it; or when you type numbers into one of those calculators that fit in your back pocket, at first you might marvel at it but then you become used to it and it seems natural. And of course it seems natural, even to me, that when I decide to raise this hand, look—the hand goes up. But it's only habit. That's exactly why I like talking about my jobs: because so few people think about such things. But let's get back to the plates.

"Every plate is divided in two, like two half-moons that fit together: they're split like this because if they were whole, the installation would be too difficult, maybe even impossible. Each plate is supported by eight little brackets welded to the walls of the duct, and that was my job: to weld these

brackets, starting from the bottom. You weld the brackets all around yourself, going higher until you reach the level of your shoulder—it gets tiring, you know, if you go any higher. You mount the first plate on the first ring of brackets, then you climb up onto it in your rubber boots, and since you're now about a half-meter higher up, you start welding another ring of brackets. The assistant lowers down two more of the half-plates, you place them one at a time under your feet, and then another turn of brackets and a plate, a turn and a plate, until you get to the top. But the top was thirty meters up.

"Well, I marked it all out without any difficulty, but as soon as I was two or three meters off the ground I began to feel strange. At first I thought it was the fumes from the electrode, although there was a good draft coming in; or maybe the mask, which you have to wear over your entire face if you're welding for a certain number of hours in a row—otherwise you get burned and your skin falls off. But it kept getting worse, I felt like I had a weight here, in the pit of my stomach, and my throat tightened the way it does when, as a kid, you feel like crying. Worst of all, my head was spinning: so many things I had long ago forgotten rushed into my mind, like my grandmother's sister, who became a cloistered nun—'Whoever walks through this door will never come out again, dead or alive'—and the stories that they told us in the village, like the one about the guy who's buried but he's not actually dead, and at night, in the graveyard, he's banging on the coffin with his fists, trying to get out. It also felt as if the tube was constricting and would soon suffocate me, like a mouse in the belly of a snake. I was looking up and I saw that the top was still very far away, especially since I was going at a rate of one half-meter per step, and I was overcome by a great desire to be pulled out, but I resisted because, after all the compliments they had given me, I didn't want to embarrass myself.

"So it took me two days, and I never backed out, and finally I made it to the top. I have to say, however, that since then, every so often, somewhat unexpectedly, that sense of being a trapped mouse comes back to me: in elevators, most of all. It doesn't really happen when I'm on a job, because after that I learned to let others handle rigging jobs in enclosed spaces; and I consider myself fortunate that in my profession most of the time you're out in the air—you might have to endure heat, cold, rain, and dizziness, but there's no chance of being cloistered. I never went back to look at that duct, not even from the outside, and I keep a good distance from all ducts, tubes,

and shafts; and when there are stories in the newspaper about kidnappings I don’t read them. Look: it’s stupid, and I know it’s stupid, but I’ve never gone back to the way I was before. At school they taught me about concavity and convexity: fine, I’ve become a convex rigger, and concave jobs aren’t for me anymore. But I’d appreciate it if you kept this to yourself.”

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1. Two well-known landmarks in Turin: Superga is a hill and the Mole Antonelliana, a monumental building, is now a museum.

The Helper

". . .Give me a break! There's no comparison. Me, no—I've never complained about my lot in life. Besides, I'd have to be an idiot to complain, because no one chose it but me: I wanted to see the world, work hard, and not be ashamed of the money I earned, and I got what I wanted. Sure there are pros and cons, you've got a family, you know all about it—one can't have a family, or even friends. Or maybe one has them—friends, that is—but they only last as long as the job: three, four, six months at the most, then you get back on a plane. . . . You know what they call a plane here? A *samolyot*. I always liked that word, it makes me think of the little onions we have back home—yes, the *siulòt*. And also of *scimmiotti*, little monkeys; but let's not get ahead of ourselves. You get on the airplane, as I was saying, and that's the end of it. Either you don't care, and you figure that they weren't real friends anyway; or they were real friends, and then you're sad. And with girls it's the same thing—actually it's worse, because it's impossible to do without them, and you'll see, one day or another, you'll end up hooked."

Faussone had invited me to have tea in his room. It was monastic, and identical to mine in every aspect, down to the details: the same lampshade, bedcover, wallpaper, sink (which even dripped exactly like mine), the transistor radio missing the tuner knob on the shelf, the bootjack, even the cobweb above the corner of the door. I'd been in my room only a few days, though, while he'd been there three months: he had fashioned a kitchenette out of the built-in cupboard, hung a salami and two braids of garlic from the ceiling, and put up on the walls a view of Turin taken from an airplane and a grainy photo of the local team, covered with autographs. As far as

household gods go, it wasn't much, but then again I didn't have anything on my walls, and I felt more at home in his room than in mine. When the tea was ready, he offered it to me graciously, but without a tray, and he advised —or rather demanded—that I take it with vodka, at least in equal parts, "so that you sleep better." But in that out-of-the-way guesthouse I was sleeping well anyway; at night there was a total, primordial silence, broken only by the sighing of the wind and the plaint of some unidentified nocturnal bird.

"All right. Which friend did it hurt me the most to leave? When I tell you, it'll knock your socks off. Because, first of all, he got me in pretty big trouble; and second of all, he wasn't even a Christian. In fact, he was a monkey."

My socks remained on my feet—partly because of an old habit of self-control, which makes secondary reactions precede the first, but also because Faussone's prologue had blunted the surprise. (I must have said already that he wasn't a good storyteller—he's more accomplished in other fields.) On the other hand, it wasn't that surprising: everyone knows that the greatest friends of animals—those who best understand them and are best understood by them—are loners.

"For once, it wasn't a crane. I've got plenty of other stories about rigging cranes, but I don't want to bore you with them. This time it was a derrick. You know what a derrick is?"

All I had was an idea I'd got from books: I knew that they were truss towers, and that they're used to drill oil wells, or perhaps to extract oil; in any case, if it was of interest to him, I could give him precise information about the origin of the term. Mr. Derryck, a man of expertise, conscientiousness, and great piety, lived in London at the end of the sixteenth century and was for many years Her Royal Majesty's executioner; he was so conscientious, and so enamored of his profession, that he endeavored constantly to perfect his instruments. Toward the end of his career he perfected a new kind of gallows, a truss, tall and slim, which allowed the hanging, "tall and short," to be visible from a great distance: this became known as the "Derryck gallows," and then, more succinctly, as the "derrick." Later, by analogy, the name was given to other structures, all in the form of trusses, destined for more obscure uses. This is how Mr. Derryck won that particular, rare form of immortality that consists of losing the initial capital letter of one's surname: an honor shared by no more than a

dozen illustrious men in history. But Faussone should continue with his story.

Faussone endured my frivolous interruption without so much as batting an eye. He had assumed a distant attitude, however; perhaps he'd been made uncomfortable by my having used the remote past tense, as one does during a history examination. Then he continued:

"That may be true, though I've always thought hanging people the normal way worked just fine. In any case, this derrick was nothing special—twenty meters high, a drilling derrick, the kind that, if you don't find any oil, you dismantle it and carry it on to the next spot. As a rule in my stories, the weather's always too cold or too hot; but this time we were in a clearing in the middle of the woods, and it was neither cold nor hot, though it did rain the whole time. But it was a warm rain, and you couldn't even really call it unpleasant, because it doesn't rain very often there. You strip down to your boxers, the way the locals do, and if it rains, well, let it rain.

"As for the rigging, it was a joke: there was no need for a professional rigger, any day laborer without a fear of heights could've handled it. I had three of them—laborers—but what bums, my God! Maybe they were malnourished, fine, but all they were good at was sitting on their cans, from morning to night; they didn't even respond when spoken to, it's like they were asleep. The fact of the matter is that, for the most part, it was up to me to figure out everything: the generator, the connections, even how to make myself some dinner at night in the hut. But what worried me more than everything else was what they call the equipment, which I didn't realize was so complicated. You know, that business with all the pulleys and the worm screw, which lowers the milling cutter—assembling a thing like that is not a job for someone in my field. It seems easy, but inside there's this whole feed contraption, which is electronic and self-regulating, and then there are the controls for the mud pumps, and the steel tubes that descend into the well, one after the other, are screwed on underneath; in other words, the whole thing is like a movie you'd see . . . well, at the movies. Like one of those films about Texas. I'm not saying it's a bad job, however. You see, I didn't realize it, but you have to drill about five kilometers down, and even then you don't know whether you'll find oil."

Since we had finished our vodka tea, and Faussone's story showed no sign of getting started, I mentioned offhandedly that I had a fermented cheese and some Hungarian salami in my room. He wasn't shy about it (he

never was: he says it’s not his style), so our tea turned into a dinnertime snack, while the orange light of the sunset gave way to the luminous violet of a northern night. A long sweep of land stood in stark contrast against the western sky, and above this, just over the ridge and parallel to it, lay a thin black cloud; it looked as if a painter had made a false stroke, and then tried it again in the space right above. It was a strange cloud and we discussed it; Faussone convinced me that it was the dust kicked up into the still air by a distant herd.

“I wouldn’t know how to tell you why contracting jobs are always in stupid places: they’re either hot, or freezing, or too dry, or it’s always raining—like the place I’m in the middle of telling you about. Maybe we just don’t adapt well, those of us from the civilized world, and when we happen to end up in a place a little out of the way, we suddenly feel like we’re at the end of the world. But everywhere there are people who are happy in their own country and wouldn’t want to switch places with us. It’s a question of habit.

“Well, in that country I was telling you about, the people aren’t easy to make friends with. I have nothing against blacks, of course, and in other areas I’ve found some who are smarter than us, but down there it’s another thing altogether. They’re deadbeats and bullshit artists. Only a few of them speak English, and I couldn’t understand their language; they don’t drink wine, never even heard of it, and they’re jealous of their women, though I can’t imagine what they’re thinking, because the women are small, with short legs, and stomachs that come out to here. They eat things that would disgust you—I’ll spare you the details because we’re eating. In short, if I tell you that down there the only friend I made was a little monkey, then you’ll have to believe me when I say that I had no alternative. The monkey wasn’t even a particularly good monkey—he was one of those with fur around the head and a face like a dog.

“He was curious, he came to watch me work, and right away he taught me something. I already said how it was always raining—well, he sat in the rain in a particular way, with his knees raised, his head on his knees, and his hands crossed over his head. I saw that, in this position, with all his hair combed down over his face, he was barely getting wet: the water dripped down his elbows and his back while his stomach and face stayed dry. I tried it myself, taking a break from my bolts, and I have to say that if you don’t have an umbrella it’s your best option.”

I thought he was joking, and I promised him that, if ever I found myself naked in a tropical rainstorm, I'd make like the monkey, but he flashed me an angry look. Faussone never jokes, and if he does, he jokes with the heaviness of a turtle. And he doesn't like anyone else making jokes, either.

"He was bored. During that season the females live together in a pack, along with an older, strong male who leads them and has sex with all of them, and woe to any young monkey that happens to come near—the older monkey will jump on him and scratch him. I understood this situation well because it was a bit like mine, though I was single for other reasons. As you know, in situations like this, when you have two guys alone together, both feeling melancholy, it's not long before you're buddies."

A thought crossed my mind: the two of us were alone together, both feeling melancholy. I'd taken the place of the monkey, and I felt a rapid surge of affection for my distant opposite number, but I didn't want to interrupt Faussone.

". . . except he didn't have a derrick to build. The first day he was there alone watching, yawning, scratching his head and his belly like this, with his supple fingers, and he bared his teeth. It's not like when a dog does it—with monkeys it's a sign of friendship, but it took me a few days to figure this out. The second day he circled the box of bolts, and since I didn't shoo him away, he'd pick one up once in a while, testing it with his teeth to see if it was good to eat. By the third day he'd figured out that every bolt goes with a nut, and he didn't really make any more mistakes after that—the half-inch bolt went with the half-inch nut, the three-eighths with the three-eighths, and so on. But he never quite figured out that all the bolt threads turned to the right. Even much later, he still didn't understand it; he tried it this way and that way, haphazardly, and when it worked and the nut was screwed on, he jumped up and down, clapping his hands on the ground, making faces, and generally seeming pleased. It's too bad us riggers don't have four hands, or even a tail. I was boiling with envy: as soon as he worked up a little confidence he was climbing up the truss like a bolt of lightning, clinging to the struts with his feet, head down, and in that position he'd be screwing in the bolts and making faces at me.

"I could've watched him all day, but I had a deadline to meet—no way around it. I was doing my best to get on with the work between rainstorms, with little help from my three worthless assistants. The monkey could have helped me, but he was like a child, so the whole thing was a game to him. It

wasn’t going to happen. After a few days I gestured for him to bring up to me certain crossbeams, and he would fly down and then up, but he’d always bring me only the parts for the top, which were painted red so that they could be seen by airplanes. They were also the lightest; you see, he understood what was going on, he wanted to play, but he didn’t want to tire himself out. But don’t think for a second that the three blacks did much more, and at least he wasn’t afraid of falling.

“Working steadily, I finished setting up the haul-off unit. The first time I revved the two motors, he was a little scared on account of the noise and all the wheels moving by themselves. By that point I’d given him a name: I’d call him, and he’d come. It might’ve helped that I gave him a banana once in a while but, anyway, he came. Then I attached the control panel, and he watched as if enchanted. When the red and green lights lit up, he looked at me inquisitively, like he wanted to know how it all worked, and if I didn’t pay attention to him he’d cry like a baby. So I have to take the blame for what happened next. Well, here, there’s no way around it, the fault was mine. I do remember thinking, after all, that he was enjoying those buttons a bit too much. What am I trying to say? I was such a moron that, on the last evening, it never occurred to me to disconnect the fuses.”

A disaster was looming. I was going to ask Faussone how he had managed to commit such a serious oversight, but I restrained myself, so as not to spoil the story. In fact, as there is an art of storytelling, codified through thousands of trials and errors, there is also an art of listening, just as old and noble, though, as far as I know, it has never been given a set of rules. And yet every narrator knows from experience that the listener makes a decisive contribution to the story: a distracted or hostile audience enervates any lecture or lesson, while a friendly public helps it along. But the listener also shares some responsibility for the work of art that is every narrative: you observe this when you’re speaking on the telephone and you freeze up, because you can’t see the reactions of your interlocutor, who, in that case, is reduced to expressing his interest with the occasional monosyllable or grunt. This is also the main reason that there are so few writers—writers, after all, being people who tell stories to an incorporeal audience.

“. . . no, he didn’t manage to destroy it completely, but he came pretty close. While I was fiddling with the electrical contacts—because, you know, though I’m not an electrician, a rigger needs to deal with everything

that comes up—and especially afterward, when I was testing the controls, he didn't miss a move. The next day was Sunday, and the job was finished, and we needed a day of rest. In short, when Monday came and I returned to the worksite, it looked as if someone had given the truss a slap: it was still standing upright, but it was totally crooked, with its grappling hook stuck in the base like a ship's anchor. And he was sitting there, waiting for me—he had heard me arrive on my motorcycle. He looked quite proud of himself; who knows what was going through his head? I was pretty certain that I'd left the equipment hauled up at the top, but he must have lowered it, all he had to do was press a button, which he'd seen me do a number of times on Saturday; and then he must have made it swing, even though it surely weighed a few hundred kilograms. And while swinging, the hook must have caught on a strut, as it was one of those safety hooks, with a carabiner and a spring catch, which locks when it closes on something—this is the problem with safety precautions. Anyway, maybe he had understood that he was making trouble, and had pushed the lift button, or maybe this only happened by chance, but the whole truss had been put under stress. Just the thought of it gives me chills even now: three or four crossbars had fallen, the whole tower had been jarred violently, and luckily the safety switch had kicked in, otherwise it'd be goodbye to your executioner from London."

"So it wasn't such a serious catastrophe after all?" As soon as I had uttered these words I realized, from my own anxious tone, that in fact I sympathized with him—the adventurous little monkey—who probably had been trying to emulate the wonders that he had seen performed by his silent human friend.

"That depends. Four days of work for the repairs, plus I was fined a good amount of money. But while I was there, trying to fix everything, his attitude changed; he was all weepy, his head slumped between his shoulders, and he watched everything from afar; whenever I went over to him he'd run away. Maybe he was afraid I'd scratch him, like the old alpha male, the keeper of the females. . . . Well, what more do you want to know? That's the end of the derrick story. I fixed the thing, had all the tests done, packed my bags, and left. As for the monkey—well, even though he had caused me all that trouble, I would have liked to take him with me, but then it occurred to me that he might come down with consumption here, they wouldn't have let me keep him in the pension, and he would have been

quite a present for my aunts. It didn’t matter anyway—damned if he ever showed his face again.”



The Sassy Girl

"Are you kidding me? No, I go wherever they send me—sure, even in Italy, but they don't usually send me anywhere in Italy because I know my trade so well. Don't get me wrong, I just mean that I can handle pretty much any situation, so they like to send me abroad, and around Italy they only send the young, the old—the guys they're worried might have a heart attack—and the deadbeats. Besides, I like it better this way myself: you see the world and you always learn something, and you get to stay far away from the boss."

It was Sunday, the air was fresh and smelled of resin, the sun never seemed to set, and the two of us had started off through the forest, hoping to reach the river before dark. Whenever the wind stopped rustling in the dead leaves, you could hear the river's powerful, tranquil voice, which seemed to come from every point on the horizon. You could also hear, at intervals, now near and now far, a light but frenetic tapping sound, as if someone were trying to hammer tiny nails into the tree trunks with tiny jackhammers. Faussone had explained that the noise was made by green woodpeckers, which we also have in our country, but it's illegal to hunt them. I asked him if his boss was really so insufferable that he felt he had to travel thousands of kilometers just to avoid seeing him, and Faussone replied no, as a boss he was actually pretty "good," a word that in Faussone's lexicon had great significance, meaning, cumulatively: compliant, nice, experienced, intelligent, and courageous.

". . . but he's one of those guys that could tell cats how to climb—you know what I mean? He's always getting in your face, you know? He doesn't leave you alone. And if your boss doesn't leave you alone then forget about

it, you lose the taste for the job, and you might as well go work at Fiat, because at least then when you get home at night you can put on a pair of slippers and get into bed with your wife. It's tempting, you know: there's always risks involved, especially when they ship you off to certain countries. No, not this one: everything's rosy here. But it is tempting, the idea of hanging it all up, getting married, and no longer living the life of a Gypsy." He repeated, meditatively, "Yeah, it's certainly tempting."

It was clear that the pronouncement of this theory would be followed by a practical example. Sure enough, after a few minutes, he started up again:

"Yeah, as I was saying, this one time the boss sent me to a job in Italy, rather, southern Italy, because he knew it was going to be a tough one. If you want to hear the story of a dumb assembly job, and I know some people like hearing about the misfortunes of others, then listen to this, because I've never seen another rigging job like it, and I wouldn't wish it on any rigger. The reason for this, more than anything else, had to do with the client. He was a good guy, don't get me wrong, he offered me some wonderful dinners and even gave me a bed with a canopy on top, because he wanted to make sure that I felt like a guest at his house, no matter the cost. But he didn't understand the slightest thing about the job, and, as you know, there's nothing worse than that. He was in the salami business and he'd made some money in it, or maybe he had been receiving money from the development fund for southern Italy, I don't know; all I know was that he had got it into his head to make metal furniture. Only idiots think it's good to have a crazy client, who lets you do whatever you want. It's just the opposite: a crazy client gives you nothing but trouble. He doesn't have the right equipment or the right supplies, at the first sign of trouble he freaks out and wants to cancel the contract, and when things go well he gets too involved and wastes your time. Right, so this guy was like that, and I was stuck between a rock and a hard place, because on the other end of the telex there was my boss, breathing down my neck. He was sending me a telex every two hours, to check up on how my work was coming. You've probably seen the way every boss, once he passes a certain age, develops his own neuroses—and mine had a lot. The first, like I told you, was the biggest one: he wanted to do everything himself, as if a rigger could rig anything sitting behind a desk, or glued to the telephone or the teletype machine—think about that for a second! A rigging project is a job that each person has to study by himself, using his own head or, even better, his hands: as you know, it

makes a difference whether you're seeing things from your armchair or from a tower forty meters above the ground. But he had other neuroses, too. Bearings, for instance; he only wanted bearings made in Sweden, and if he found out that someone had used any other type on a job, his face would turn different colors and he'd start jumping this high in the air, even though he was usually a pretty calm guy. It was silly anyway, because on jobs like the one I'm telling you about—where you have a long conveyor belt, slow and light—any bearing would have worked fine, even those bronze bushings that my godfather used to make, one at a time, with a little elbow grease, for the Diatto and the Prinetti automobile plants, in his workshop on Via Gasometro. Well that's what he called it, but now it's Via Camerana.

"Then, since he was an engineer, he was also obsessed with metal fatigue—he saw it everywhere and I think that he even had dreams about it at night. It's not your field, so you might not know what it is. Well, let me put it this way: it's unusual. In my whole career I've never seen a single certified case of metal fatigue; when a piece breaks, the owners, directors, designers, and the workshop heads all always say that there's nothing for them to do about it, that it's the fault of the rigger, who's far away and can't defend himself, or of random electrical currents, or of fatigue, and they wash their hands of it, or at least they try to. But don't let me lose my train of thought. That boss's strangest neurosis was this: he was one of those guys who, before they turn the page of a book, they lick their finger. I remember that my elementary-school teacher, on the first day of school, taught us not to do that, because of the germs. I guess this guy's teacher never taught him that, because he was always licking that finger of his. Well I noticed that he licked his finger whenever he wanted to open anything—his desk drawer, a window, the door to his safe. One time I saw him licking his finger before opening the hood of his Fulvia."

At this point I realized that it wasn't Faussone who was losing track of the story but me—what with the "good" but inexperienced client and the "good" but maniacal boss. I asked him to be clearer and more concise, but now we had come to the river and we paused for a couple of seconds without talking. It was less a river than a bay: it flowed with a solemn swishing noise along the shore—a high bank of brittle, reddish earth—and we could barely see the opposite side. Small waves, transparent and clean, broke against the riverbank.

“Okay, I might have gotten a little lost in the details, but you can be sure, it was a stupid job. First of all, the workers down there, needless to say, are completely inept: maybe they’re good with a hoe, but I wouldn’t bet my life on it, because they seemed to have about as much energy as a flock of sheep; they were constantly calling in sick. But the worst thing was the quality of the materials: there weren’t many types of bolts and nuts available in town, and the ones there were would make even a dog sick. I’ve never seen crap like that before, and I don’t just mean in this town—where, when it comes to shoddiness, they don’t screw around—but even that time in Africa I told you about before. It was the same deal with the base plates: it was like they’d measured them with their fingers; and every day it was the same song and dance: hammer, chisel, pickax, break up everything and then pour on the quick-setting cement. I clung to the teletype machine, because even the telephone only worked when it felt like it, and after fifteen minutes the little machine was banging away, as teletypes do, like they’re always in a hurry, even when they’re writing out some bullshit, and on the paper it said: ‘Despite our advice you have evidently used materials of indeterminate origin,’ or some other such nonsense that had no basis in reality, and I felt myself going stiff. I’m not just saying that: I really felt my elbows slowly hardening, and my knees, too, and my hands drooping and swinging like a cow’s udders, until I wanted to give up the whole profession once and for all. I’ve felt like that plenty of times, but that time worse than others, and, as you can imagine, I’ve had my share of bad jobs. Has that ever happened to you?”

Of course! I explained to Faussone that, at least in times of peace, that’s one of the fundamental experiences of life: being at work and yet not being at work. It’s likely that, at least in other languages, this stiffening sensation, which debilitates and hinders the workingman, can be described in more poetic terms, but I don’t know of any stronger way to put it. And I pointed out to him that, in order to feel that way, you didn’t even need to have an annoying boss.

“Yeah, but that guy, forget about it, he would have tried the patience of a saint. Believe me, it’s not like I take any pleasure in ragging on him, because I told you he wasn’t so bad. It’s just that he hit me in my weak spot—my love of work. I would have rather he fined me or, I don’t know, maybe even given me a suspension, instead of those few words, put down so casually, but when I stopped to think about it, I felt like I’d been skinned

alive. It was as if all the problems of the job, and not only that one, were my fault, just because I hadn't wanted to use the Swedish bearings. And yet I had in fact used them—it wasn't my money, after all! But he didn't believe me, or at least he pretended not to believe me; anyway, after every telephone call from him I felt like a criminal, even though I had put my entire soul into the job. But I put my soul into every job, you know, even the stupid ones; actually the stupider they are, the more I put my soul into them. For me, every job is like a first love."

In the soft light of the sunset we headed back, along a path barely visible through the thickness of the forest. Against all his instincts, Faussone stopped talking, and walked silently at my side, with his hands behind his back and his eyes fixed on the ground. Two or three times I saw him draw in his breath and open his mouth as if to begin speaking again, but he seemed indecisive. He resumed only when we were in sight of the guesthouse:

"Can I tell you something? There was one time that boss of mine was right. Or sort of right. It was true that on that job there were a lot of problems, like the fact that we couldn't find the right materials, that the Commandant—yes, the salami guy—was always wasting my time instead of giving me a hand. It was also true that we didn't have a single laborer worth two cents; but if the work was proceeding poorly, despite all those delays, the fault was partially mine. Actually, it was the fault of a girl."

He had actually said *'na fija*, or *una figlia*, "a daughter"; and in fact, in his voice, the term "girl" would have sounded a little forced, but no more forced or affected than "daughter" would seem if you read it here. This information, however, was surprising. In his other stories Faussone had presented himself as impervious—a man of few sentimental attachments, the kind who doesn't "chase after girls," but whom girls chase after—though he doesn't really care, he picks this one or that one without giving it much thought, and keeps her only for the duration of his project; then he bids her farewell and leaves. I waited for him to continue, with anticipation and suspense.

"You know, there's a lot of stories that go around about the girls of that region, that they're small, fat, jealous, and only good for having kids. This particular girl was my height, with brownish-red hair; she stood as straight as a board and was about as sassy as any girl I've ever met. She drove a forklift, actually—that's how we met. Next to the conveyor belt that I was

assembling there was a track for trucks: just barely room enough for two to pass at the same time. I saw a truck coming down it, driven by a girl, carrying a load of steel pipes that were sticking out a little, and coming in the other direction was another truck, this one empty, and also driven by a girl. It was clear they wouldn't be able to cross at the same time, one of the two would have to back up until she reached a place where the road was wider, or the girl with the steel pipes could stop and remove her cargo and then reload them more tidily. No, they both planted themselves right there and started yelling insults at each other. I could tell right away that there was some bad blood between the two of them, and I was happy to wait patiently for them to finish, because I had to pass, too. I had one of those little trucks that you steer with a rudder shaft, loaded up with those famous bearings, and God forbid that it overturned and my boss found out.

"So I wait five minutes, then ten, but nothing happens, those girls are still at it, like they're out in the middle of the street. They were arguing in their dialect, but you could understand most of it. At a certain point I decided to get involved, and I asked them if they would please let me pass. The larger of the two—the girl I mentioned before—turns to me and goes, very calmly, 'Hold on, we're not done yet'; then she turns toward the other one, and just like that, coolly, she says something that I wouldn't dare repeat to you, but I swear it made my hair stand up straight. 'Okay,' she says to me, 'now you can pass,' and just like that she goes full speed in reverse, giving such a close shave to the columns and the supports of my conveyor belt that I froze. When she got to the end of the passage, still going in reverse, she took a turn that not even Niki Lauda could pull off, and instead of looking where she was going she was staring right at me. Christ, I thought to myself, she's a madwoman. But I had already figured out that the whole scene had been performed for my benefit, and a little while later I also learned that the reason she was acting so crudely was that she had been watching me for a number of days while I was putting the air bubble on the brackets. . . ."

That expression sounded strange to me, so I asked him to clarify. Faussone, annoyed, explained in a few dense words that an air bubble is a type of level that contains liquid with an air bubble in it. When it's perfectly horizontal, the bubble is properly aligned, and that's how you know the surface on which it's resting is flat.

“So if someone says, ‘Put the air bubble on that,’ that’s what they’re talking about. But let me continue, because the story about the girl is more important. The point was that she had understood me—she understood that I like people who are decisive and know their trade, and I could tell that she was into me, and was trying to strike up a conversation. So we started talking, and it wasn’t at all difficult—I mean, we slept together and it seemed natural, nothing unusual. But there’s something else I wanted to tell you. The nicest moment, the moment when I said to myself, ‘I’m never going to forget this, not even when I’m old, or when I’m on my deathbed,’ and I wished time would stop right then, like a motor cutting out—well, it wasn’t the moment we went to bed. It was before that. We were in the cafeteria of the Commandant’s factory. We were sitting near each other, we were done eating, we were talking about this and that—actually I remember I was telling her about my boss and his odd way of opening doors—and I put my hand on the bench to my right, and there was her hand, and our hands touched, and hers didn’t move; she just left it there for me to pet, like a cat. Let me tell you, everything that happened later was very nice, too, but it didn’t mean as much.”

“And where is she now?”

“You really have to know everything, don’t you?” said Faussone, as if it had been my idea for him to tell me the story of the truck driver. “What do you want me to say? It’s a tug-of-war. Marry her? I can’t marry her: first of all there’s my job, second because . . . well, before getting married, you need to think it through, and for a girl like that—she’s good, needless to say, but she’s also as cunning as a witch. I’m not sure if I’m explaining myself. But to let bygones be bygones, or forget all about her—that wouldn’t be right. Every once in a while I go to my boss and ask to be sent back to that region, with the excuse that I have to make some repairs. And one time she showed up in Turin, on holiday, wearing faded cutoff jeans, accompanied by a boy, one of those guys with a beard up to his eyes, and she introduced me to him as if it were no big deal; so I also acted like it was no big deal. I felt something like mild heartburn, in the pit of my stomach, though I didn’t say anything because that was our arrangement. But you’re something else, aren’t you? Making me tell you things I’ve never told anyone before.”



Tiresias

It's not normally like this: normally Faussone dives into a story about some adventure or misadventure, and rattles off the whole thing without taking a breath, in that haphazard manner of his to which I'd become accustomed by now, without allowing himself to be interrupted, except for brief requests for explanations. This being the case, he seems better suited to monologues than to dialogues, and for the most part his monologues are overloaded with his repetitive tics and his particular language, which to me comes across as rather gray; I suppose it's the gray of our country's fogs, or perhaps the gray of the sheet metal and steel pipes that are effectively the heroes of his stories.

That night, however, it seemed that things might unfold differently: he had had quite a lot of wine, and the wine—a terrible, cloudy wine, viscous and sour—had altered him. It hadn't dulled his wits, and, besides, anyone in his line of work shouldn't leave himself open to surprises (as he said himself)—one must always be on guard, like the secret agents you see in films—nor had it obscured his lucidity. But it had stripped him of something. It had cracked his protective armor. I'd never seen him so taciturn, but, oddly enough, his silence, instead of making him seem distant, brought us closer together.

He emptied another glass, without enthusiasm or enjoyment, but with the bitter resignation of someone forced to take his medicine: ". . . so are you writing down these stories that I'm telling you?" Perhaps I would, I told him; I wasn't bored with writing, writing was my second profession, and I was just at that moment giving serious consideration to the possibility of making it my first, or even sole, profession. Did he not want me to write

down his stories? On other occasions the idea had made him happy, even proud.

"Right. Yeah, well, don't pay attention to that, not all days are the same, you know, and today, well, today is ruined—one of those days when nothing goes right. There are some days when you can even lose the will to work." He was silent for a long time. Then he said:

"Yeah, there are some days when everything goes haywire; and it's all very well to say that you're not responsible, that the whole design is screwy, that you're tired and, besides, the devil's wind is blowing. All true, but the grief that you feel right here, nobody can fix that. So then you start questioning yourself, you even ask questions that make no sense, like, for example, what are we doing here in this world? And if you think about it for a second, you realize that we're not in this world to rig trusses, if you know what I'm saying. I mean, when you suffer for twelve days, putting all your energy and skills into a job, sweating, freezing, and cursing, and you start having doubts, they begin to gnaw at you, and when you take a good look, sure enough, the job is out of whack; you don't believe it because you don't want to believe it, but then you look again and all the dimensions are off—then, my friend, what do you do? That's when you have to change your mentality, and you start to wonder whether the whole thing is worth the trouble in the first place, and that it might be best to take on some other line of work. But then you start thinking that every job is the same, and that the whole world is out of control—even if we've now figured out how to go to the moon—and it's always been out of control, and no one can fix it, especially not some rigger. Yes, well, you get thinking about this sort of thing. . . . But tell me, do other guys worry about this sort of thing?"

How intransigent is that optical illusion that makes our neighbor's problems seem less bitter than ours, and his profession more lovable! I responded by saying that it's difficult to make comparisons; however, having done work similar to his, I could concede that it's advantageous to work sitting down, at ground level, in a warm place; yet, besides this, and supposing I was permitted to speak on behalf of all writers, I'd say that we have bad days, too. In fact they happen to us more often, because it's easier to tell whether a piece of metalwork is "on the air bubble" than a written page. You can write a page, or even a whole book, with a feeling of great enthusiasm, and only at the end do you realize it's no good, that it's a mess, foolish, derivative, lacking, excessive, useless; and then you get sad, and

start having the very same ideas that he was having that evening, and you wonder whether it's time to change not just your career but the air you breathe and your skin, and maybe you even think about becoming a rigger. But it can also happen (and it happens often) that when you write useless, foolish things, you don't realize it and don't want to realize it. This is quite possible, because paper is an excessively tolerant material. No matter what absurdity you write, it never protests: it's not like the wood you use for scaffolding in a mining tunnel, which creaks when it's overloaded and is about to collapse. In the writing trade, the instruments and the alarm signals are rudimental: there's nothing equivalent to a square or a plumb line. If a page doesn't work, the reader knows it, but by then it's too late, and nothing good's going to come out of it, especially since that page is your work and yours alone—you have no excuses or pretexts, you're entirely responsible for it.

At this point I noticed that Faussone, despite the wine and his bad mood, had become attentive. He had stopped drinking and—though his expression was usually thick, fixed, and less animated than the bottom of a frying pan—he was now regarding me with a look that was somewhere between mischievous and malicious.

"All right, that's a fact. I never thought of it like that. Just think, if no one had ever invented those monitoring instruments for us and the work had to go forward just the same, then we'd have to make it all up as we went along: it'd be enough to drive you crazy."

I acknowledged that, indeed, writers' nerves did tend to be weak, but it's difficult to determine whether the nerves weaken because of writing, and the aforementioned absence of sensitive instruments that might evaluate the quality of the written work, or whether the writing profession simply attracts people who are predisposed to anxiety. Unquestionably, however, many writers are neurasthenics, or at least they become that way (it's always difficult to diagnose "occupational diseases"), and many others end up in a mental institution or some equivalent, and not only in this century but in many centuries past; there are also a lot of writers who don't exhibit any obvious signs of illness, but who live badly, get depressed, drink, smoke, don't sleep, and die young.

Faussone was beginning to enjoy this game of comparing the two professions; it wouldn't be like him to admit it, since he's normally so sober

and composed, but you could see it from the fact that he'd stopped drinking, and his period of silence had come to an end. He replied:

"The fact is that people talk a lot about work, but those who talk the loudest are the ones who have never tried it. If you ask me, this issue of skittish nerves affects everyone these days—not just writers and riggers but people in all lines of work. You know who it doesn't affect? Janitors, clock-watchers, assembly-line workers—because they send everyone else to the mental asylum. Speaking of nerves: don't think for a second that when you're up there in the sky, all by yourself, and a wind blows, and the tower hasn't yet been reinforced and it's bobbing like a toy boat, and the people on the ground are the size of ants, and you're holding on with one hand and you have the wrench in the other; and you wish you had a third hand to hold the blueprint, and maybe also another, number four, to shift the catch on your safety belt—well, like I was saying, don't think for a second that this is soothing on the nerves. To tell the truth, I can't think off the top of my head of a single rigger who's ended up in a mental asylum, though I know of many, including friends of mine, who have gotten ill and had to change professions."

I had to admit that with writers there are, in reality, very few occupational illnesses—partly because, generally speaking, the hours are flexible.

"You mean there aren't any," he rudely interrupted. "You can't get sick from writing. At most, if you write with a pen, you can get a callus. And as for occupational hazards—well, don't even get me started."

He had made his point, all right—I admitted it. Then, in the same polite tone, Faussone, in an unusual flight of fancy, said that it was like trying to figure out whether it was better to be born a man or a woman. The only person who could know the right answer would be someone who had tried both ways. At this point, though I realized it was a low blow on my part, I couldn't resist the temptation to tell him the story of Tiresias.

He seemed somewhat uncomfortable when I informed him that Jupiter and Juno, besides being husband and wife, were also brother and sister—they usually don't make a point of telling you that at school, but there was surely some significance to it. He did display interest, however, when I told him about their famous argument—about whether the pleasures of love and sex were more intense for woman or man. Oddly enough, Jupiter awarded the prize to woman, Juno to man. Faussone interrupted:

“Exactly, it’s like I was saying before: to decide, you’d need someone who had tried out being both a man and a woman; but there’s no one like that, even if, every once in a while, you read in the newspaper about that navy captain who goes to Casablanca to undergo an operation and then gives birth to four children. If you ask me, those are just journalists’ tales.”

“Probably. But at that time it seems that there did exist a suitable judge. His name was Tiresias, a wise man of Thebes, in Greece, to whom, many years earlier, a strange thing had happened. He was a man, a man like you or me, and one autumn evening, which I imagine was as damp and gloomy as this one, while walking through the forest, he came across a tangle of snakes. He looked more closely and realized that there were only two snakes, but they were both very long and thick: one was a male and the other a female (you can already see that Tiresias was an acute observer, because I don’t know how he was able to tell a male python from a female, especially at night, and if they were so entangled that it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began)—and the male and female were having sex. Tiresias, because he was scandalized, or envious, or simply because the two animals were blocking his way, raised his walking stick and brought it down heavily on the pile of snakes; then he felt a great jumbling sensation, and was transformed from a man into a woman.”

Faussone, who always got worked up by notions of humanistic origin, sneered and told me that one time, not far from Greece—in Turkey, to be precise—he, too, had encountered a tangle of snakes in the woods; there weren’t two of them, however, but many, and they weren’t pythons but garden snakes. It certainly seemed as if they were having sex, in that odd way of theirs, all twisted up, but he had nothing against it and he let them be: “But now that I know the trick, the next time it happens, who knows, I might just have to try it myself.”

“Anyway, it seems that this Tiresias was a woman for seven years, and he had his share of feminine experiences. But at the end of those seven years he again came across the snakes. This time, knowing the trick, he hit them with his stick on purpose, so as to be turned back into a man. Evidently, having experienced both sides, he found manhood to be more advantageous. Yet in that debate I was telling you about he said that Jupiter was right, but I couldn’t tell you why he said that. Perhaps he found it better to be a woman, but only for sex and not for the rest, because otherwise he would have remained a woman—that is, he wouldn’t have delivered that

second blow. Or maybe he was just worried about what might happen were he to contradict Jupiter. But he got himself in trouble anyway, because Juno was offended—”

“Yeah, never get between husband and wife—”

“—she was so offended that she blinded him, and Jupiter couldn’t do anything about it, because apparently there was a rule at the time stating that when a god cursed a mortal, no other god, not even Jupiter, could reverse it. The best Jupiter could do was give Tiresias the ability to see into the future. But, as you can tell from this story, it was too late.”

Faussone was fiddling with the bottle and he had a vaguely annoyed air about him. “It’s a good enough story. You learn something new every day. But I don’t quite get what it has to do with me. You’re not trying to tell me that you’re Tiresias, are you?”

I hadn’t anticipated a personal attack. I explained to Faussone that one of the great privileges of a writer is the ability to maintain a level of imprecision and vagueness, to say and yet not say, to invent freely without worrying about being prudent—because the pylons we build do not carry high-tension cables, if they fall no one dies, and they don’t even have to hold up against the wind. We’re ultimately an irresponsible bunch, and you’ll never see a writer be brought to trial or end up in prison because his structures fell down. But I also said that—and maybe I hadn’t realized it until I was telling him the story—I did feel a little like Tiresias, and not simply because of my double identity. A long time ago I, too, had stumbled into the middle of a fight between gods; I, too, had come across snakes in my path, and that encounter altered my condition, giving me the strange power of words; and since then, appearing as a chemist before the eyes of the world, yet feeling the blood of a writer in my veins, I felt as if I had two souls in my body, which is one too many. But I said he shouldn’t take this very seriously, because the whole comparison was a stretch; to work to the fullest extent of one’s ability, or even beyond one’s ability, is our profession’s true reward. Unlike riggers, when we manage to transcend our limitations and pull off impossible combinations we’re happy and we receive praise.

Faussone, to whom I had told all my stories on other evenings, neither raised an objection nor asked me any additional questions, and anyway it was now too late to go further into the matter. Yet feeling emboldened by my expertise in both Venuses, and despite the fact that he was quite visibly

sleepy, I tried to explain to him that on good days all three of our professions, my two and his one, could provide satisfaction. His profession and the chemistry profession that resembles it because they teach you how to be whole, to think with your hands and with your whole body, and not to capitulate before ruinous days and formulas you don't understand, for there will come a time when you do understand them; ultimately they teach you to know the material and stand up to it. And writing because it yields—rarely, but once in a while—some moments of creation, as when a current passes through a cold circuit and a lamp goes on, or a rotor moves.

We agreed that we had many good things in common. The advantage of being able to evaluate ourselves without having to depend on others, and seeing our selves reflected in our work. The pleasure of watching your creation grow, stone by stone, bolt by bolt, solid, essential, symmetrical, and well suited to its purpose, and when it's done you can look at it and think that it might outlive you, and that it might be of use to someone you don't know and who doesn't know you. Maybe you'll be able to come back and see it in your old age, and it will seem beautiful to you, and it won't really matter if you're the only one who finds it beautiful. And you'll say to yourself, "There may be no other person in the world who could have pulled this off."

Offshore

“Sure I’m young, but I’ve seen some dark things in my time, and they’ve always had something to do with oil. You’ll never see oil being found in a nice place like, say, San Remo or the Costa Brava; at least not anymore—only in disgusting, godforsaken places. All the worst things that have ever happened to me happened while I was searching for oil. What made matters worse was that I could never put my heart into it, because everyone basically knows that oil’s going to run out and it’s not worth the trouble. But you know how it is: if you sign a contract, it doesn’t matter where they send you, you better go. Then again, to be completely honest, I was happy enough to go off on this particular job, because it was in Alaska.

“I haven’t read too many books, but as a child I read everything that Jack London ever wrote about Alaska, and not just once, either. Those books gave me an idea of the place, but after I went there—and I’m sorry to have to say this in front of you—I began to lose faith in the printed word. I mean, I was expecting to find myself in a land of snow and ice, of midnight sun, of sled dogs and gold mines and maybe even bears and wolves that chase after you. That was the idea I had of the place, I was carrying it around with me almost without realizing it, so when they called me into the office and told me that there was an opening to go to Alaska for a rigging job, I didn’t think twice before I signed the contract. There was also the matter of a special hardship allowance, and then I’d been in the city for three months and, as you know, I don’t like city life. Or, rather, I like it for three or four days, I take a walk, maybe check out a movie, I look up some girl and go see her, maybe I decide to see her again, so I take her to dinner at Il Cambio and feel like some kind of hot shot. Sometimes I also go visit

those two aunts of mine on Via Lagrange that I told you about the other time. . . .”

I could’ve sworn that he hadn’t told me about these aunts—at least he hadn’t described them. There then transpired a brief squabble in which each of us tried politely to insinuate that the other one hadn’t been paying attention, until Faussone settled the argument unceremoniously.

“It doesn’t matter. I have these two churchgoing aunts. I go sit in their nice living room and they give me chocolates; one is clever, the other not so much. But I’ll tell you about them some other time.

“So I was talking about Alaska, and how I don’t like being in the city. That’s because, you see, I’m the type of guy that can’t just do the minimum. Yeah, like those motors with malfunctioning carburetors that you have to keep revving so they don’t quit, even if you risk burning the ignition. After a few days in the city all kinds of bad things start happening to me: I wake up in the middle of the night, I feel like I’m coming down with a cold but I never actually get sick, I feel like I’ve forgotten how to breathe, I get headaches and footaches, when I go out in the street I think everyone’s watching me—I feel lost, in other words. One time I even went to see the company doctor, but he just made fun of me. He was right, because I knew what was wrong with me: I wanted to leave. So the time I’m telling you about, I signed the contract without asking too many questions. I was just happy to have a new job, a project on which I’d be working in partnership with Americans, and I figured they’d give me the rest of the information once I got to the site. So just like that I zipped up my bag—I keep it ready to go—and I got on a plane.

“There’s nothing really to say about the trip: jet lag used to bother me, but now I’m used to it. I made my three flight changes, I slept during the flights, and when I arrived I was as fresh as a rose. Everything went as planned, a representative from the company was waiting for me in a Chrysler as big as a boat and I felt like the Shah of Persia. The representative took me to a restaurant for shrimp—they’re something like our prawns, and he told me they were a regional specialty—but there was nothing to drink; he explained to me that his religion forbade alcohol, and with his immaculate manners he made it clear to me that, out of concern for my eternal soul, I shouldn’t have anything to drink, either; he was a nice enough guy, but that’s what he was like. Over shrimp he explained the job to me, and it seemed a job like any other. Well, you know how

representatives are, they're great at handling people, but when it comes to work, forget about it. I once quarreled with one because he didn't understand anything and he was promising the client impossible things. You know what he told me? That in our line of work you had three options: you could understand what was going on, you could understand it poorly, or you could understand nothing at all, but to understand it well you needed to be an engineer. And rather than have a poor understanding, it was best to understand nothing, since that way you'd always have an excuse if things didn't work out. Good logic, huh?"

Since I have friends who are corporate representatives, I did my best to defend them, saying that it's a delicate job, that it's often worse if they know too much because then they lose business, and so on, but Faussone wouldn't listen to reason.

"No, I've never met a single one who understood a thing, or who even made an effort. Some of them pretend to understand, but they're the worst of all. Don't talk to me about them—representatives—unless you want an argument. Believe me, all they're good for is handling clients, taking them to nightclubs and soccer games, and that's not so bad because sometimes they take us along, too, but as far as understanding the job, give me a break, they're all alike, I've never met one who had any idea of what was going on.

"Well, this man tells me that I'm there to finish the rigging of a derrick at a worksite forty kilometers away, and then load it onto boats, to be carried out to sea, to a shoal not too far from the coast. If the derrick was going to be loaded onto a boat, I figured it couldn't have been anything special; and I almost began to get angry, because they had made me travel halfway around the world for this. But I didn't say anything to the representative—it wasn't his fault.

"It was night now, so he says his goodbyes and tells me he'll pick me up from the hotel at eight o'clock the next morning to take me to the site. The next morning everything's going fine; I did have to eat shrimp for breakfast, but of course I'd seen worse. Everything's fine, like I said: he arrives at eight, punctual, in his Chrysler, and we leave, and pretty soon we're outside the city, because it was a small city. It wasn't exactly a 'Burning Daylight.'[2] I'd never seen such a melancholy place. It looked like Séstrier in the off-season; I don't know if you've ever been there, but there was a dirty, low sky, so low that it looked like you could touch it—at times we did touch it,

because when the road went up an incline we drove right into the fog. A cold, moist breeze was blowing, it slipped under your clothes and put you in a bad mood, and in the fields all around us grew a hard, short black grass that resembled drill bits. There wasn't a soul in sight, just large crows, the size of turkeys: they watched us pass and shuffled their feet without flying away, as if they were laughing at us. We went up a hill, and at the top Mr. Compton showed me the worksite—it emerged from the gray air at the edge of the sea, and it took my breath away. Look, you know I don't like to exaggerate, but we were ten kilometers away and it was as if we were already there: it looked like the skeleton of a whale, long and black, lying along the shore, already completely rusted because in that part of the world iron starts to rust within minutes, and the thought that it was my responsibility to erect the thing in the middle of the ocean—I almost pitched a fit. Anyone can say, 'Go build a derrick.' You remember that other time, the time with the monkey, when you told me about the London executioner and all that? Well, figure that tower was twenty meters high, which is a pretty good height, take it from me; this structure, though it still wasn't close to being finished, already extended two hundred and fifty meters along the ground. To give you an idea of what I'm talking about, that's like from here to that green fence over there, or from Piazza San Carlo to Piazza Castello. Work never scares me, but on that occasion I said to myself, 'Your time has come.'

"As we drove down the hill, the gentleman explained to me that the Alaska of the snow and the sleds does exist, but it's much farther north; where we were was still Alaska, but we were on a landmass that extended down the Pacific Coast, like a handle that connected to the real Alaska, and in fact that's exactly what they call it in English, the Panhandle—which means the handle of a pan. As for the snow, he told me not to worry, this was the season for it and there'd be snow sooner or later, but if not, that'd be for the best. It was like he knew what was going to happen. And he acknowledged that yes, the derrick was rather large, but that's the reason they'd sent to Italy for a 'bright guy,' which, modesty aside, meant me. He was a good fellow, that guy, despite all his talk about the eternal soul.

"As we were having this conversation, we went down the hill's winding road and arrived at the site. The whole crew was there to greet us: the designers, the project's engineering director, a half-dozen new engineers—all English-speaking and all with beards—and the team of Alaskan riggers,

none of whom were actually from Alaska. One of them was a big fat pistolero, and they told me that he was Russian Orthodox, apparently there's still a few of them left over from back when the Russians had the brilliant idea to sell Alaska to the Americans. The second guy was called Di Staso, so he obviously wasn't very Alaskan. They told me that the third was an Indian, hired because they're good at climbing on scaffolding and they're fearless. The fourth one I don't remember too well: he was a regular guy, the kind you find everywhere, with the face of a half-wit.

"The head engineer was on top of things, the kind of guy who doesn't talk a lot and doesn't stress any single word more than any other; in fact, to be honest, I got exhausted trying to understand what he was saying because he spoke without ever opening his mouth, but as you know, in America that's what they're taught—that it's not polite to open your mouth. But he was on top of everything—he showed me the scale model, he introduced me to the odd team that I just told you about, and he told them that I would be in charge of rigging. We went to lunch in the cafeteria, and I probably don't have to tell you that it was shrimp again; then he gave me a booklet that contained instructions for the rigging, and he said that he'd let me study it for two days, but after that I'd have to report to the site because we needed to get started on the job. He showed me in the booklet how all the operations had to be performed on certain days, some even at a certain hour, because of the tide. Yes, the tide: you don't get it, right? I didn't get it myself, in that moment, what the tide had to do with anything. I understood it later, and I'll explain it to you later, too, if you like."

That was fine with me: it's always best to go along with someone who is telling a story, otherwise he'll stumble and lose his train of thought. Besides, Faussone was in rare form, and as the story unfolded, I saw that his head kept sinking between his shoulders, the way it does whenever he's about to reveal something big.

"Then we left, Compton and me. But I have to tell you that I had a strange feeling about all of it. That office, that cafeteria, and, more than anything else, those faces—it was as if I had seen them all before, and then I realized that it was true, I had seen it all before in a movie, though I couldn't tell you when, or what film. So Compton and I, like I said, left for the city. I was going to return to the hotel to study the booklet, but the engineer told me that once the job started, I'd be staying in a room reserved for me in the guesthouse at the worksite; he said *ghestrum*, and I couldn't

figure out what the hell that meant, but I didn't risk asking him because in theory I knew how to speak English.

"Anyway, we got back on the road in my man's gorgeous Chrysler, and I shut my mouth and ruminated on the job. On the one hand it was a great job, the kind that you remember for a long time afterward and it makes you happy to have done it; on the other hand, that little word 'tide,' and the necessity of transporting that derrick, made me a little sick to my stomach. Because, you know, I've never liked the ocean: the way it's always moving, the dampness, the soft sea air—the bottom line is that I don't trust it, and it gets me down. And then, at a certain point while we were driving, I saw a strange thing: the sun was somewhat dim in the sky, and on either side of it there were two other, smaller suns. I pointed this out to Compton, and I saw that it made him anxious; in fact, a little bit later, all of a sudden, the sky went dark, even though it was still daytime, and it immediately began to snow like nothing I'd ever seen before. It was coming down heavily, first in hard grains, like semolina, then in a powder so fine that it entered the car's air intakes, and finally in flakes the size of walnuts. We were still going up the hill, a dozen kilometers from the worksite, and it became clear that things were taking a bad turn. Compton hadn't said anything, he just grunted once or twice; I watched the windshield wiper, I heard the engine whirr and turn over, harder and harder, and I thought to myself: If it stops, we're toast.

"Hey, have you ever completely flubbed something?"

Yes, I replied, I had, and more than once, too, but I didn't quite follow. Faussone said:

"I've done so as well, many times in fact, but never as bad as what Compton did then. He was skidding like crazy, so the only thing to do was to keep it in second gear, without braking or accelerating, and maybe giving the windshield wiper a rest once in a while; but instead, seeing a straightaway, he grunted again and slammed on the gas. The car spun around; it did a complete one-eighty, as sharp as a soldier doing an about-face, and came to a stop up against the mountainside, our two left wheels in a ditch. The engine stopped, but the wiper kept going back and forth like crazy, burrowing into the windshield, making two windows framed by snow. Clearly the car was a good make—or maybe they just build them better over there.

“Compton was wearing dress shoes but I was in army boots with rubber soles, so it was up to me to get out and see what could be done. I found the jack and I tried to position it; I wanted to lift the left side of the car and then slide some rocks under the wheels, in the ditch, and then try to head back to the worksite, since the car was already turned around and now faced downhill, and it didn’t seem to have suffered any real damage. But there was no way—it had come to a stop thirty centimeters short of the side of the mountain, so I could just slide myself in behind it, but there was no way I could get under the car and insert the jack securely. In the meantime the snow was ankle deep, it was only getting worse, and it was now almost dark.

“There was nothing to do but stay put, remain calm, and wait for daylight to come so that we could find a way to get out of the snow; the car had enough gas, so we could leave the motor and the heat on and go to sleep. The main thing was not to lose our heads—but Compton lost his right away. He started crying and laughing, he said that he felt like he was suffocating, and that I should run to the site and get help while it was still light out. Once he even grabbed me around the neck, at which point I punched him twice in the stomach, in order to calm him down, and in fact it did calm him down, but I was terrified to spend the night next to him—as you know, I don’t like being in narrow, enclosed spaces. So I asked him whether he had a flashlight; he did, he gave it to me, and I got the hell out of there.

“I have to say that, as far as bleakness goes, this was pretty bleak. The wind picked up and the snow again became very fine and started blowing in every direction; it went down my neck and in my eyes and I found it hard to breathe. It had snowed maybe half a meter, but the wind had swept it against the side of the mountain and the car was almost completely covered; even the headlights, which were still on, lay beneath a mantle of snow, but you could still see their light—a pale glow that seemed to emanate from Purgatory. I rapped on the glass and told Compton to turn them off and to sit there quietly, and I’d return soon. I tried to fix the car’s exact location in my mind, and then I took off.

“At first it wasn’t so bad. I figured I’d only have to go about ten kilometers, or even less if I took a shortcut and headed in a straight line down the mountain, bypassing all of the switchbacks. And I said to myself, ‘You wanted Alaska? You wanted snow? Well, now you’ve got it. You

ought to be happy.’ But I wasn’t very happy. Those ten kilometers felt like forty, because with every step I plunged knee-deep into the snow, and although I was going downhill, I began to sweat, my heart pounded, and partly because of the storm, partly because of my exhaustion, I kept losing my breath and had to keep stopping. The flashlight, by the way, was of no help whatsoever. All I could see were a lot of horizontal white lines and a glistening powder that made my head spin, so I turned it off and proceeded through the darkness. I was hurrying to get down to flat land, because I figured that once I was on flat ground the site couldn’t be much farther away. Well, this turned out to be an idiotic notion, because as soon as I got back to flat ground I realized I had no idea where to go. I didn’t have a compass—the only compass I’d had up to that point was the mountainside, and with that gone I had no idea what to do. I was paralyzed by fear—a hideous beast—and I don’t think I’ve ever felt it worse, even those times when, to be honest, the danger was greater, but it was because of the darkness, and the wind, and I was all by myself in a place at the end of the earth; and it occurred to me that if I were to fall down and lose consciousness, the snow would bury me alive, and nobody would find me until April, after everything had melted. And, though I don’t think of him often, I thought of my father.

“You see, my father was born back in 1912—a member of that unfortunate generation. He had to do every kind of national service possible: he fought in Africa, then France, Albania, and finally Russia, and he came home with a frostbitten foot and some strange ideas, and later he was imprisoned in Germany, but I’ll tell you about that another time; parenthetically, it was then, while his foot was healing, that he *manufactured* me—that’s the word he’d always use when he joked around with me. Anyway, that time in Alaska I felt a little bit like my father, who had been abandoned in the snow—even though he was a good metalworker—and he told me that he had felt a great urge to sit down in the snow and wait for death to come, but finally he gathered his courage and kept walking for twenty-four days, until he was out of it. So I gathered my courage, too.

“I gathered my courage and told myself that the important thing was to think rationally. This was my reasoning: if the wind had driven the snow against the car and the mountainside, that meant it was blowing from the north, which was the direction of the worksite; assuming that the wind didn’t change direction, I’d just have to walk straight into it. Maybe I

wouldn’t find the site, but at least I’d get close, and I’d avoid the danger of traveling in circles, like a roach when it sees light. So I continued to walk into the wind, and every so often I turned on the flashlight to see my footsteps behind me, but the snow filled them in immediately. Besides the snow that kept falling from the sky, there was another snow, raised by the wind, which whipped across the flat ground and into the darkness, hissing like a hundred snakes. Once in a while I’d look at my watch. It was odd: I felt like I’d been walking for weeks, but the clock never seemed to move. It was as if time stood still. All the better for Compton, I thought, so when we find him he won’t be frozen stiff. But I’m sure he felt like it had been a long time, too.

“Anyway, I was lucky. After walking for two hours I hadn’t found the site. Yet I realized that I was crossing train tracks, the service tracks, I mean; all right, the tracks themselves weren’t visible, but I could see those fences that they use to prevent the snow from piling up on the rails. The fences were totally useless, but they were useful to me, because they still jutted out a little bit, so I pressed on against the wind by following the fence posts and I arrived at the site. Everything went smoothly after that. They had a vehicle ready for, as they say, ‘emergencies’*—see what a funny language English is? Because not a damn thing was going to ‘emerge’ from that snow. It was a six-ton behemoth, with tracks almost a meter wide, so it wouldn’t sink in the snow and could go up forty-degree inclines without a hitch. The driver turned on the headlights, we were back up the slope in a minute, we found the spot, we had shovels ready, and we pulled out Compton, who was half asleep. Perhaps he had already started to freeze, but we shook him a little and gave him a nip of booze—which was against his principles, but he didn’t notice—then we gave him a massage, and he was all right. He didn’t say much, but then again he wasn’t a talkative guy. We left the car where it was.

“Back at the site they gave me a straw mattress and the first thing I did was ask for another copy of the construction booklet, because the first one was going to be spending the winter in the Chrysler. I was dead tired, and fell asleep immediately, but all night long I dreamed about the huge snowstorm, and about a guy walking through it, into the wind, and in my dream I couldn’t tell whether it was me or my father. But as soon as I woke up the next morning my thoughts turned to that other emergency, which was now only two days away—the loading of that absurdly long thing onto a

boat and carrying it between various islands for eighty miles, and then standing it upright on the sea floor. I'm sorry, but you're looking at me like you don't know what I'm talking about."

I tried to reassure Faussone, promising him that I was following his story with great interest, which was true, and with complete comprehension —which was not entirely true, since there are certain things that, in order to understand them, you have to do yourself, or at least you have to see them for yourself. He guessed as much and, without hiding his impatience, he took out his pen and grabbed a paper napkin, and said he would show me. He was a good draftsman. He sketched the shape of his derrick to scale: a trapezoid, 250 meters high, with the broader base 105 meters and the shorter 80, and above this an assortment of trusses, cranes, and turrets. Next to it he sketched the Mole Antonelliana, which looked pathetic by comparison, and St. Peter's, which was only half as tall.

"Look," he said, pointing to the shorter side of the trapezoid. "Once it's upright, the sea comes up to here. But they constructed it lying down, where it was mounted on three sledges, and the sledges were mounted on three ramps of reinforced concrete and steel; all this was done before I even showed up. Now I'll show you that, too. But the best part, the trick—here, you can see it here in the drawing. The derrick's six legs aren't all equal: you see I've made the ones on this side bigger. And they were quite long, in fact: three tubes eight meters in diameter, a hundred and thirty meters long, just as high as St. Peter's, which I've drawn here on the side. By the way, you know I don't have much in common with priests, but whenever I'm in Rome I go to St. Peter's—which you have to admit is a great piece of work, especially when you consider the limited means available to them back then. It's not like I feel any desire to pray when I'm at St. Peter's, not even a little bit; but when that contraption started slowly to turn in the water, and then stood up straight, all by itself, and we all climbed up to smash the bottle—well, yeah, I felt a little like praying, but unfortunately I didn't know what prayer to say; none of them seemed exactly right. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

"Like I said, three legs were larger, and that was because they weren't simply legs; they were also designed to be buoys. But let me get back to the story. I got settled at the site, and I spent two days peacefully reading the booklet, going over the details with the engineer, and drying my clothes. On the third day we began work.

“The first thing to do was position the hydraulic jacks: they’re like car jacks, only bigger. It wasn’t a difficult job, and it was a good way to evaluate the work team I told you about—the Russian Orthodox, Di Staso, the Indian, and the normal guy. As you can imagine, besides having trouble understanding what I was saying, they could barely understand one another; but ultimately we were all riggers, and we always figure out a way of communicating with each other, even if only through gestures. We get the idea right away, and if one guy is particularly bright, you can bet the next guy will listen to him, even if he isn’t the boss. That’s how it is all over the world, and every time I think of my father—because he’s dead now—I think that if only the military worked like this, then certain things wouldn’t have happened; things like, for example, taking a metalworker from the Canavese and shipping him off to Russia with cardboard shoes to shoot at Russian metalworkers. And if governments worked like this, there would be no need for armies, because there’d be no reason to fight wars, since people with common sense would reach agreements with one another.”

The conclusions people come up with when they presume to hold forth on issues outside their area of expertise! I tried delicately to point out to him the subversive, even revolutionary undertones of what he was saying. Assign responsibility according to experience? Are you joking? This kind of system may work for riggers, but for other, more subtle and complex activities? But I had no trouble getting him back on track.

“Look, I don’t like ordering people around or taking orders. I like to work by myself, so that it’s like I’m putting my signature on the finished product; but of course a job like that was not for one man. So we got busy: after that huge snowstorm that I told you about, we had a little bit of calm and things went all right, though there was some fog from time to time. It took me a little while to figure out what caliber of guy each one of them was, because we’re not all made equal—and that’s especially true of foreigners.

“The Russian Orthodox was as strong as a bull. His beard ran up to his eyes and he had hair down to here, but he worked with care and you could tell right away that he was a professional. Except you couldn’t interrupt him, otherwise he’d lose the thread, become confused, and had to start all over again. Di Staso, I learned, was the son of a man from Bari and a woman from Germany, and in fact he seemed a bit mixed up; when he spoke, I found it as hard to follow him as I would a real American, though

fortunately he didn’t talk much. He was one of those guys who always say yes, and then go ahead and do it their own way. So I had to keep an eye on him, but the problem was that he was bothered by the cold, so he would take breaks every second, and start dancing around—even when he was at the top of the truss, which gave me goose bumps—and he’d stick his hands in his armpits. The Indian was a real character: I found out from the engineer that he was from a tribe of hunters who, instead of staying on their reservation and going through the motions for tourists, had agreed to move to the cities and clean the façades of skyscrapers; he was twenty-two years old, and his father and his grandfather had been in that line of work. Which is not exactly the same thing—as a rigger you have to use your head a little bit more—but he had a good head. He also had some strange habits, however: he never looked you in the eye, never moved his face, and in general seemed a bit rigid, though on the job he was as nimble as a cat. He didn’t speak much, either: he was about as much fun as a stomachache, and when you criticized him, he talked back. He even cursed people out, but fortunately only in the dialect of his tribe, so you could pretend not to understand and there weren’t any problems. The last guy was the normal one; but I still haven’t figured him out. He was really something of a cretin. It took him a while to understand things, though he was willing, and he paid attention, because he knew he wasn’t very bright; so he tried to persist and not make mistakes, and actually he made relatively few mistakes—in fact I couldn’t understand how he made so few. I felt sorry for him because the others made fun of him, and I felt a tenderness toward him, as you would toward a child, even though he was almost forty years old and not particularly kind on the eyes. You know, one advantage of our line of work is that there’s a place even for guys like that, and they learn on the job the things that they didn’t learn in school. It’s just that, with this kind of person, you need to be a little more patient.

“So, as I was saying, it wasn’t too hard to position the hydraulic jacks that would allow us to slide the truss into the sea; it wasn’t too exhausting or labor-intensive, all we had to do was put the jacks in place and make sure they were perfectly level. That took a day, and then we began to push. But don’t think for a second that we just eyeballed it and gave a shove. There was a control room: it was well heated and it had a Coke machine, a closed-circuit television, and a telephone that connected to the hydraulic jack operators. All you had to do was push the buttons and you could see on the

television whether everything was lined up. Oh, and I forgot—between the jacks and the sledges there were also piezometric cells, whose dials were in the control room, so you could monitor the force at every moment; and while I was sitting in that control room, in a comfortable chair, in the middle of all those devices, I thought back to my father and his sheet metal, a blow here and a blow there, to repair any defects, morning to night in the dark workshop with his sawdust stove—and I felt a lump form in my throat.

"But I couldn't stand to sit there for too long. At some point I ran out into the cold to watch the derrick move. You couldn't hear a thing, just the wind, the hum of the oil pumps in the control room, and the sea that was washing against the docks, three hundred meters away, but it wasn't visible through the fog. And in the middle of the fog, obscured by the fog, you could see the derrick advancing, as big as a mountain and as slow as a snail. I had adjusted the control panel just as the manual instructed, and the derrick was moving a half-meter per minute. You had to go right up close in order to see it move, but, once you did, it was impressive, and I thought of an army advancing and no one being able to stop it, or when the lava erupted from the volcano and buried Pompeii—because one Sunday, with that sassy girl I told you about, I went to see Pompeii.

"Sorry, but from the way you're looking at me, I'm not sure whether you have a clear understanding of the job. Let me explain: there was this truss lying on its side on the ground, on top of three sledges; the plinths were on three tracks, which led down to the sea, and they were pushed slowly along by eighteen hydraulic jacks. The truss was built to float, but so that it would be easier to maneuver, it was to slide on top of two pontoons, or steel barges that—again, before I even got there—had been filled with water and settled on the bottom of the basin, in the right position. After the truss had been moved onto them, we had to pump all the water out and make them float again, so they would support the weight of the truss and hold it above the water, and then tow the pontoons and the truss to the seabed, sink the pontoons again, put the truss upright, and settle it on its legs.

"The derrick moved calmly toward the basin and it was time to bring up the pontoons—but nothing was happening. The wind had been blowing for a while, and though it had swept away the fog, it had also begun to agitate the sea. I don't have much experience with the sea, and that was the first job I ever had to do near—or, rather, in—an ocean, but I saw the engineer

sniffing the air like a hunting dog, crinkling his nose and making gestures as if to say that things weren't going well. Actually, the waves were already pretty big that day. The manual had prepared us for this possibility—no lifting if the waves were more than two feet high. These were easily more than two feet high, so we took a break.

"We waited three days, and nothing really changed. We passed the time drinking, sleeping, and playing cards; I even taught the four men on my crew how to play rummy, because with the wind like that, and in that enchanting landscape that I've told you all about, nobody really wanted to go for a walk. The Indian, however, did something that surprised me: in his typically rude manner, and without ever looking me in the eye, he made me understand that he wanted to invite me to his house, which wasn't far away. Since he was something of a wild man, he didn't sleep in the guesthouse like the rest of us, but at his own place, a wooden hut, with his wife. The others laughed, but I couldn't figure out why. So I went there with him, because I like to see how other people live, but as soon I was in his hut, I realized that he was asking me to sleep with his wife. His wife, just like him, looked off to one side and didn't speak; I was embarrassed because there wasn't even a curtain and no privacy, and then I got scared. So I babbled something completely incoherent in Italian, which I knew he wouldn't understand, and I left. Outside, the others were waiting for me, and then I realized why they'd been laughing. They explained that in his tribe it was the custom to offer your wife to your boss, but that I'd done the right thing because their women don't wash often, and when they do, they use seal grease.

"When the sea calmed, we began to pump air into the pontoons. It wasn't a very good pump—low pressure, no larger than that stool over there, but it ran smoothly. It seemed nearly impossible that it could do all the work itself and be strong enough to lift thirteen thousand tons—just think how many cranes would be needed to do the same amount of work. But in two days, without a sound, the pontoons rose to the surface; we tied them tightly to their supports, and by the evening of the second day the derrick was afloat; it even seemed as if it wanted to set off, but that was only an effect of the wind. I admit I was a little jealous of the designers who had invented that trick of making air, water, and time do all the work; it never would have occurred to me, but I already told you I don't have much

confidence with water, to be honest I'm not even a good swimmer, and one of these days I'll tell you why.

"I'm not a good swimmer, but that didn't matter, because nobody would've been able to swim in a sea like that: it was the color of lead, and so cold that I have no clue how those famous shrimp, which continued to be served in the cafeteria—sometimes boiled, sometimes roasted—could live there; but they said the sea was full of fish. We all put on our life jackets, because that was also in the manual, boarded the tugboats, and went out to sea, pulling the derrick, which lay on the two pontoons, behind us, the way you lead a cow to market by its halter. It was my first time at sea, and though I wasn't exactly calm, I tried not to let it show; I figured that as soon as we began the work of positioning the derrick, I'd be distracted and it would pass. The Russian Orthodox was also scared, but it didn't affect the other three guys, though Di Staso was a little seasick.

"I told you we went out to sea, but that was just a figure of speech; I didn't feel 'out' of anything. Off the coast there was a whole Cernaia of islands and islets, and channels that slipped one into another, some so narrow that the derrick could barely fit through, and when I thought about what would happen if it didn't, it sent shivers down my spine. Fortunately, we had a good pilot and he knew the way. I went into the pilothouse to see how he was doing, and he was perfectly calm, talking on the radio with the pilot of the other tugboat, in one of those nasal American voices. At first I thought they were planning out the route, but they were talking about a baseball game."

I hadn't understood clearly the whole pontoon situation: if the derrick was built to float, couldn't it have been launched directly into the sea, without all these complications? Faussone looked at me dumbfounded before responding with the impatient patience of a person addressing an eager, if somewhat retarded, child:

"You know, if it was Lake Avigliana, maybe you'd be right, but this was the Pacific, though I don't know why the explorers named it that, because it's always got waves, even when it's calm—at least every time I've seen it. And it doesn't take much to bend a contraption as large as that one, even if it's made of steel, because it wasn't meant to lie on its side. It's just like us, if you think about it: we need a flat bed in order to sleep. Anyway, the derrick needed pontoons, because otherwise there was a danger that with the waves it might buckle.

“I was telling you how, when I was on the tugboat, I was a little scared at first; but this soon passed, because I convinced myself that there wasn’t any danger. They were some pretty great machines, those tugboats. Not particularly comfortable—they’re not built for pleasure cruises—but solid, well designed, without a single excess bolt, and you can feel their extraordinary power as soon as you get on one; in fact, they’re used for tugging boats much larger than themselves, and there’s not a storm that can stop them. After we’d spent some time navigating between channels, I got bored of sitting there and watching the scenery, which was always the same, so I went belowdecks to take a good look at the engine room, and I have to say that I enjoyed it, even though calling it a ‘room’ might be an overstatement, because there’s barely enough space to turn around; but I’ll never forget those pistons, and most of all the propeller shaft, and the kitchen, too, in which all the little frying pans were bolted to the wall, so the cook never even has to move while he’s preparing a meal, because everything is within arm’s reach. And when night came, we stopped and they gave us rations like in the army, though they weren’t bad, except instead of fruit they gave us shrimp with jam. Then we went to sleep in berths and the boat didn’t rock too much: just enough to put us to sleep.

“We left that network of channels the next morning, and I took a deep breath. We only had a dozen miles to go before we got to our destination, where they had already set up a buoy with a headlight and a radio, so that we could find it even in case of fog, and there was always fog. We arrived at the buoy around noon. We attached the derrick to some other buoys, so that it didn’t start wandering off during the process, and we opened the pontoon’s air ducts, so that they’d sink a little and we could tow them away. I say we, but to tell the truth, I stayed on deck, and the Indian, who was the least affected of anyone by the sea, went onto the pontoons; but it all happened so fast anyway, we just heard a great puff of air, like a sigh of relief, and the two pontoons detached from the derrick and the tugboats pulled them away.

“At this point, no two ways around it, the spotlight was on me. Fortunately, the sea was almost calm. I assumed the grittiest attitude I was able to muster, boarded a small boat with my four men, and then we climbed up the ladders of the derrick. It was our job to conduct all the preliminary tests, and then remove the safety valves on the floating legs. You know how it is when you have to do something that you don’t want to

do, but you brace yourself, because when you have to do something, well, you do it? And that's especially true if you have to make others do it, and one of the others is seasick—or maybe just faking, which was my suspicion.

"The tests took a long time, but they went fine, none of the dents were worse than expected. As for the safety catches, I'm not sure I explained that clearly. Here, look: imagine my derrick as a truncated pyramid, floating on one of its sides, which is composed of three parallel legs—the flotation tubes. Well, we had to weigh down the lower sections of these legs, so that they would sink and the pyramid would stand erect. In order to weigh down the legs we had to pump them full of seawater: they were divided into segments with watertight bulkheads, and each segment had valves that allowed the air to escape and the water to enter at just the right rate. The valves were operated by remote control, but they had safety catches, and those had to be removed by hand, or, rather, hit off with a hammer.

"Right: so it was exactly at this moment that I realized that the whole tower was moving. It was strange: the sea seemed still, you couldn't see any waves, but the tower was moving—up and down, up and down, rocking very gently, like a baby's cradle, and I felt like my stomach was about to come up. I tried to resist, and I might've made it if I hadn't happened to see Di Staso clinging to two wind braces like Christ on the Cross, eight meters above the water, throwing up into the Pacific Ocean—and that was it for me. We got the job done all the same, but, you know, as a rule I try to conduct my business with a little class, though this time—I'll spare you the details, but the two of us looked less like cats than like those animals whose names I can't even remember, you see them at the zoo, they have imbecilic faces, they're always laughing, and they walk very softly, clinging, upside down, to the branches of trees, with limbs that function like hooks. Well, all of us except the Indian looked like that, and in fact those bastards back on the tugboat, instead of encouraging us, were laughing at us, making monkey gestures and slapping their thighs. But I guess you can't blame them, if you see it from their perspective: the specialist who has been brought over from the other side of the world with a socket wrench hanging at his waist—since a wrench for me is what a sword was to a knight back in the olden days—puking like a little baby. Yeah, that must have been quite a sight.

"Fortunately, I'd prepared well for that part of the job, and I'd made the four men practice in advance. Anyway, though it wasn't particularly

elegant, it took us just fifteen minutes longer than the amount of time allotted in the manual. We reboarded the tugboat and my seasickness soon passed.

"The engineer was in the control room with binoculars and a chronometer, before the radio controls, and the show was ready to begin. It was like watching television with the sound off. He was pushing the buttons one at a time, like buzzers, though we could hear only the sound of our own breath, and we were breathing as if on tiptoe. At a certain point you could see the derrick begin to tilt, like a ship when it's about to go down: even from a distance you could see the eddies made by the legs as they sank into the water, and the waves came all the way up to us and rocked the tugboat, but you still couldn't hear a sound. It kept tilting, and the upper platform kept rising until, with a large splash, it stood upright; it dipped slightly and then it settled, like an island, but it was an island that we had made ourselves; I don't know about the others, maybe they weren't thinking of anything in particular, but I thought of God creating the world (if it really was Him), separating the sea from the dry land—even if that really didn't have much to do with it. Then we got back in the boat again, and were joined by the guys from the other tug, and we all climbed up onto the platform; we smashed a bottle and made a bit of a ruckus, because that's the ritual.

"Now, don't go spreading this around, but at that moment I started to cry. Not for the derrick, but for my father: what I mean is, that iron sacrament planted in the middle of the ocean reminded me of a silly monument that my father once made with his friends; they put it together one piece at a time, on Sunday after their bocce game, a bunch of old guys, all of them a little senile and a little drunk. They were war veterans—some had fought in Russia, others in Africa, others who knows where—and they were fed up. Since they were all more or less in the same business—one knew how to solder, one could file, one could pound sheet metal, and so on—they joined forces to make a monument that they would donate to the village. But it was to be a backward kind of monument: iron instead of bronze, and instead of all the eagles and crowns of glory and the soldier advancing with his bayonet, they would make a statue of the unknown baker: yes, the man who invented the loaf of bread. And they'd do it in iron, using black sheet metal two millimeters thick, soldered and bolted. They actually went ahead with it, and it certainly was sturdy, no doubt about that,

but as a work of art it wasn’t entirely successful. The mayor and the parish priest didn’t want it, and, instead of standing in the middle of the piazza, it’s rusting in a cellar, next to bottles of good wine.”

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2. A reference to Jack London’s book *Burning Light* (1910).
* Here, and throughout *The Wrench*, an asterisk indicates that the word or phrase is in English in Levi’s original text.

Metalwork

“The places where my father was during the retreat weren’t too far from here, but it was a different time of year: he told me that the wine froze in their flasks and the leather of their cartridge cases froze, too.”

We’d entered the forest, a splendid autumnal forest decorated in unexpected colors: the green-gold of larches that were just beginning to shed their needles, the dark purple of beeches, and here and there the warm brown of maples and oaks. The bare trunks of the birch trees made one want to pet them like cats. Between the trees, the underbrush was low, and there weren’t many dead leaves yet: the ground was firm and resilient, as if tamped down, and it echoed strangely under our feet. Faussone explained to me that, if you don’t let the trees get too thick, the forest will clean itself: the animals, large and small, take care of it, and he showed me the tracks of a hare in the mud, hardened by the wind, and the yellow and red galls on the oak trees, and the dog roses with worms sleeping inside them. I was somewhat surprised by his familiarity with plants and animals, but, as he pointed out to me, he was not born a rigger: his happiest childhood memories were of filching (meaning petty thefts of farm produce), group excursions in search of birds’ nests or mushrooms, teaching himself zoology and the theory and practice of trapping, and communion with the modest natural world of the Canavese in the form of blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, and wild asparagus—all heightened by the cheap thrill of illicit behavior.

“Yes,” continued Faussone, “because when I was a child my father would always say that he wanted me to hurry up and finish school so I could go join him in his workshop. He wanted me to be just like him: at the

age of nine he was already in France learning the trade, because that's what everyone did back then, they were all tinkers down in the valley, and he worked as a tinker until the day he died. He always said he would die with a hammer in his hand, and that's just what happened, poor man. But it's not the worst way to go, because many people, when they stop working, get ulcers or start drinking or begin talking to themselves, and I think he would have been one of them, but, of course, he died before that happened.

"He never did anything but work metal, except when they put him in prison and sent him to Germany. Especially copper plates. They made everything of copper, because stainless steel wasn't yet in style: vases, saucepans, pipes, even unlicensed stills for making bootleg grappa. Where I'm from, since I was born during the war, there was always a lot of pounding going on. Mostly, they made tin-plated copper cooking pots, large and small, because *magnino* means 'tinker,' someone who makes pots and coats them with tin—and even now there are a lot of families named Magnino, but they probably don't know why.

"You know that when you beat copper it hardens . . ."

I knew this, yes. As we spoke, it came out that, though I'd never beaten metal myself, I had a lot of experience with copper—battles silent as well as fierce—marked by love and hate, enthusiasm and exhaustion, victory and defeat, and an increasingly refined knowledge, the kind you have when you've lived with people for a long time and you can predict their words and actions. I knew, oh yes, the feminine suppleness of copper, metal of mirrors, metal of Venus. I knew its warm splendor and its noxious taste, the soft cerulean green of its oxides and the vitreous azure of its salts. I knew firsthand how copper hardens, and as I said this to Faussone I almost felt as if we were related. Copper, if treated badly—beaten, stretched, bent, compressed—is just like us: its crystals grow larger and it becomes hard, crude, hostile, or, as Faussone would say, "arverse"—averse. I told him that I could explain the science behind this phenomenon, but he replied that it didn't matter to him and, besides, it wasn't always that way: just as we aren't all the same, and behave differently when faced with difficulties, so it is that there are some materials that improve when you beat them, like felt and leather, and also iron, which discharges its slag when you hammer it and gets stronger and becomes wrought iron. I added that you have to be careful with these comparisons, because, although they may be poetic, they don't actually tell you very much, so you should be cautious about drawing

educational—or edificational—conclusions from them. Should the educator follow the example of the smith, who, by beating hard on iron, gives it nobility of form, or of the vintner, who obtains the same result with wine by storing it out of sight in the darkness of a cellar? Is it best for a mother to model herself on the pelican, who plucks out all her own feathers in order to fashion a soft nest for her newborns, or on the bear, who pushes her offspring to climb to the top of a fir tree and then abandons them there and leaves without looking back? Does tempering or hardening make a better didactic model? Watch out for analogies: they corrupted medicine for millennia, and perhaps they're to blame if there are now so many different pedagogical systems and, despite three thousand years of debate, nobody knows which one is best.

In any case, Faussone reminded me that the copper plate, having been worked over until it's hard—meaning you can no longer use a hammer on it, it's no longer "malleable"—has to be cooked again, that is, it has to be heated for a while at 800°C, so that it can regain its original pliability. As a result, the work of the tinker consists of alternating between heating and beating, beating and heating. I knew about all this, more or less, but I didn't have as much experience with tin—I'd had only a fleeting, youthful dalliance, and even then I was mostly concerned with its chemical composition—so I listened closely to what he had to say:

"Even when the pot is finished, the job isn't done, because if you cook in a pot of so-called naked copper, it'll ultimately make you sick—you and your family. I can't rule out the possibility that if my father died at only fifty-seven, it had something to do with the copper that was circulating in his blood. The moral of the story is that the inside of the pot needs to be coated with tin, and don't think for a second that this is easy, even if you know, in theory, how it's done: theory's one thing, practice is another. Well, to get to the point, you first use sulfuric acid, or nitric acid if you're in a rush—but only for a second because otherwise it's see you later, pot—then you rinse it with water, and finally you remove the oxide with cooked acid."

This last term was new to me. I asked him to clarify, but I didn't anticipate that I'd open an old wound in the process. It so happened that Faussone didn't exactly know what *l'acid cheuit* was, and he didn't know because he'd refused to learn—in short, there had been some rancor between him and his father. When Faussone was eighteen, he'd gotten bored with making pans in the village; he wanted to move to Turin and

work at Lancia. That's what he did, in fact, but it didn't last long. Well, there had been an argument about cooked acid. At first his father was angry, but then he became silent because he understood that there was nothing he could do.

"Anyway, you make it with hydrochloric acid, you cook it with zinc and ammonium chloride and I don't know what else—if you want, I can find out for you, though I hope you're not planning to coat any copper pans with tin yourself. But at that stage it's still not finished: while the cooked acid is working, you need to have the tin ready. Virgin tin. This is where you can tell whether the tinker is a professional or a slacker. You need virgin tin, meaning tin in its purest form, when it's fresh off the boat, as opposed to soldering tin, which is alloyed with lead. I'm telling you this because there are people who line pans with soldering tin. We even had a few of them in my village. When the job is done you can't tell the difference, but you can imagine what happens when the people who buy those pans cook with them for, say, twenty years, and the lead seeps into everything they eat.

"I told you that it was essential to have the tin ready, hot enough so that it's molten but not too hot, otherwise a red crust forms and you'll waste the material, and, you know, now it's easy, but back then only the rich had thermometers, and the way you'd estimate the heat of something was by spitting on it. Sorry, let me explain: you'd watch to see whether your saliva sizzled a lot, or a little, or if it jumped right off. When this happened, you'd take the *cucce*—I don't even know whether there's a name for them in Italian, but they're like thick hemp strands—and you lay the tin on the copper like you're spreading butter in a terrine, if that makes sense. As soon as it's done, you dunk it in cold water, because if you don't, the tin, instead of having a beautiful shine, will stay dull. You see, it's a trade like any other trade, relying on tricks both big and small, invented by some other Faussone in some bygone era, and the whole story of how it evolved could fill a book, but it's a book no one would ever write, which is a shame. Now that so many years have passed, I regret that fight I had with my father, the way I talked back to him and silenced him, because he understood that this trade, which had always been practiced the same way, and was as old as time, was going to die with him. When I told him that I didn't care about cooked acid, he didn't say anything, but he felt like a part of himself died right then. That's because he liked his job, you see, and I understand that now, because I like mine, too."

This was the crucial point, and I could tell that Faussone realized it. If you put aside those prodigious, singular moments that destiny gives us, love of one's work (a privilege enjoyed, unfortunately, only by a few) is the best, most concrete approximation of happiness on earth—but most people don't realize this. We know less about this vast region—the region of the *trade*, of the *boulot*, of the *job*, in short, of daily work—than about Antarctica, and it's a sad, mysterious phenomenon that the people who speak about it the most, who make the greatest racket, are the ones who know the least about it. Whenever work is exalted by someone in official ceremonies, an insidious rhetoric comes into play, based on the cynical belief that a medal and a few words of praise cost less, and are more valuable, than a pay increase. There also exists, however, a rhetoric on the other side, not so much cynical as profoundly stupid, that tends to denigrate work, to portray it as vile, as if we could do without work, our own or that of others, not just in some future utopia but here, today: as if anybody who works were by definition a servant, and as if, conversely, anyone who doesn't work, or doesn't know how to, or doesn't want to were therefore a free man. It's the depressing truth that many jobs are undesirable, but it's a mistake to rage against them if you're prejudiced from the start; anyone who does so condemns himself to a lifetime of hatred—not only of his work but of himself and the world. We can and should fight to ensure that the worker benefits from the fruit of his own labors, and that the job itself is not a punishment. But love or, conversely, hatred of work is a personal matter, which depends greatly on the individual's own history and less than one might think on the industrial structures within which the work takes place.

Faussone, as if he'd read my thoughts, replied, "You know what my first name is? Tino, which is pretty common, but my Tino is short for 'Libertino.' When I was born, my father actually wanted to call me Libero, and the mayor, even though he was a Fascist, was a friend, so he gave his consent, but the town clerk wouldn't let it go through. My mother told me all this later; the clerk said that there was no such thing as St. Libero, that it was an unusual name, that he didn't want any trouble, and that he'd need to get permission from the provincial party secretary and maybe Rome as well. He was lying, of course—the truth was that, to be on the safe side, he didn't want the word 'Libero' in his records. Ultimately there was no way around it: the moral of the story was that my father resorted to Libertino, because, poor man, he didn't understand. He thought that it would be the

same as when someone's named Giovanni and they call him Giovannino. So I remained Libertino, and anyone who happens to see my passport or my driver's license laughs at me behind my back. It didn't help that, as the years went by, traveling the world as I have, I really did become something of a libertine, but that's another story, and besides, you've figured it out already. I am a libertine, but it's not my whole identity. It's not the reason I was put on earth, though if you asked me why I was put on earth, I'd be hard-pressed to give you an answer.

"My father wanted to call me Libero because he wanted me to be free. I don't mean in the political sense—as far as politics went his only precept was never to wage war, because he'd been through enough of that already. Free, for him, meant not having to work for a boss. That could mean spending twelve hours a day in a workshop like his, completely black with soot and covered in ice during the winter, or maybe as an immigrant, or going around with a little handcart like a Gypsy—but never under a boss, or in a factory, spending your whole life on an assembly line performing the same action over and over again, until you're no longer able to do anything else and they give you your severance pay and your pension and you sit on a park bench. This was why he was against the idea of me working at Lancia. Secretly he hoped that I would stay in his shop and get married and have children to whom I could pass on the family business. Listen, I do all right now in my line of work, but if my father hadn't insisted, sometimes nicely and sometimes not, that after school I go with him to the workshop and turn the hand crank in the forge and he'd show me how, from a three-millimeter metal plate, he could, just by eyeballing it, make a picture-perfect half-sphere, without even relying on a model—well, as I said, if it weren't for my father, and if I'd been happy to go along with what they taught me in school, then without a doubt I'd still be working on an assembly line."

We'd arrived at a clearing, and Faussone pointed out to me the elegant labyrinths made by moles—bulges that barely rose above the ground, from which protruded conical mounds of fresh soil that the moles had turned up during the night. Earlier, Faussone had taught me how to identify the skylark nests hidden in depressions in the fields, and he showed me an ingenious dormouse nest, in the shape of a muff, half hidden amid the low branches of a larch. Later, he stopped talking and held me back, blocking my chest with his left arm, like a barrier. With his right hand he pointed out

a slight quivering in the grass a few steps from our path. A snake? No; on a stretch of beaten earth an odd little procession appeared: a porcupine was advancing cautiously, with brief stops and starts, and following him—or her—were five cubs, like tiny train cars tugged by a toy locomotive. The first clenched the leader's tail in its mouth, and each of the others clenched the tail of its predecessor in the same way. The leader stopped abruptly in front of a large beetle; she flipped the beetle on its back with her paw and took it between her teeth. The little ones broke rank and crowded around, and then the leader withdrew behind a bush, dragging all the little critters with her.

At dusk the overcast sky cleared; suddenly we became aware of a melancholy distant wail and, as sometimes happens, we also became aware of having already sensed it before, even though our minds had not yet identified it. It repeated at almost regular intervals, and we couldn't tell from what direction it came, but then we spotted, high above our heads, orderly flocks of cranes, one after another, a long black line against the pale sky; it was as if they were weeping because they'd been forced to leave.

". . . but he was still around when I got out of the factory and started the work I'm doing now, and I think that made him happy. He never said so, because he wasn't the talkative type, but he let me understand as much in other ways. Whenever he saw me going off somewhere new he was clearly envious, but it was a friendly kind of envy—it wasn't like when someone covets another man's fortune, and curses him because he can't have it himself. My father would've liked a job like mine, even if your company makes money off you, because at least it can't take away the finished project. That stays put, it's yours, no one can take it away from you, and he understood this. You could see it in the way he looked at his stills after he had finished and polished them. When his clients came to take them away, he gave them a little caress and you could tell that he was sorry; if they didn't end up too far away, he'd sometimes take his bike and go look at them, with the excuse of making sure that everything was working all right. And he would have liked it because of the travel, too, since no one traveled much in his day; he hadn't traveled much himself, and when he did, he did so wretchedly. He claimed the only thing he remembered from the year that he spent in Savoy as an apprentice were the chilblains, the slaps, and the way they cursed at him in French. Later, as a soldier, he went to Russia and you can imagine what sort of traveling that was. It might sound strange, but he told me on numerous occasions that the best year of his life was the one

after Badoglio took over, when the Germans rounded everyone up at the Milan station, disarmed them, packed them in cattle cars, and shipped them off to work in Germany. Amazing, isn't it? But it always helps to have a trade.

"He really had to tighten his belt those first few months, but you don't need to hear about that. He didn't want to sign up with the Republic and return to Italy. All winter he went at it with the pick and shovel, and it wasn't a good life; he wore nothing but his army uniform. He had signed on as a mechanic, though he'd already lost all hope of getting a job when, in March, they put him to work in a shop where pipes were made, and things improved a little. But it soon became clear that they were looking for railroad engineers, and though he wasn't an engineer, he knew a thing or two about hot water boilers and he figured that sometimes you have to change horses midstream. He volunteered even though he didn't speak a word of German—hunger being the mother of innovation. Luckily for him, he was assigned to work on coal locomotives, which at the time were used to pull freight cars and local trains. And he got two girlfriends, one at either end of the line. It's not that he was particularly smooth—he said that it was easy, that all the German men were off at war and the women chased after you. Of course he never told me this story in much detail because when they took him prisoner he was already married with a small child, which was me. But on Sundays his friends would come over to our place for a glass of wine, and with a euphemism here, a snigger there, a conversation cut off in the middle—it wasn't hard to figure it out, especially when I noticed that his friends were laughing the hardest, while my mother sat there with a drawn face, looking away and laughing uneasily.

"I understand it, because it was the only time in his life that he let himself live a little. Besides, if he hadn't found German girlfriends who could work the black market and bring him food, he'd likely have ended up with tuberculosis, like so many others, and it would have been worse for my mother and me. As for driving the locomotive, he said it was easier than riding a bike; all you had to do was pay attention to the signals and if there was a bombing attack brake, ditch everything, and run for the fields. There were problems only when it was foggy, or when there were alarms and the Germans made fog on purpose.

"So when he got to the end of the line, instead of going to the railroad dormitory, he stuffed coal in his pockets, his bag, and his shirt to give to

that side's girlfriend, since he had nothing else to offer, and in return she gave him dinner. Then he'd leave again the next morning. After doing this for a while, he learned that there was another Italian engineer working the same line, also a military prisoner, a mechanic from Chivasso; he drove the freight cars that traveled at night. They only met a few times at the terminals, but, as they were almost from the same place, they became friends just the same. Since the guy from Chivasso wasn't very organized, and was going hungry because he only ate the stuff the railroad gave him, my father handed over one of the girlfriends, for nothing—just out of friendship—and from that point on they were very close. After they both came home, the Chivassese came to see us two or three times a year, and every Christmas he would bring us a turkey. Over time we all began to think of him as my godfather, because by then my actual godfather, the one who made bushings for Diatto, had died. Anyway, he was indebted to us, to such an extent that many years later he was the one who found me the position at Lancia and persuaded my father to let me go, and later he got me my first rigging job, even though I wasn't yet a rigger at the time. He's still alive; he's not even that old. He's a bright guy—after the war he started to raise turkeys and guinea fowl and he made a lot of money.

"But my father went back to work as before, hammering sheet metal in his workshop, a blow here, a blow there, in just the right spot, making sure the whole sheet had the same thickness, and smoothing out the creases—what he called *veje*, 'old women.' He was offered a few good industrial jobs, mostly in body shops, which would've been similar work. Every day my mother would tell him to accept one of these offers, because the pay was good—for the health insurance, for the pension, etc.—but he wouldn't even consider it. He said that the boss's bread has seven crusts, and that it's better to be the head of an eel than the tail of a sturgeon—he liked his proverbs.

"But at this point nobody wanted tin-lined copper pots anymore, because the much cheaper aluminum models had become available in stores, and then they introduced the stainless-steel ones with nonstick coating so your steak doesn't stick to the bottom of the pan. He wasn't making much money, but he wouldn't hear of changing his ways, so he started making autoclaves for hospitals—the things that are used to sterilize instruments before an operation, made of copper, but plated with silver instead of tin. It was during that time that he and his friends decided to

make that monument to the baker that I told you about, and when the town refused it, he was upset and he started to drink a bit more. He worked less and less, because there weren't many orders, and in his spare time he made other kinds of things, just for the pleasure of doing it, like shelves and flower vases, but he never sold them; he put them in storage or he gave them away as presents.

"My mother was a good churchgoing woman, but she didn't treat my father so well. She never got on his case, but she was provincial, and it was clear that she didn't respect him very much. She didn't realize that when his trade was gone, he'd be gone, too. He didn't want the world to change, but since the world changes—and these days it changes faster than ever—he had no wish to keep up with it, so he became depressed and lost all desire to do anything. One day, he didn't come home for dinner, and my mother found him dead in his workshop. He had a hammer in his hand, as he had always said he would."

Wine and Water

I didn't expect, this late in September, to encounter such hot weather on the lower Volga. It was Sunday, and the guest rooms were uninhabitable: the Administracija had installed noisy and pathetically inefficient fans in the rooms, and the air circulation was entirely dependent on the little window in the corner, which was no bigger than the page of a newspaper. I proposed to Faussone that we go to the river, walk along it to the ferry house, and take the first boat that showed up. He agreed, and we left.

It was mildly cool on the path and we were refreshed by the water's unexpected transparency and the marshy, musky fragrance it gave off. A light breeze blew over the surface of the river, rippling the water into tiny waves, but every so often the wind would shift direction, and then from the land would come torrid blasts of air, redolent of clay dust; at the same time, as the surface of the water became still again, you could make out the blurry features of submerged farmhouses. This hadn't happened in some distant era, Faussone explained, nor was it a village of sinners. It was simply the result of a giant dam constructed seven years earlier—we could see the dam now, just past the bend in the river. Above it a lake had formed, or rather a sea, 500 kilometers long. Faussone was as proud as if he'd built the thing himself, but all he'd done was assemble a crane that was used on the job. And there was a story about this crane—he promised he'd tell me it one day.

We reached the ferry house around nine a.m. It consisted of two sections: a brick building situated on the riverbank and a set of wooden planks, practically a covered raft, floating on the water; these two sections were connected by a bridge, also made of wood, hinged at both ends. No

one was there. We stopped to check the schedule, written in beautiful handwriting but full of cancellations and corrections, which was pasted to the door of the waiting room. Shortly afterward we encountered an old lady. She came forward with short, calm steps, not looking at us, because she was absorbed in knitting a garment in two colors; she walked right past us and took a folding chair from the corner of the room, opened it near the schedule, sat down, and, settling the folds of her skirt under her, continued to knit for a few minutes. Then she looked up at us, smiled, and told us that it was useless to consult the schedule, because it had expired.

Faussone asked her how long ago it had expired, and she gave him a vague response: three days ago, or maybe a week, and the new schedule still hadn't been determined, but the boats were running anyway. Where did we want to go? With some embarrassment, Faussone said that it didn't matter, we'd take a boat anywhere, though we had to be back by evening: we simply wanted to go out on the river and get some fresh air. The old lady nodded gravely and informed us that a boat would arrive before too long, and would leave right away for Dubrovka. How far away was that? Not very far, about an hour, maybe two, but what difference did it make? she asked, with another luminous smile. Were we on vacation, by any chance? If so, Dubrovka was the place for us—there were woods and fields, you could buy butter, cheese, and eggs, and her granddaughter lived there. Did we want first-class tickets, or second class? She was the ticket office.

After talking it over, we decided to opt for first class. The little old lady put down her knitting, disappeared through a doorway, and reappeared behind a ticket window. She rummaged around in a drawer and found us two tickets; they were first class, but they still didn't cost much. Crossing the sagging bridge, we walked onto the raft and waited. The raft was deserted, too, but before long a tall, thin young man arrived and sat on the bench not far from us. He was modestly dressed, in a threadbare jacket, patched at the elbows, and a shirt open at the chest. Like us, he didn't have any baggage; he chain-smoked and watched Faussone with a curious expression on his face. "Hmm—he must have realized we're foreigners," said Faussone; but after the third cigarette the young man came over and greeted us, and said a few words—in Russian, naturally. After a brief conversation, I saw him grab Faussone's hand and squeeze it warmly, in fact he rotated it energetically, as if it were the crank on one of those old cars that didn't have starters. "I never would have recognized him,"

Faussone said to me. “He’s one of the laborers who helped me assemble the crane for the dam six years ago. But now that I think about it, it seems to me I do remember him, because it was brutally cold and he was unfazed by it; he worked without gloves and was dressed just like he is now.”

The Russian was so happy you would’ve thought he had run into his long-lost brother; Faussone, however, kept up a reserve, and listened to the man’s long-winded monologue as if he were listening to the radio weather report. The man spoke with enthusiasm and I found it difficult to follow him, but I could tell that the word *ràsnitsa* recurred with some frequency in his speech. It is one of the few Russian words I happen to know; it means “difference.” “It’s his name,” Faussone explained to me; “Difference is actually his name, and he’s telling me that he’s the only person in the entire lower Volga with that name. He’s something else, this guy.” Difference, after rummaging in his pockets, found a crumpled, greasy ID card, and he showed Faussone and me that the man pictured in the photo was him, and the name was Nikolai M. Ràsnitsa. Right after this he declared that we were his friends, or, rather, his guests: in fact, by a lucky coincidence, that day was his birthday, and he was preparing to celebrate it with a ride down the river. Very well, we’d go together to Dubrovka; he was waiting for the same boat, and on it were two or three of his buddies who were going with him to the party. The prospect of a real Russian encounter, somewhat less formal than the interactions we had at work, was not unappealing to me, but I saw a veil of suspicion settle over Faussone’s face, which was usually so inexpressive. A little later, out of the corner of his mouth, he whispered, “This isn’t going to end well.”

The boat arrived, coming from the direction of the dam, and we took out our tickets for inspection. Difference, annoyed, told us that we shouldn’t have bought the tickets, especially not the first class and round-trip fares—weren’t we his guests? He would have taken care of it: he was friends with the captain and the whole crew, and neither he nor his guests ever had to buy a ticket. We embarked and saw that the boat was empty as well, with the exception of Difference’s two buddies, who were sitting on one of the benches on the deck. They were both giants, with faces like criminals: they looked like no one I’d ever seen before, not in Russia or anywhere else, except maybe in one of those spaghetti Westerns. One was obese, and his pants were held in place by a belt cinched tight beneath his belly; the other wasn’t as heavy, but his face was ravaged by smallpox, and he had an

underbite, a peculiarity that conferred on him the aspect of a mastiff and contrasted with his eyes, which were also vaguely canine, but of a soft hazel color. Both of them were drunk, and reeked of sweat.

The boat set off again. Difference explained to his friends who we were, and they said that it was fine if we came along—the more the merrier. They made me sit between the two of them, and Faussone sat next to Difference on the bench opposite. The obese one had a parcel of newspapers with him, bound with string; he untied it and inside were several loaves of peasant bread stuffed with lard. He offered them around and then he went somewhere belowdecks. When he came back up, he was holding by the handle a tin bucket, evidently a discarded can of paint; he took an aluminum cup out of his pocket and filled it with whatever liquid was in the can, and offered me a drink. It was a very strong, sickly-sweet wine, similar to Marsala, but more pungent, and it had an edge to it; to my palate it tasted unspeakably bad, and I saw that Faussone, who is a connoisseur, was not enthusiastic, either. But these two fellows were determined: the can held at least three liters of the concoction, and they announced that we had to finish the whole thing during the trip, otherwise what kind of birthday would it be? And then, *niè strazno*—don't worry—we'd find some even better stuff in Dubrovka.

In my poor Russian I tried to defend myself, saying that the wine was good but I'd had my fill, I wasn't accustomed to it, and I was seriously ill, in the liver, in the stomach; but there was no way out of it. The two of them, now joined by Difference, displayed a compulsive conviviality that was quite menacing, and I had to drink and drink some more. Faussone drank, too, but he was in less danger than me, because he can hold his liquor and because, being a more proficient speaker of Russian, he was able to make more articulate excuses or change the subject. He didn't show any outward sign of discomfort; he kept talking and drinking, and every so often my eye, which was becoming increasingly cloudy, caught his clinical gaze, but whether he was distracted or was making a deliberate effort to act superior, not once during the course of the whole trip did he make any effort to come to my rescue.

Wine has never agreed with me. That wine, especially, plunged me into an unpleasant condition, in which I felt humiliated and impotent: I hadn't lost my mental clarity, but I felt that I was losing my ability to stand, so I dreaded the moment when I would have to get up from the bench. I felt my

tongue getting tied, and, above all, my field of vision was frustratingly reduced; I watched the solemn winding of the two riverbanks as if through a screen, or, rather, as if I were looking through a pair of those tiny opera glasses common in the last century.

For all these reasons, I haven't retained a very clear memory of the journey. At Dubrovka, things improved a little. The wine was finished and a nice refreshing wind was blowing, carrying with it the scent of hay and of stables, and, after a few initial shaky steps, I felt somewhat reassured. It seemed that everyone was related up there: the ticket seller's niece, we learned, was the pockmarked sidekick's sister. It was now lunchtime and she insisted that everybody—us included—should come and eat at her house. She lived with her husband near the river, in a small wooden cottage, painted a pale blue, with carved gables over the doors and windows. In front there was a vegetable patch of green, yellow, and violet cabbages, and the whole thing made one think of a fairy's home.

The interior was scrupulously clean. The windows, as well as the doors between rooms, were covered by lace curtains that fell from the ceiling to the floor, but the ceiling couldn't have been more than two meters high. On one wall there hung, side by side, two cardboard icons and a photograph of equal size showing a boy in an army uniform, with an array of medals across his chest. The table was covered by an oilcloth, on which sat a steaming tureen of soup, a large loaf of rye bread with a dark, rough crust, four place settings, and four hard-boiled eggs. The niece was a robust peasant woman of about forty, with coarse hands and a gentle face; her brown hair was covered by a white head scarf tied under her chin. Next to her sat her husband, an elderly man with short gray hair that stuck to his head with sweat from the day's work; he had a thin, tanned face, but his forehead was pale. Opposite them sat two blond children, apparently twins, who seemed impatient to start lunch, but they were waiting for their parents to take the first bite. They hurried to set four more places for us, which made things a bit crowded.

I didn't have any appetite, but to be polite I tried some soup. Our hostess reproached me with maternal severity, as if I were a spoiled child: she wanted to know why I was such a "bad eater." Faussone, in a quick aside, explained to me that in Russian, eating badly means not eating very much, the same way that we might say eating well instead of eating a lot. I excused myself as best I could, with gestures, facial expressions, and

various mumblings, and the woman, who was more discreet than our traveling companions, didn't insist.

The boat was to leave again around four. Other than our group, there was only a single passenger on board. I don't know where he came from; he was a small, lank man dressed in rags, of an indeterminate age, with a short, sparse, but unkempt beard; he had clear, deranged eyes and only one ear: the other had been reduced to an ugly, fleshy hole, from which a scar descended all the way down to his chin. He, too, was a close friend of Difference and the other two, and to Faussone and me he displayed an exquisite sense of hospitality: he insisted on showing us the whole boat, from prow to stern, without neglecting the bilge, with its suffocating stink of mold, or the latrines, which I'd rather not describe. He seemed absurdly proud of every detail, and we deduced that he must have been a retired seaman, or perhaps a former employee of the shipyard; but he spoke with a somewhat unusual accent, with such a prevalence of *o*s for *a*s that even Faussone stopped asking him questions, because he wouldn't have understood the answers anyway. His friends called him Grafinya —"Countess"—and Difference explained to Faussone that he was actually a count, and that during the Revolution he escaped into Persia and changed his name, but his story seemed to us neither clear nor convincing.

It began to get hot again and the left bank of the river, which the boat was following, was thronged with swimmers. They were families, for the most part, eating and drinking, splashing about in the water or baking in the sun on blankets spread out along the dusty shore. Some, both men and women, wore modest bathing suits that covered them from their necks to their knees; others were completely nude, and roamed through the crowd with ease. The sun was still high; there was nothing to drink on board, not even water, and our companions' pitiful wine was gone. The count had disappeared, and the three others were snoring, sprawled out on the benches. I was parched and hot; I proposed to Faussone that, once we had disembarked, we should look for an isolated beach, undress, and go for a swim ourselves. Faussone was silent for a few seconds; then, in a sulk, he responded:

"You know I can't swim. I told you that when I was telling the story of the derrick and Alaska. Water makes me anxious. And you don't want me to start learning here, in this water—it might be clean but it's got strong

currents, and there’s not even a lifeguard, and besides I’m not that young anymore.

“The fact is that no one ever taught me to swim when I was child, because where I’m from there’s no water you can swim in; and the one time I had a chance to learn, it went badly. I’d decided to learn on my own, I had the time and the will, but it went badly. This was a number of years back, in Calabria, when they were building the highway, and they sent me down there with a crane operator—I was to assemble the gantry crane, and he was going to learn how to maneuver it. Do you know what a gantry crane is? I didn’t know, either, at the time. It’s a clever way to make a concrete bridge, a thing that seems simple enough when you look at it, with its rectangular piers and the beams set on top of them. These bridges may have a simple structure, but they’re not so simple to build; they’re like any top-heavy thing, such as belltowers and so on, though of course the pyramids of Egypt are something else altogether. They had a proverb about this in my father’s village: ‘Let your neighbors worry about building bridges and belltowers’—but in the local dialect it rhymes.

“Anyway, imagine a fairly narrow valley, and a road that has to cross it at its highest point, and the pylons are already in place at intervals of, let’s say, fifty meters. The ones at the center, you see, might be as high as sixty or even seventy meters, and there’s no way to lift up the girders with a crane, apart from the fact that the ground underneath is not always stable, and in that location that I was telling you about, in Calabria, there really wasn’t a foundation at all, it was the mouth of one of those streams of theirs that fill with water only when it rains—which is hardly ever, but when it happens the water sweeps everything away. An exposed streambed of sand and rocks—you can’t even begin to imagine putting a crane on land like that, and the middle pylon was already several meters out in the sea. Also, you have to understand that those girders weren’t exactly toothpicks: they were mammoth, as long as Corso Stupinigi[3] is wide, and they weighed a hundred or even a hundred and fifty tons. It’s not like I don’t trust cranes—they’re basically my profession—but they’ve yet to invent a crane that can lift a hundred tons seventy meters high. So they invented the gantry crane instead.

“Now, I don’t have a pencil with me, but you should imagine a long trolley, so long that you can only assemble it on site—that was the job I had to do. To specify, the trolley needed to be long enough so that it would

always rest on top of at least three pylons. In this case, taking into account the thickness of the pylons, that meant it had to be a little less than a hundred and fifty meters long. So this is a gantry crane, and it's used to launch the girders. Within the crane there are two tracks, which run its entire length; on these tracks run two smaller trolleys, each of which has a winch. The girder is on the ground, somewhere within the crane's span; the two winches first pull it all the way up into the trolley, and then the crane advances, moving very slowly, like a caterpillar, traveling on rollers that are set on top of the pylons. It advances with the girder inside it, making you think of a pregnant animal; it goes from pylon to pylon until it reaches the right place, and there the winches turn upside down and the crane gives birth to the beam, by which I mean that it drops it into the exact right slot. I saw it done, and it was a nice piece of work, the type that's satisfying, too, because you could see the machine was working smoothly, without effort and without making a sound; also, and I don't know why this is, but to see large things move slowly and soundlessly—like, for instance, a ship when it leaves port—has always affected me, and I'm not the only one, other guys have told me that they've felt the same way. When the bridge is finished, the crane is dismantled; it's carried away by trucks and can be used another time.

"I'm telling you how it goes in an ideal scenario, that is, how the job should've gone, but in fact things started to go wrong almost immediately. I won't bore you with the details, but there were constant problems, beginning with the sections that I was to assemble myself—the segments of the crane that I told you about. They hadn't been built to specification and we had to trim them all, one by one. As you can imagine, I protested, in fact, I was stubborn about it: the idea that I'd have to pay for someone else's mistake, that a rigger should have to start fooling around with a hacksaw and a file, was absurd. I went to the foreman and I let him have it: all the pieces had to be the right size, stacked properly in the right order, at the site—otherwise, no Faussone. They could go find another rigger in Calabria, because in this world, if you let anyone get the best of you, you're finished."

I was still tempted by the water, a temptation renewed every second by the wash of small waves against the keel, and by the happy cries of the Russian children, so blond, sturdy, and radiant, who were chasing one another to the river and plunging in like otters. I didn't understand the

correlation between the gantry crane and Faussone's antipathy toward water and swimming, so I asked him, warily, if he would explain. Faussone glowered at me.

"You never let me tell stories my own way," he said, and withdrew into a vexed silence. This reproof seemed to me then (and seems to me still) completely uncalled for, because I had always let him say whatever he wanted and for as long as he wanted, and the reader can testify to this. I said nothing, however, so as not to disturb the peace. But soon our mutual silence was dramatically interrupted. On the adjacent bench, Mr. Difference woke up, stretched, looked around with a smile, and began to undress. When he was down to his boxers, he awoke his obese friend and handed him the bundle of clothes; then he saluted us politely, climbed over the railing, and jumped into the water. With a few energetic strokes he escaped the pull of the propeller; then, swimming nonchalantly on his side, he headed toward a small group of white houses, from which a wooden pier extended. The obese guy went back to sleep immediately and Faussone resumed his story.

"Look—did you see that? Well, it makes me angry, because I wouldn't be good—I'll *never* be good at that kind of thing, and the gantry does have something to do with the swimming, you just need to be patient and the connection will become clear. You see, I like being at a construction site as long as everything goes the way it should, but that foreman irritated me, because he was the kind of guy who doesn't care about anything as long as he gets his paycheck at the end of the month, but he didn't realize that when you don't care about anything for too long, the paychecks stop coming—for you and everyone else. He was a tiny guy, with soft hands, and hair combed back with Brilliantine and parted in the middle; he was blond, so he didn't look like a Calabrian, and he was pompous, strutting around like a cock. And since he talked back to me, I said fine, it was all the same to me if he didn't want to cooperate, the weather was good, the sun was out, and the sea was nearby; I'd never had a beach vacation before, so I'd have one now until all the parts of my gantry, from top to bottom, were ready. I sent a telegram to the company, and since it was in their best interest as well, they wrote back right away, giving their approval—so it seems like I did the right thing, don't you think?

"For my vacation I didn't move from that very spot, out of spite, because I wanted to keep an eye on the worksite, but also because there was

no need: I found a room in a small house no more than a hundred meters from the concrete pylons. A nice family lived there, actually I thought about them a little while ago, when we were having lunch in Dubrovka, because good people are alike everywhere, and, besides, everyone knows that there's not much difference between Russians and Calabrians. They were kind, clean, respectful people, always in good spirits; the husband had a strange profession, which was repairing holes in fishing nets, the wife kept the house and the garden, and the child didn't do anything, but he was nice all the same. I didn't do anything, either: at night I slept like a pope, in a silence disrupted only by the sound of the ocean, and during the day I sat in the sun like a tourist, and I decided that this was the right time to learn how to swim.

"I told you before how, in that place, I had everything I needed. I had tons of spare time, no one paid any attention to me or bothered me or made fun of me because I was almost thirty years old and trying to learn how to swim; the sea was calm; there was a beautiful beach to lie on; and there weren't even any rocks on the bottom, just a fine, white sand, as smooth as silk, with such a gradual slope that you could go out nearly a hundred meters and still touch the bottom—the water came just up to your shoulders. But I must confess that, despite all this, I was terrified. It wasn't just in my mind—and I'm not sure if I'm explaining myself properly here—but it was also in my stomach and my knees, an animal fear, in other words, but I'm pigheaded, as you've surely observed by now, so I drew up a plan for myself. First of all, I had to make myself get over my fear of water; then I had to convince myself that I could float, since everybody else could—children, even animals, so why not me? Finally, I had to learn how to move myself forward. Nothing was missing, not even a plan, and yet I still didn't feel calm, at least not the way you should be when you're on vacation. I felt like something was scratching me from the inside. It was all a little confused: the gnawing feeling about the work that wasn't moving forward, the anger against that foreman I didn't like, and also another fear, the fear of someone who sets out to do something but isn't capable of doing it, so he loses faith and decides it'd be better if he didn't even try, but since he's stubborn he goes through with it anyway. I've changed a little since then, but I was like that back then.

"Overcoming my fear of water was the toughest thing. Though I should say that I didn't overcome it at all—I just got used to it. I gave myself two

days: I walked into the water until it was up to my chest, I took a breath, held my nose with my fingers, and put my head under the water. The first few times were like death. I mean that—I really felt like I was dying. I don't know if everyone's like this, but I had a kind of automatic mechanism that kicked in as soon as I put my head underwater. My throat clamped up and I felt water go into my ears, and it seemed like it was going down those two small passageways into my nose, then down my neck and into my lungs, until I drowned. So I had to stand up again. I almost felt like thanking God Almighty for separating water from dry land, like it says in the Bible. But it wasn't even fear, really; it was horror, like when you suddenly see a corpse and your hair stands on end—but let's not get ahead of ourselves. In short, I got used to it.

"Next up was floating, which I could see would be a bit more complicated. I'd seen how other people did it, on various occasions, how they play dead. I tried to do this, too, and I was floating, no problem, it was just that in order to keep floating I needed to refill my lungs with air, like those Alaskan pontoons I told you about; but you can't always have full lungs, there comes a moment when you have to empty them out, and then I felt myself sink like the pontoons when it came time for them to be tugged away, and I had to kick in the water as fast as I could, still holding my breath, until my feet touched the ground; then I stood up straight, panting heavily like a dog, and I wanted to give up. But you know how it is when you encounter something difficult and it's like you've made a bet, and you don't want to lose? Well, that's what happened with me, as it does when I'm working. I may quit an easy job, but never a hard one. The problem comes from the fact that we have our air pipes in the wrong place. Dogs and, especially, seals have them in the right place; they can swim without a hitch from birth and no one even has to teach them how. So I decided for that first time that I'd learn how to swim on my back. I would have been more than happy with that—even if it didn't seem completely natural—because if you're on your back you can have your nose out of the water and then, theoretically, you can breathe. At first I did some shallow breathing, so as not to empty the pontoons too much, and then I picked up the pace a little at a time, until I was convinced that it was actually possible to breathe without sinking, or at least without having my nose go under, which was the most important thing. But all it took was a small wave, just this high, and the fear would come back and I'd lose my bearings.

“I did all my experiments, and whenever I got tired or out of breath I went back to the shore and stretched out in the sun near the highway pylon; I had stuck a nail in it so that I could hang my clothes, because otherwise the ants would get at them. As I told you, the pylons were some fifty meters high, maybe even higher: they were of plain cement, and they still bore the imprint of the mold. There was a stain on the pylon about one or two meters above the ground, and the first few times I didn’t really notice it; one night it rained, and the stain turned darker, but even then I didn’t give it much thought. It was certainly an odd stain: it was the only blemish, the rest of the pylon was clean, and so were the other pylons. It was a meter long, and divided roughly into two sections, one long and one short, like an exclamation point, only at a slight angle.”

He was quiet for a long time, rubbing his hands as if he were washing them. I could distinctly hear the knocking of the engine, and the ferry house was already coming into view.

“Listen, I don’t like to tell lies. Do I exaggerate a little? Yes, especially when I’m talking about my work, and I don’t think that’s a sin, because anyone listening to me understands this right away. Well, one day I noticed that there was a crack running across the stain, and a procession of ants going in and out of it. This got me curious, so I tapped on it with a rock and it sounded hollow. I tapped harder and the cement, which was no thicker than a finger, caved in; and there, inside of it, was the head of a corpse.

“I felt like I’d been shot in the face, and I lost my balance, but he was really there. And he was watching me. Shortly after this I got a strange illness, scabs started to appear on my waist, eating away at me, and when they fell off, new ones formed—but I was almost happy because finally I had an excuse to quit and go back home. So I never learned how to swim, not then or since, because every time I go into the water—whether sea, river, or lake—I start having ugly thoughts.”

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3. A street in Turin.



The Bridge

“. . .But when they proposed sending me off to India, I wasn’t really interested. It’s not like I knew a lot about India; you know how you can quickly get the wrong idea about a country, and since the world is big, and the whole thing is made up of countries—and you can’t visit all of them—you end up full of foolish ideas about every one of them, including, maybe, your own. I can tell you everything I knew about India in just a few words: they have too many children, they die of hunger because they have a religion that forbids them to eat cows, they killed Gandhi because he was too good, the country is bigger than Europe and they speak I don’t know how many different languages, so, for lack of any better solution, they all agree to speak English; and then there’s that story of Mowgli the Frog, which I believed to be true when I was little. Oh—I forgot the part about the Kama Sutra and the hundred and thirty-seven ways of having sex, or maybe there are two hundred and thirty-seven ways, I don’t remember for sure, I read about it one time in a magazine while I was waiting to get a haircut.

“In other words, I almost would’ve preferred to stay in Turin: I was living in Via Lagrange at the time, with my aunts. Sometimes, instead of going to a pension, I go to their place, because they treat me well, they cook specially for me, in the mornings they get up very quietly so as not to wake me, and they go to the early Mass and buy me rolls still warm from the oven. The only problem is that they want me to get married. This isn’t so bad in itself, but the thing is that they’re heavy-handed about it, and set me up on dates with women who really aren’t my type. I have no idea how they find these women; maybe in those convent boarding schools. They’re all the same, like wax figurines—when you talk to them they don’t even dare

look you in the face, which makes me horribly embarrassed, and I don't know how to begin, so I start acting as awkward as them. So sometimes when I come to Turin I don't even tell my aunts and I go straight to the pension; but it's also because I don't want to bother them.

"Like I was saying, this was at a time when I was a little tired of traveling around and, despite my aunts' mania, I would have happily stayed put. But at the office they kept encouraging me—they know my weak spot and they know how to manipulate me—saying it was an important job, if I didn't go then they wouldn't know who else to send. They kept at it, calling me every day. As I've said before, I don't like to keep my engine idling and I can take only so much of city life, so by the end of February I started to think that maybe I ought to stop wearing out my sheets and start wearing out my shoes instead, and in early March I was at Fiumicino boarding one of the Pakistani airline's yellow Boeings.

"It was a completely ridiculous trip: I can safely say that I was the only serious traveler on the flight. Half of the passengers were German and Italian tourists who, from the moment we got on the plane, were all pumped about the idea of seeing Indian dance, because they thought that meant belly dancing, but later I saw it for myself and it's a very solemn affair—they dance only with their eyes and their fingers. The other half were Pakistani laborers returning home from Germany with their wives and small children, and they were happy, too—because they were going home for vacation. There were also some female workers, in fact, there was a girl sitting next to me in a violet sari—a sari being that piece of clothing they wear, without sleeves, and without a front or back—and this girl, well, she was a beauty. I don't know how to describe it, but she just seemed transparent, she had an inner glow, and her eyes spoke to me; unfortunately, it was only her eyes that spoke, by which I mean she spoke only Indian and a little German, and I've never had any desire to learn German. If I had, I certainly would have talked to her, and I'm sure it would've been a livelier conversation than I've had with the girls my aunts send me—no offense, but those girls are so flat it's like St. Joseph himself has smoothed them over with his plane. Anyway, let's drop the subject. The point is, and I don't know if you're like this, too, but, for me, the more exotic the girl, the more I like her, because she arouses my curiosity.

"The most cheerful people on board were the children. It was complete bedlam, there weren't enough seats for all of them—I think those airlines

let them fly free. They were running around barefoot, chatting among themselves like sparrows, and playing hide-and-seek under the seats, so that every so often one of them would sprout up between your legs, give you a little smile, and run off. When the airplane flew over the Caucasus there were air pockets, and some of the adult passengers got scared and others got sick. The kids, however, just invented a new game: as soon as the airplane turned a little to the left, and tilted to the left, they all shouted and threw themselves against the windows on the left side of the plane; and on the right the same thing, so violently that the pilot felt the aircraft swerve and at first he couldn't figure out why, and assumed there was some kind of engine malfunction; but finally he realized it was the kids, so he called the flight attendant and told her to quiet them down. It was the hostess who told me this, because, it being a long trip, we had become friends. She was beautiful, too, and wore a small pearl fastened through her nose. When she brought around the food tray, it had only what seemed like white and yellow ointments that made you queasy, but whatever, I ate them just the same, because she was watching me and I didn't want her to think I was difficult.

"You know how it is when you're going in for a landing and the engines slow down a little, and the aircraft tilts forward so that it seems like a large, worn-out bird, then it starts its descent and you see the lights of the airfield below, the ailerons emerge and the airfoils rise up, and everything vibrates, so it feels as if the air has become rough? That's what happened, but it was a terrible descent. Clearly the control tower hadn't given us permission to land, because we began to fly around in circles, and either there was turbulence or the pilot wasn't very good or there was some mechanical problem, because the airplane shook as if it were going over the teeth of a saw, and out the window I could see the wings flapping like a bird's, that is, as if they were loose; and this went on for twenty minutes. It's not like I was worried: I know this happens sometimes. But I thought back to it later —after what happened at the bridge. Anyway, by the grace of God, we landed, the engines died down, and the doors opened. When they opened, the cabin filled with what seemed less like air than like warm water, with a certain scent, which you smell everywhere in India: a heavy scent, a mix of incense, cinnamon, sweat, and decay. I had no time to waste, so I retrieved my luggage and went to find the small Dakota that was to fly me to the worksite. Fortunately, it was almost dark outside, which was for the best,

because that airplane was a terrifying sight. When it took off it was even more terrifying, even if I hadn't seen it—but there was nothing to be done, and besides it was a short trip. It was like one of those cars in an old Ridolini movie;[4] but I saw that the other passengers were calm, so I stayed calm myself.

"I was calm and happy because I was finally about to arrive, and because I was going to start a job that I knew I'd like. I still haven't told you about it, but it was a great job. I had to put up a suspension bridge, and I've always thought that working on bridges is the most beautiful kind of work there is, because you can be sure that they won't do any harm to anyone, in fact, they'll do good, because bridges carry roads, and without roads we'd all still be savages; in short, I like bridges because they're the opposite of borders, and borders are where wars start. Well, that's what I thought about bridges, basically what I still think; but when I assembled that bridge in India I was sorry I hadn't been a better student, because if I had studied more I probably would have become an engineer. But if I were an engineer, the last thing I'd want to do would be to design a bridge, and the last bridge that I'd want to design would be a suspension bridge."

I pointed out to Faussone that his comments appeared to be somewhat contradictory. He admitted that this was true, but that I should wait to hear the end of the story before judging him. It often happens that a thing might be good in theory but bad in practice, and that was the case here.

"The Dakota landed in a way I'd never experienced before, and I've taken my share of flights. When it was in sight of the runway, the pilot flew very low; but instead of slowing the engines he pressed down on the gas, which made a horrible noise; he sped over the whole runway just two or three meters above the ground, zoomed up over the barracks, did a turn at low altitude, and then landed, skipping three or four times—like a flat stone on water. They explained to me that this was done to scare off the vultures, and in fact, as the airplane got close to the ground, I saw them there, in the floodlights, but I couldn't figure out what they were, they looked like old women squatting—but then again I wasn't surprised, because in India everything always seems to be something else. In any case, they weren't particularly frightened: they shifted a little, hopping about with their wings half open, not even bothering to take flight, and as soon as the airplane came to a stop they gathered around it as if they were expecting something,

only every so often one of them would give a quick peck to its neighbor. Those are some damn ugly animals.

“But it’s pointless to start telling you about India, I’d go on for ever, and, besides, maybe you’ve been there. No? Well, you can read about these things in books, but how to wire the cables of a suspension bridge, you can’t find that in a book, or at least not what it feels like. So we arrived at the worksite’s airport, which was just a plot of packed earth, and they had us sleep in barracks. It wasn’t too bad, but it was hot. Now, I don’t want to go on and on about the heat, so just understand that it was always hot, day and night, you sweat so much over there that, if you don’t mind me saying so, you never have to go to the bathroom. So during the entire course of this story it was as hot as hell, and it’d be a waste of time to keep repeating this.

“The next morning I went to introduce myself to the boss on the job. He was an Indian engineer and we spoke English, and we understood each other very well because the Indians, to my ear, speak English better than the English, or at least more clearly; the English just don’t get it, they speak quickly, chewing up all their words, and if you don’t understand something they act surprised and can’t be bothered to help. Anyway, the engineer explained the job to me, and then he gave me a type of netting to put under my helmet, because they have malaria over there, and in fact there was mosquito netting over the windows of the barrack. I saw that the Indian workers at the site weren’t wearing the netting, and when I asked him why, he said that most of them had malaria already.

“That engineer was very worried; or, rather, I mean that I’d be very worried if I were him, but if he was, he didn’t show it. Speaking in a very calm voice, he told me that they had brought me on to lay the support cables on the suspension bridge. The biggest part of the job was already done: they had, over a period of time, dredged the riverbed at the five points where they would put the five piers. It had been a crazy job, because the river carries away a lot of sand, even when it’s low, so as soon as they dug a hole it would fill up again. Then they sank the caissons, and sent miners inside the cofferdams to dig out the rock, and two of them drowned, but ultimately the cofferdams were sunk and filled with gravel and cement, so anyway they’d finished the dirty part of the job. Listening to all this talk I started to get worried, because he referred to the two dead men like it was no big deal, a normal thing, and I started to realize that this was one of

those places where you shouldn’t trust that others will behave prudently, where you have to look out for yourself.

“I was saying that, if I were in the engineer’s place, I wouldn’t have been so calm; just two hours earlier, they had called to tell him about an unbelievable thing that was happening: now that they were finally finished with the piers, a flood was coming and the river was changing course; he said this in the way someone else might say the roast was burned. His reaction time must’ve been pretty slow. An Indian in a turban arrived in a jeep, and the engineer told me, very politely, that he’d see me again soon, and that he was extremely sorry. I realized that he was going to have a look, so I asked to go with him, and he made a grimace that I didn’t understand, but finally he said yes. I don’t know how to explain it; maybe it was because he respected me, maybe because one should never refuse an offer of advice, or maybe it was simply out of politeness—he was very polite, but one of those guys who’re happy to let water find its own level. He also had a good imagination: while we were traveling in the Jeep, on streets that I can’t even begin to describe to you, instead of thinking about the flood he told me how they had put service bridges across the river (he called them *chetuòks*, or catwalks, but I don’t think any sensible cat would ever try to walk on them; more about them later). Someone else would have taken a boat, or fired a harpoon, the kind you use for whales; but this guy gathered all the children of the town and declared that a prize of ten rupees would go to the first kid who could fly a kite over to the other shore. One kid succeeded, the engineer paid him the reward—which was no big deal since ten rupees is just fifteen hundred lire—and then he knotted a thicker rope to the kite string and, proceeding in this manner, he wired the steel cables of the *chetuòk*. He had just finished telling this story when we arrived at the bridge, and came before a sight that was breathtaking, even to him.

“The power of rivers is not something we think too much about back home. We were at a bend in the river, some seven hundred meters wide, which didn’t seem like a good place for a bridge, but apparently he had no choice, because an important railroad line needed to cross there. You could see the five piers in the middle of the current, and past them were the pylons built for the approach, which were smaller and lower, so as to connect to the flat land; support towers, each one about fifty meters high, had already been built on the five larger pylons; and trestles had already been laid horizontally between two of the piers, a light, provisional bridge,

on which the actual span would be mounted. We were on the right bank, which was reinforced by a solid concrete embankment, but the river itself had retreated—overnight, it had begun to eat away at the left bank, where there was a similar embankment, and early that morning that embankment had collapsed.

"There were a hundred Indian laborers around us, and none of them so much as blinked. They just calmly watched the river, sitting on their heels in that odd way of theirs—I don't know how they do it, I wouldn't be able to keep it up for more than two minutes, obviously they must learn how to do it as children. When they saw the engineer, they leaped to their feet and greeted him, putting their hands to their stomach—like this, as if they were praying—and bowing slightly, and then they sat down again. We were too low to get a good view of the situation, so we climbed a ladder that led up the scaffolding on the bank, and from there we could see the whole spectacle.

"Below us, as I said, the water was gone. There was only black mud, which in the sun was already beginning to steam and stink, and within it was a confusion of uprooted trees, planks, empty barrels, and animal carcasses. The water was running against the left bank, as if it were trying to carry it away, and in fact, while we were standing there mesmerized, seeing this unfold without knowing what to do or what to say, we saw a piece of the embankment, about ten meters long, come loose, slam against one of the piers, then ricochet and fly downstream in the current, as if it were wood instead of cement. The water had already carried away a good portion of the left bank; it had poured into the breach and was flooding the fields on the far side, creating a round lake more than a hundred meters wide, and more water kept flowing into it—like an evil beast bent on destruction, whirling around with the river's full power, and expanding before our eyes.

"The current was carrying all kinds of things along with it—not just scraps but what appeared to be floating islands. Farther upstream the river must have passed through a forest, because some of the trees still had their leaves and roots, and there were even entire chunks of riverbank—and I have no idea how these stayed afloat—with grass, clumps of earth, freestanding plants and upturned plants, pieces of the landscape, in other words. They raced by at full speed, sometimes threading between the pylons and shooting down on the other side, other times hitting against the

foundation and splitting into two or three pieces. The piers were obviously quite sturdy, because a whole tangle of planks, branches, and tree trunks had collected at the foundations, and you could see the power of the water, which piled up all this debris against the piers but could not topple them; it made a strange noise, like underground thunder.

"I know, I said I was happy that I wasn't the engineer, but, in his position, I think I would've tried to do a little more. I'm not saying that he could've done much there, on the spot, but I had the impression that, if it were up to him, he would've sat on his heels like his workers, and he would have stayed there, watching, for eternity. Since he was the engineer and I had just gotten there, I felt like it wouldn't have been right for me to give him advice. Then again, since it was plain to see that he didn't know what the hell to do, and was pacing up and down the shore in silence—spinning in circles, in other words—I summoned my courage and told him that, in my opinion, it'd be best to collect some stones and rocks, the larger the better, and lay them on the left bank; but we'd have to move fast, because even as we spoke the river carried away two more slabs of the embankment in just an instant, and the whirlpool in the lake kept spinning faster. The moment we got in the Jeep we saw a mass of trees, earth, and branches as big as a house—I'm not exaggerating—and it was rolling like a ball. It struck the bridge at the point where there was a scaffolding, and bent it like a straw and dragged it down into the water. There was really nothing to be done. The engineer told the workers to go home, and we returned to our barrack as well, so we could order the stones; but on the way there the engineer told me, in his typically calm voice, that there was nothing but fields, black earth, and mud in the area, so if I wanted a stone even as big as a walnut I'd have to go at least a hundred miles away to find it—as if the stone idea had been some craving of mine, the kind a pregnant woman gets. What I'm saying is that he was perfectly nice, but odd; he seemed to be playing rather than working, and he was starting to get on my nerves.

"He went to telephone somebody, I have no idea who, probably a government official. He spoke Indian and I didn't understand a word, but it seemed that he first had to speak to an operator, then the secretary of the secretary, and then the actual secretary; the man he was looking for never got on the line, and finally he lost the connection—in other words, it was kind of like here. But he didn't lose patience, and he started all over again. While he was on hold with one of the secretaries, he told me that he didn't

think there'd be anything for me to do at the worksite for the next few days; I could stay there if I wanted, but he suggested that I take a train to Calcutta, so that's what I did. I couldn't really tell whether he suggested this out of kindness, or just to get me off his back; certainly nothing much came out of it. In fact, he told me right away that I shouldn't bother trying to find a room at a hotel, and he gave me the address of a private home where I should go because the owners were his friends, and I would also appreciate it for hygienic reasons.

"I'm not going to tell you about Calcutta—five days, and a waste of time. The population is more than five million and there's horrible poverty, which you see right away. Imagine, as soon as I walked out of the station, and this was at night, I saw a family that was getting ready for bed, and their bed was inside a section of concrete pipe, one of those new pipes they use for sewer systems—four meters long and one meter in diameter—and there was a father, a mother, and three children, and inside the pipe they had put a nightlight and two pieces of cloth, one to cover one end and one for the other; but they were still lucky, because most people just slept on the sidewalk wherever they could find a spot.

"It turned out that the engineer's friends weren't Indian but Parsi; the man was a doctor, and I felt comfortable with them. When they found out that I was Italian, they welcomed me warmly, I'm not sure why. I didn't know anything about Parsis—in fact, not even that they existed. To be honest, my ideas about them still aren't too clear. Maybe, since you're from a different religion, too, you can explain it to me."

I had to disappoint Faussone: I knew practically nothing about Parsis except the macabre aspect of their funerals, in which the cadaver, lest it contaminate earth, water, or fire, is not buried, submerged, or cremated but, rather, left in the Towers of Silence to be eaten by vultures. But I thought that these towers no longer existed, and hadn't since the time of Salgari.[5]

"Not so: they're still there, my hosts told me all about it, but they weren't religious themselves, and they said that when they died, they'd be put underground the normal way. The towers still exist, only they're in Bombay, not Calcutta: there are four of them, each with its own platoon of vultures, though they're used only four or five times a year. But they told me something else. A German engineer had come by with a bunch of prospectuses and got himself an appointment with the Parsi priests. He told them that his technicians had been working on a grill that could be placed at

the bottom of the towers, a grill with electric resistors that burned the corpse very slowly—hygienically, and without flames or foul odors or contaminating anything. Leave it to the Germans, right? In any case, the priests talked this over, and as far as I know they're still talking it over, because they have conservatives and liberals there, too. The doctor was laughing while he was telling me the story, and his wife interrupted to say that, in her opinion, nothing's going to happen—not for religious reasons but because of the kilowatts available and the local bureaucracy.

"Everything is cheap in Calcutta, but I didn't dare buy anything, I didn't even go to the movies, out of fear of dirt and disease; I stayed at home instead and chatted with the Parsi woman, who was very courteous and sensible—actually that reminds me, I have to send her a postcard—and she told me all about India, a subject without end. I was getting impatient, though, and every day I called the worksite, but the engineer either wasn't there or was avoiding me. On the fifth day I finally got hold of him, and he told me that I could return, that the river was lower and the job could proceed, so I went.

"I reported to the engineer, who still seemed to have his head in the clouds, and I found him at the barrack, standing in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by about fifty men, and he seemed to be expecting me. He greeted me in that peculiar manner of his, with his hands against his chest, and then, in turn, he introduced me to my workers: 'This is Mr. Peraldo, your Italian foreman'; and they all bowed with their hands pressed together and I just stood there like a fool. I assumed he had forgotten my name, because you know how foreigners always have trouble with names, and it always seemed to me, for example, that every Indian was named Sing, so I figured the same thing had happened to him. I told him that I wasn't Peraldo but Faussone, and he gave me his angelic smile, and said, 'Sorry, it's just that all you Europeans look the same.' In other words, it gradually became clear that this engineer, who was called Chatanya, didn't only bungle his work, he also bungled names, and this Mr. Peraldo wasn't someone he had dreamed up—he was a real person, a worker from Biella who, coincidentally, was scheduled to arrive that morning. He was in charge of anchoring the bridge cables, and in fact, he did arrive a little bit later; and I was happy because it's always a pleasure to meet a fellow countryman abroad. How the engineer managed to confuse him with me, and say that we had the same face, is a mystery, because I'm tall and thin and he was

short and squat, I was in my thirties and he was past fifty, he had a little mustache like Charlot,[6] and even then I didn't have much more hair than the little I have now, here in the back; in other words, if we resembled each other, we resembled each other in the crook of our elbow, and we both liked to drink and eat—not, by the way, an easy thing to do well over there.

"It wasn't a complete surprise to meet a worker from Biella in such an out-of-the-way place, because if you travel you'll find, in every corner of the globe, a Neapolitan who makes pizza and a Biellese who makes walls. One time I met one at a worksite in Holland, and he told me that God made the world, except for Holland, which was made by the Dutch; but the dikes in Holland were made by Biellese workers, because no one has invented a machine that can build walls—well, it was a nice proverb, even though it's not really true anymore. I was lucky to have met this Peraldo, because he had traveled the world more than me, and he knew a thing or two, though he didn't talk a lot; and also, though I don't know how he managed this, because he had in his room a good supply of Nebbiolo, and every now and then he'd offer me some. He'd only offer me a little, not much, because he wasn't that magnanimous and he didn't want to make too big a dent in his supply; and he was right, because the job dragged on, and it has to be said that that's how it is, it's the same all over the world—I haven't seen many jobs finish on schedule.

"He took me to see the tunnels for the anchorages: you see, the bridge's cables would have to endure a lot of friction, and standard cable terminals wouldn't do. They had to be anchored in a wedge-shaped block of concrete, which was sunk into a tunnel bored deep into the rock. There were four tunnels in all, two for each cable. But what tunnels! They were like caves. I'd never seen anything like them, eighty meters long, ten meters wide at the opening and fifteen at the bottom, at a thirty-degree angle. . . . Come on, don't make that face. I know what it means—you're going to write this stuff down. I'm sorry, but I wouldn't want any big mistakes to get out. Or if so, I'm sorry, but not because of me."

I promised Faussone that I would follow his directions conscientiously, and in no case would I yield to the temptation, so common in my profession, to invent, embellish, and elaborate. I wouldn't add anything to his account, but I might take out a couple of things, like a sculptor, when he carves a form from a block; and he expressed his approval. Carving, then, from the large block of technical details that he—in a not particularly

orderly fashion—presented to me, I discerned the form of a long, narrow bridge, which was supported by five towers made out of steel boxes, and hung from four festoons of steel cables. Each festoon was 170 meters long, and each of the cables was made from a monstrous cord composed of 11,000 threads, each thread 5 millimeters in diameter.

"I told you the other night that, for me, every job is like a first love. But in this case I understood right away that it was a demanding love—the kind that, if you can get out of it without losing your hide, you have to count yourself lucky. Before I started I had a week of schooling, taking lessons from the engineers. There were six of them, five Indians and one guy from the company: four hours in the morning writing things down in a notebook, and studying all afternoon. It was really like spider's work, except spiders are born knowing how to do their job, and if they fall, it's not very far, and it's not a big deal anyway, because the thread is built into their body. Ever since I worked that job, whenever I see a spider in its web I think back to my eleven thousand wires—or, rather, twenty-two thousand, because there were two cables—and I feel like we're related. Especially when there's a wind blowing.

"Then it was my turn to impart a lesson to my men, who were real Indians, unlike those Alaskans I was telling you about before. But I have to admit that at first I had no confidence, seeing them sitting there all around me, on their heels, or with their legs crossed and their knees apart, like the statues in the churches I'd seen in Calcutta. They stared at me and didn't ask any questions, but then, over a period of time, I dealt with each of them, one by one, and I realized that they hadn't missed a word; in fact, in my opinion, they're more intelligent than us, or maybe they were just afraid of losing their jobs, because over there they don't stand on ceremony. They're just like us, even if they wear turbans and don't wear shoes, and every morning, no matter what else is going on, they spend two hours praying. Sure, they have their problems, too: one of them had a sixteen-year-old son who was already shooting dice and he was worried because the kid always lost; another had a sick wife; and a third had seven children, but he said that he didn't agree with the government and didn't want to have an operation, because he and his wife liked kids, and he showed me a photograph. They were beautiful, and so was his wife; all Indian girls are beautiful, but Peraldo, who had been in India for a while, informed me that we had no chance with them. He also said that, though the situation might be different

in the cities, there are certain diseases going around out there, so it's best to forget about it; in other words, I was never more hard up than during my time in India. But let's get back to the job.

"I told you about the *chetuòks*—that is, the catwalks—and about the trick of using a kite to string the first cable. Obviously we weren't going to fly twenty-two thousand kites. There's a special system for stringing the cables of a suspension bridge: you set up a winch, and about six or seven meters above each catwalk you rig a looped cable—like one of those transmission belts they used to have, back in the day—which extends, between two pulleys, from one shore to the other; attached to this looped cable is an inactive pulley, with four holes; through each hole you pass a loop of wire from a large spool; and then you set the pulleys in motion and draw the inactive pulley back and forth between the shores—that way, with a single trip, you thread eight strands. The workers, except for the ones who were threading the loops and the ones who were removing them, stood on the catwalk, two every fifty meters, watching to make sure that the threads didn't cross. But it's one thing to tell you about it, and another thing to do it.

"Fortunately, the Indians are a submissive people, because you have to realize that going out on those catwalks isn't exactly the same thing as taking a stroll down Via Roma. First of all, they're on an incline, because they're built at the same angle that the suspension cable will have; second, all it takes is a light breeze to make them wobble like crazy, but I'll talk more about the wind later; third, since they need to be light, so as not to offer wind resistance, the walkway is made of a grating, so it's best not to look down, because if you do you'll see the river below, the water the color of mud, with all kinds of little things moving in it, which, seen from above, look like tiny fried fish, but are in fact the backs of crocodiles—but I already told you that in India everything always looks like something else. Peraldo told me that there aren't many crocodiles left, but the few that are show up whenever you build a bridge, because they like to eat the scraps from the cafeteria and they lie in wait for workers to fall into the water. India is a nice country, but it doesn't have any pleasant animals. Even the mosquitoes—besides the fact that they carry malaria, which means that you always have to wear not just a helmet but a veil, the kind women used to wear way back when—are this big, and if you don't watch out, they'll bite off a whole chunk of your flesh; it's also said that there are butterflies that

come at night to suck your blood while you sleep, but I really never saw them, and, as far as sleeping went, I always slept well.

“The trick to rigging the wires is making sure that they all have the same tension—and, with wires of that length, it’s not easy. We did two shifts, six hours each, working from dawn to dusk, but then we had to organize a special team to work at night, before the sun came up, because during the day some of the wires would get direct sunlight, and the heat would cause them to expand, while others lay in the shade; so it was important to take measurements at night, because that’s when the wires are all the same temperature. And, without fail, I was the one they always asked to take those measurements.

“It went on like this for sixty days, with the fixed pulley going back and forth, and the spiderweb kept growing, perfectly taut and symmetrical, and you could start to see what shape the bridge was going to take. It was hot, like I said. Okay, I know I said I wasn’t going to talk about it anymore, but it really was hot; it was a relief when the sun went down, in part because I was able to go back into the barrack and have a beer and a chat with Peraldo. Peraldo had started as a laborer, then he became a bricklayer, and then a cement worker. He had been all over the place; he even spent four years in the Congo building a dam, and he had plenty of stories, but if I start telling other people’s stories in addition to my own I’ll go on forever.

“After we’d strung the wires, you could see, if you looked from a distance, the two cables stretching from one shore to the other with their four festoons, delicate and light, just like the threads of a spiderweb. But when you saw them close up, the two bundles, each one seventy centimeters thick, looked terrifying. We compacted them with a special machine, like a ring-shaped press, that as it moves along clasps the cables together by applying the force of a hundred tons, but I didn’t have any hand in this. It was an American machine, and they had sent it all the way down there with an American specialist who gave everyone a nasty look; he didn’t speak to anyone and he didn’t let anybody get near him, clearly he was afraid that they’d steal his secret.

“At this point it seemed that the hard part was over; we’d rigged the vertical suspension cables in just a few days and fished them up with a block and tackle from the pontoons down below—it was like fishing for eels, except the eels weighed fifteen hundred kilos apiece; and finally it was time to begin laying the roadbed. No one would ever have guessed it, but

that was the moment the real adventure started. I have to say that, despite the trouble with the flash flood that I told you about before, though they acted as if nothing had happened, they did follow my advice: while I was in Calcutta they called in a parade of trucks loaded with boulders, and when the water receded, they did a nice job of reinforcing the embankments. But you know the old chestnut about the scalded cat, who afterward was afraid of cold water? Well, the whole time I was on the job, standing up there on my catwalk, I kept my eye on the water. I'd gotten the engineer to let me have a mobile telephone, because I figured that if another flood was going to come, it'd be nice to have some advance warning. It didn't occur to me that danger might come from another direction and, judging from what happened next, it didn't occur to anyone else, either—not even the designers.

"I'd never met those particular designers in person, I don't even know where they were from, but I've known plenty of others, and I can tell you that they come in all kinds. There's the elephant designer, the guy who always has to be correct; he doesn't care about elegance or economy, he just doesn't want any trouble, so he'll use four of something when one will do; usually this designer is already a little bit over the hill and, if you think about it, it's really a sad situation. Then, there's the miser type, who acts as if he has to pay for every rivet out of his own pocket. There's the parrot designer who, instead of working out the plans himself, cribs from someone else—the way you do in school—without realizing that everyone is laughing at him behind his back. There's the snail designer, meaning the bureaucratic type, who goes very, very slowly, and as soon as you give him a nudge he jumps back and hides in his shell, which is made out of rules and regulations—and, no offense, but I'd also call him the moron designer. Finally there's the butterfly designer, and I think that the designers of this bridge were that type, and it's the most dangerous type, because they're young and bold, and they're always trying to trick you; when you talk to them about money or safety they look at you like you're slime, and they only care about what's new and what's beautiful, without realizing that, if a work is well designed, it's beautiful automatically. I'm sorry if I keep going on about this, but when you put all your feeling into a job and it ends up the way this bridge did, well, it's upsetting. It's upsetting for a number of reasons: one, because it wastes a lot of time, since afterward it's always a mess with the laws and the lawyers and a thousand other idiotic things; two,

because even if you had nothing to do with it, you end up feeling a little guilty; but most of all, seeing a work like that come down, the way it came down—one piece at a time, as if it were suffering, as if it were resisting—it breaks your heart the same way the death of a person does.

"And just as when a person dies, and everyone talks about how they'd seen it coming from the way he was breathing and the movement of his eyes, it was the same thing with the bridge, after the disaster. Everyone had to put in their two cents, even the engineer—he said that he'd seen it coming from the start, that the suspension cables weren't strong enough, that the steel had holes in it as large as beans; the welders said that the riggers didn't know how to rig, the crane operator said the welders didn't know how to weld, and everyone took it out on the engineer, ragging on him, saying he'd been sleepwalking through the job and dillydallying and he didn't know anything about running an operation like that. Maybe everyone was right to some extent, or maybe nobody was, because even in this regard it was the same as it would've been with a person. I'd experienced this on numerous occasions: a tower, for example, which has been tested and retested so many times that you would've thought it'd stand for at least a century, begins to buckle after only a month; and a different one, which you wouldn't have bet on, not even for two cents, doesn't show so much as a crack. And if you leave it to the experts, then good luck; three of them show up and you get three different explanations—I've never met an expert that could figure out anything. Of course if someone dies, or a structure collapses, then there must be a reason, but there might not be only one, and if there is, then it might not be possible to find it. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

"I've already talked about how it was always hot on that job, every single day, a sweltering heat that wasn't easy to get used to, but by the end I actually did get used to it. Well, when the job was finished, and the painters were already perched all over the place like gnats in a spiderweb, it occurred to me that, all of a sudden, it wasn't hot anymore. The sun had come up, but instead of heating everything as usual, it was drying the sweat off of us, which was refreshing. I was on the bridge then, too, halfway down the first segment, and besides that sense of refreshment I felt two other things that made me stop in my tracks like a hunting dog when he points: I felt the bridge vibrate under my feet, and I heard something that sounded like music, but I couldn't tell where it was coming from; by music I mean a

sound, deep and faraway, like a church organ—see, I used to go to church when I was little—and I realized that it was all caused by the wind. It was the first time I'd felt wind since landing in India, and it wasn't a strong wind, but it was constant, like the wind you feel when you drive very slowly and hold your hand out the window. I felt uneasy, I don't know why, and I started walking back to the head of the bridge. Maybe it's a legacy of our profession, but we tend not to like things that vibrate. I got to the abutment, I turned to look back, and I felt my hair stand on end. And I don't mean that as a figure of speech, it really stood up straight, every single hair, and all at once, like every hair had just woken up and wanted to run away: because from where I stood you could see the entire profile of the bridge, and something unbelievable was happening. It was as if the force of the wind was waking the bridge itself. Yes, like someone who hears a noise, wakes up, tosses and turns, and gets ready to leap out of bed. The whole bridge shook: the roadbed wagged, like a tail, from left to right, and then it began to move vertically as well, you could see ripples running from my end to the other, like when you shake a slack cord; but they weren't vibrations anymore, they were waves that must have been one or two meters high—I know that because one of the painters had abandoned his work and started running toward me, and I'd see him one second and he'd be gone from sight the next, like a ship in the ocean when there are enormous waves.

"Everyone ran off the bridge—even the Indians hurried a bit more than usual—and there was a lot of screaming and chaos: no one knew what to do. Even the suspension cables were in motion. You know how it is in those moments, when one person is saying one thing and another says something else; but after a few minutes you could see that, though the bridge wasn't completely still, the waves had somewhat stabilized: they were rolling between the two ends at a steady rate. I don't know who gave the order, or maybe someone just took the initiative, but I saw that one of the tractors from the worksite was driving onto the roadbed of the bridge, laying down two three-inch cables: maybe they wanted to lay them diagonally to restrict the oscillations; certainly whoever was doing it must have been pretty brave, or more likely reckless, because I don't think you can really tame a structure like that, even if you managed to clamp down those two cables—and that roadbed was eight meters wide by one and a half high, so you can figure out how many tons were involved. There was no time to do anything

anyway, because by that point everything was happening too fast. The wind might've picked up, I'm not sure, but around ten o'clock the vertical waves got to be about four or five meters tall, and you could feel the earth shake, and you could hear the vertical suspension cables stretching and tightening. The tractor driver, seeing that he was in danger, ditched the tractor right there and jumped out onto the shore—which was good thinking, because immediately afterward the roadbed began to bend as if it were made of rubber, the tractor swerved all over the place, and finally flew right over the parapet, or maybe crashed through it, and fell into the river.

"You could hear what sounded like cannonballs firing, one after another; I counted six of them, and it was the sound of the vertical suspension cables snapping: they snapped clean off the roadbed, and the recoil caused the stumps to fly up. Even the roadbed began to crack, splitting apart at the joints, and sections of it fell into the river; some of the other pieces, however, stayed put, hanging on the beams like rags.

"Then it was over: everything was frozen in place, like after a bombardment, and I don't know what I looked like, but the guy next to me was trembling all over and his face was a sickly green, even though he was one of those dark-skinned Indians with a turban. All in all, two lengths of the roadbed had almost completely broken off, as well as a dozen vertical suspension cables, but the main cables were fine. Everything was as still as a photograph except the river, which continued to rush by as if nothing had happened. The wind hadn't died down; actually, it was stronger than before. It was as if someone had set out to do a certain amount of damage and then, having achieved it, was satisfied. And a stupid notion came to me: I once read in a book that, in ancient times, when they began to build a bridge, they killed a Christian; well, maybe not a Christian, because Christians didn't exist yet, but a man, and they buried the corpse in the bridge's foundation—though later they'd kill an animal instead—and then the bridge wouldn't collapse. But, like I said, it was a stupid idea.

"I left then; the large cables had held up, so I didn't have to redo them. I found out afterward that when they tried to figure out why and how it all had happened, they couldn't agree on anything, and they're still debating it today. As for me, when I saw the length of the roadbed start to flap up and down, I immediately thought of my landing in Calcutta, and of the wings of the Boeing that flapped like a bird's, which made me sick for a moment, even though I'd flown lots of times; but I don't know what to tell you.

Clearly the wind had something to do with it; I've been told, in fact, that they're now rebuilding the bridge, but with ducts in the roadbed, so that there's less wind resistance.

"No, I haven't worked on any other suspension bridges. I left without saying goodbye to anyone, except Peraldo. It's not a nice story. It's like when a girl you like dumps you one day out of the blue and you don't know why, and you suffer, not just because you've lost the girl but because you've lost your confidence. Ah well, pass me the bottle and we'll have another round—I'm buying tonight, anyway. So, yeah, I went back to Turin, and I almost started going out with one of those girls I told you about before, the ones my aunts wanted to set me up with, because my morale was so low that I couldn't put up a fight—but that's another story. Ultimately I got over it."

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4. The American silent-film comic actor Larry Semon was known in Italy as Ridolini.
5. Emilio Salgari (1862–1911), an author of adventure stories that take place in exotic lands.
6. The reference is to Charlie Chaplin.

Without Time

It had rained all night, sometimes in silent gusts, with raindrops so delicate they could be mistaken for mist, and sometimes in violent bursts, beating loudly against the sheets of corrugated iron that served as a roof for the warehouse sheds, which had been built in a haphazard formation around the guest quarters. A modest stream that flowed nearby had swelled in size, and all night long its voice entered my dreams, commingling with the images of flood and ruin evoked by Faussone's Indian story. At dawn—a sluggish dawn, humid and gray—we found ourselves besieged by the sacred, fertile mud of the Sarmatian plain, the brown mud, smooth and deep, that nourishes the grain and devours invading armies.

Beneath our windows the chickens were scratching, as comfortable in the mud as the ducks; they were fighting one another for earthworms. Faussone made a point of saying that the chickens we have back home would have drowned under the same conditions—thereby affirming, once again, the advantages of specialization. The camp's male and female Russian attendants moved about intrepidly, stomping around in their knee-high boots. The two of us waited until nine o'clock for the cars that were supposed to pick us up and take us to our respective places of work, and then we began making phone calls. By ten, it was clear that the very courteous response "as soon as possible" actually meant "not today, possibly tomorrow—if you're lucky." The cars were stuck in the mud, had broken down, were out on other assignments, and, besides, had never even been reserved for us, said the gentle voice on the telephone, with that well-known Russian indifference to the plausibility of an individual excuse or the mutual compatibility of multiple excuses. "A land without time," I said,

and Faussone replied, “Don’t worry about it. Besides, I don’t know about you, but I get paid just the same.”

I was still thinking about the unfinished story of the girl his aunts had sent to him, the one who almost got him into trouble: what kind of trouble?

Faussone was elusive. “Trouble, that’s all. With girls, three times out of four you get yourself in trouble, especially if you’re not careful from the very beginning. We didn’t see eye to eye; all we did was contradict each other, she never let me talk and always wanted to speak her mind, so I did the same. Now, she was bright, and her face was pretty enough, but she was three years older than me and, well, the chassis could have used some repairs. I mean, she had her merits, but she wanted a different type of guy for a husband, the kind of guy who punches the clock and shows up on time and keeps his mouth shut. And at my age one starts to become difficult—in fact, it might already be too late for me.”

He had gone over to the window and seemed lost in melancholy thoughts. Outside, the rain was dying down, but a raging wind had risen; the trees were shaking their branches as if they were trying to gesture, and close to the ground you could see odd, globular mounds of twigs, half a meter to a meter in size, flying about, rolling and jumping, designed like that by evolution to scatter their seed elsewhere—arid, yet darkly alive, they seemed to be fleeing from the forest of Pier della Vigna.[7] I muttered something vaguely consolatory, as seemed fitting, suggesting that Faussone compare his age with mine, but he began speaking again as if he hadn’t heard me:

“It used to be easier: I didn’t even have to think twice about it. I really was timid by nature, but at Lancia, partly for the company, and partly because they put me on maintenance and I learned how to weld, I became bolder and more confident; yes, welding was an important part of this, but I couldn’t say why. Maybe because welding is not a natural job, at least autogenous welding—it doesn’t come naturally, it doesn’t resemble any other job, your head, hands, and eyes all have to learn it independently, and especially the eyes, because when they put that visor in front of your eyes to protect you from the light, all you see is darkness and, in the darkness, the little bright worm of the welding cord as it advances, and it has to advance at a fixed speed. You can’t even see your own hands, but if you don’t do everything by the book, and you go off track even a little, instead of a weld you make a hole. The fact is that as soon as I became confident with my

welding, I became confident with everything, down to the way I walked; and here again the practice that I had in my father's shop paid off, definitely came in handy, because my father, God rest his soul, had taught me how to make copper tubes from sheet metal, back when there was no such thing as semifinished parts. You'd take the sheet metal and beat the edges until they were beveled; then you placed one edge over the other, painted over the joint with borax and brass chip, and passed it over the coke forge—not too slow and not too fast, otherwise the brass either melts off or won't fuse. And you have to eyeball the whole thing. Can you imagine?

"Then, following this same procedure, you'd make smaller tubes from the large tube, pulling it with the hand winch, and passing it over the heat each time—it's hard to believe. But by the end you almost couldn't see the joint anymore, only the paler grain of the brass; and if you ran your finger over it, you didn't feel a thing. Nowadays this work is completely different, of course, but I happen to be of the opinion that if schools taught vocations instead of Romulus and Remus, we'd all be a lot better off.

"I was telling you how learning to weld taught me a little about everything. And it just so happened, on the first important rigging job I had —which was, in fact, a job that involved welding—I brought a girl along with me; but, to tell the truth, I really didn't know what to do with her all day, so the poor girl trailed behind me, she sat on the grass under the pylons, smoking one cigarette after another, getting bored, and from way up above she seemed very small. The job was in the mountains, a beautiful spot in Val d'Aosta, and it was a nice time of year, too—the beginning of June. We had to finish constructing the pylons for a high-tension line, and then we had to rig the cables. I was twenty years old, I had just gotten my driver's license, and when the company told me to take the Fiat 600 van with all the equipment in it, and paid me in advance and ordered me to go, I felt as powerful as a king. My mother was still alive at the time, and she lived in town, so I didn't tell her anything, and of course I told my aunts even less—I didn't want to upset them because, when it came to girls, they thought they had a monopoly. This girl was on vacation; she was a schoolteacher, I'd known her for only a month, I took her dancing at Gay's; when I invited her, she was stunned, but she agreed right away. She wasn't the type to make a fuss.

"You can imagine that with these three things happening all at once—the girl, the work gig, and the car trip—I was revved up like a racing

engine: being twenty years old then was like being seventeen now, and I drove like a moron. Although I hadn't had much practice, and the van was straining, I tried to pass everyone, always giving them a close shave—remember, this was before the highway was built. The girl was scared, but you know what guys are like at that age: I enjoyed scaring her. At one point the car sneezed two or three times, and then came to a stop. I opened the hood and started feeling around in the engine, pretending like I knew what I was doing, but to tell the truth I didn't have a clue, and I couldn't figure out what the problem was. It wasn't long before the girl got impatient: I didn't want her to, but she hailed a traffic cop on a motorcycle and asked for his help. Right away he dipped a twig into the gas tank and showed me that I didn't have a drop of gas; in fact, I knew that the gauge was broken, but I'd forgotten about it because I'd been distracted by the girl. The cop drove off without another word, but I felt a little humbled, and maybe that was for the best, because from then on I drove more responsibly and we arrived without any accidents.

"We got a good rate at a little hotel—two separate rooms, to keep up appearances—and then I checked in at the electric company office and she went out walking on her own. This job, compared to some I've had since, a few of which I've already told you about, wasn't a big deal, but it was my first job outside the shop and I was really excited about it. They took me over to a pylon that was nearly finished, and explained that the other rigger had gone on sick leave. They gave me all the blueprints and details of the joints, and they put me to work. It was a truss tower made out of zinc pipes, the Y-shaped kind; we were at an altitude of eighteen hundred meters, and in the shadow of the rocks you could still make out patches of snow, but the fields were already in full flower. You heard water running and dripping everywhere, as if it had just rained, but in fact it was the sound of the thaw, because at night it would still freeze. The truss tower was thirty meters high; the supports had already been put in place; and below, on the ground, was the carpenters' table, where they were preparing pieces for welding. They were looking at me strangely, and at the time I couldn't figure out why. Then, once they got to know me a little, they explained that the previous rigger was not on sick leave after all, but had had an accident; you see, he had lost his footing and had fallen—luckily from not very high up—and the end result was that he was in the hospital with several broken ribs. They thought it was best to tell me this, not to scare me but because they

were sensible people with long experience in the trade, and seeing as I was so cheerful and rosy, with the girl watching from below, and me goosandering twenty meters off the ground, without even a harness—"

I had to interrupt the narrative here because of this "goosandering." The locution was familiar to me—"goosandering" means more or less "displaying bravado," or "showboating"—but I hoped that Faussone might explain the origin of the word to me, or at least clarify what a goosander is. We didn't get very far: he knew vaguely that a goosander was a bird, and that to goosander a woman meant to try to woo her by showing off, but he didn't know anything beyond that. Later on, for my own purposes, I did some research, and found out that the goosander is the common merganser, a species of duck with beautiful plumage, which is now exceedingly rare in Italy; but no hunter could confirm for me that its behavior was peculiar enough to justify this metaphor, which is still widely used. Faussone resumed his story, with a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Well, by now I've been around lots of worksites, in Italy and elsewhere, so I know that sometimes, especially abroad, they bury you under rules and safety measures, as if you were mentally deficient or an infant; other times they let you do whatever the hell you want because, even if you break your head, the insurance company will reimburse you for a new one. In either case, however, if you're not careful, you'll get in trouble sooner or later, but learning how to be prudent is more difficult than learning how to do the work. Usually prudence comes later, and only after you get yourself in trouble: fortunate is the man whose troubles are small and pass quickly. Nowadays there are safety inspectors who stick their nose into everything, and that's all well and good; but even if they were all angels from heaven, and knew the ins and outs of every type of job, which isn't even possible since there's always new jobs and new tricks—even then, do you really think nothing would go wrong? That would be like saying there'd be no more car accidents if everyone obeyed the traffic laws. But tell me, have you ever met a driver who hasn't had an accident? I've thought about it a lot: accidents shouldn't happen, but they do happen, so you need to learn to always keep your eyes open; if not, then find a new profession.

"Anyway, if I made it through that job in one piece and without even a bruise, it's only because there's a god for lovers and fools. But really I wasn't one or the other—all I cared about was looking good for the girl who

was watching me down in the field, the way a goosander apparently does for his goosander girlfriend. When I think about it now I get the chills, even though many years have passed since then. I was going up and down the pylon, holding on to the crossbars, without ever using the ladder, as quick as Tarzan; when I was welding, instead of sitting or straddling a bar, like a sensible person, I stood upright, or even on one foot, and *bam*, down with the blowtorch; and I'd look at the blueprint, but not really. I should say that the inspector was a good guy, or maybe he couldn't see very well, because when I told him that the job was finished, he climbed up, very slowly—looking like a real old fogey—and though I'd done more than two hundred welds, he only made me redo about a dozen; yet I fully realized at the time that mine were scrawls, coarse and full of air bubbles, while right alongside them were the ones done by the rigger who had gotten hurt, and those looked like embroidery by comparison.

"But that goes to show you how fair the world is: the prudent guy fell, whereas even though I acted like a moron the whole time, nothing happened to me. I should add, however, that either my welds, despite being lopsided, were strong, or the structure was abundantly reinforced, because that tower is still there, and it's survived some fifteen winters so far. Yeah, it's a weakness of mine: it's not like I'm dying to go all the way to India or Alaska, but if I do a job—whether good or bad—and it's not too far off the beaten path, then I like to go visit it once in a while, the way you would with relatives of a certain age, or like my father did with his stills. So if there's a holiday and I don't have anything better to do, I just get up and go. That tower I was telling you about: I like to go see it, even if it's nothing special and there's not a single person who passes by and gives it so much as a glance—because it was essentially my first job, and also because of that girl I brought along with me.

"At first I thought the girl was pretty strange, because I wasn't experienced and I hadn't yet learned that all girls are strange in one way or another, and if you meet a girl who doesn't seem strange that means she's actually stranger than most, because she's out of the ordinary, if you see what I'm saying. This one was from Calabria, by which I mean to say that her parents came from Calabria, but she had gone to school up north here, and the only way you'd know where she came from was by her hair and her coloring, and because she was fairly small: you couldn't tell from the way she talked. In order to go up to the mountains with me she had to have some

words with her parents, but it wasn't too bad, because they had seven children, so one more or less didn't make such a big difference; she was also the oldest, and a teacher, so she was pretty independent. I told you that she seemed strange to me, but it was more that the situation was strange, because she had never gone away from her family or her city and, furthermore, I was taking her somewhere she'd never been before. Everything filled her with wonder, and the summer snow and all the hoops I jumped through to impress her were only the beginning. Anyway, I'll never forget the first night we spent up there.

"It was the off-season, so we were the only ones in that hotel and I felt like I was king of the world. We ordered a huge dinner because we—well, maybe not her so much, but after a full day outdoors and all my acrobatics, I was as hungry as a bear; and we also drank a lot. I can hold my liquor, as you know, but she, between the sun she'd had all day, and the wine she wasn't used to, and the fact that we were alone there, as in a desert, and the few people around didn't know us, and the thin air—well, all this is to say that she started laughing like a madwoman and talking all kinds of nonsense, even though she was usually pretty reserved, and finally she got so flushed that I started to get worried. I think she might have even had a touch of fever, because that can happen to someone who isn't used to getting a lot of sun. Anyway, to get to the point, we went for a walk after dinner, and there was still a little light outside, but it was already getting cool and it was clear that she wasn't entirely steady on her feet, or maybe she was just pretending, but she held on to me tightly and said she wanted to go to sleep. So I took her to bed—not her bed, of course, because the two separate bedrooms were just for show, though it's not like there was anyone there who cared what we did. There's really no need for me to tell you anything else about that night, because you can imagine it yourself, and besides, if someone feels compelled to learn more about that kind of stuff, well, it isn't hard to find out about it.

"I'd finished my welding in just three days of work, and since all the other towers were ready, it was time to begin laying the cables. You know, when you see them from the ground they look like sewing thread, but they're made of copper, ten millimeters thick—completely impossible to deal with, in other words. Sure, compared to that rigging job in India that I told you about, this was easy, but you need to remember that this was my first job, and that the tension had to be precisely regulated—especially on

the two lateral cables, the ones that hung from the two branches of the Y—otherwise the whole base of the tower would get twisted. But don't worry, there aren't any accidents in this story, except for the one suffered by the rigger who had come before me; there weren't any accidents after me, either, I mean at least not at the tower, which is actually still standing there as good as new, as I told you. Because, you see, there's quite a big difference between a power line and a suspension bridge like that famous one in India, in that bridges carry people, while power lines carry only kilowatts; in short, power lines are a little like the books you write, which may well be very beautiful, but, let's be honest, if there is something inadequate in them, no offense, nobody gets killed, and the only person who loses out is the customer who bought it.

"Cable wiring isn't really my thing, and I should've left, but after I'd finished my welding and it had been tested, I went into the office and volunteered for the wiring job, just so the situation with the girl could continue for a few more days. I should explain that, back then, I was ballsy in a way I'd never dream of being now. I can't say why, maybe it's just because, at the time, I needed to be, and where there's a will, there's a way. The fact is, they called Turin, reached an agreement, and extended my engagement; it's not like I was any brighter than the rest of the guys there, it's just that they were all a bunch of wusses, and they certainly had use for another guy who—and I don't mean to brag—was pretty strong. Well, guess what: though I didn't realize it at first, it was a brutal job, at least the way it was done back then; the work at Lancia seemed like child's play by comparison. Copper cable weighs a ton, you know, it's rigid and at the same time delicate, because it's braided, and if a single thread is damaged by rubbing against the rocks, then forget about it, everything is ruined—like when a stocking gets a snag in it—and you need to throw out several meters of cable and splice the ends together, though only after making sure the client approves; but it always turns out badly. And then, in order not to let the cable drag on the ground, you need to hold it high and pull it taut so that it doesn't sag, and unwind the spool from the top instead of the bottom, to give it greater height; in short, our crew, which, excluding present company, was made up of about a dozen rejects, reminded me of 'Volga-Volga,'[8] except that, instead of working until we died, we worked until six p.m. In order to steel myself I thought of the girl, but in the meantime, with every passing day, I developed more blisters on my hands, which was annoying

when I was alone with the girl, but it was even more annoying to have her see me tied to the cable like a mule to a cart. I tried to get myself a spot with the lifters, meaning the guys who pull the stretched cable up from the ground and attach it to the insulators, but it wasn't going to happen; as you know, whenever there's a comfortable, high-paying job, the Camorra is there. I had no chance, and had to go along with the 'Volga-Volga' all week. The last two days it was uphill, and it wasn't just my hands bothering me—the cable had also started to chafe my shoulder.

"While I was slaving away there, the girl was going around town talking to people, and one fine evening she told me about her plan for the weekend. To be honest, just the idea of her making a plan while I was tied to the cable got me going a little, but, to be chivalrous, I pretended like it was no big deal; or at least I tried to pretend like it was no big deal, but the girl started laughing and said it was clear from the way I was scratching my nose that something was bothering me. I had some good excuses, however, since after six days of being tied to the cable I would rather have gone to sleep than climb a mountain; or maybe have had sex, but only so long as I didn't have to leave my bed. But no: they had filled her head with a bunch of nature talk—how, in a valley near the one with the power line, there was a wonderful spot where you could see glaciers and ibex and the Swiss Alps and even moraines, though I still haven't figured out what those are; I figured they were some kind of tasty fish. Anyway, to make a long story short, she figured out my weakness right away: my sense of honor. Half in jest and half serious, she called me spineless and a slacker—she might have been from Calabria but she'd been speaking our dialect since she was a kid. So on that Saturday, as soon as the sirens blew at the worksite, she took a pin and pierced all the new blisters I'd gotten that day, and she put tincture of iodine on the wound that I had on my shoulder, and then we packed our sacks and took off.

"Look, I don't even know why I'm telling you this story. Maybe it's because we're in this town, with its unending rain and its cars that never pick you up—it's because of the contrast, in other words. Yes, because she was right, that girl—it really was a gorgeous landscape. There's also another contrast, if you think about it, which is the difference between being twenty years old and being thirty-five, and between doing something for the first time and doing it after you're used to it; but I have the feeling that

there’s no need to tell you, someone who has a few years on me, about this kind of thing.

“So, as I was saying, she was well prepared, and she decided that for our honeymoon (she was actually saying that, though I wasn’t quite convinced) we should go to a camping shelter, the name of which I no longer remember, but it’d be hard to forget the place, and the night we spent; not because we made love there but because of everything else. They tell me that they now lower those camping shelters down with helicopters, but back then the shelters weren’t much, and most people, even those who sleep in the Porta Nuova train station, would complain if they had to sleep in one of them. It was like a half-barrel, made of sheet metal, two meters by two meters, with a little entryway like a cat door; inside there was only a horsehair mattress, some blankets, a little stove the size of a shoebox, and, if you were lucky, a bit of dry bread left by whoever had come before you. Since the shelters were in the shape of a half-cylinder, about a meter high, you needed to crawl to get inside. On the roof there were some thin strips of copper that served as lightning rods, but more than that they served as braces so that a storm couldn’t carry the whole thing away. There was also a shovel, driven straight into the ground, with a handle more than two meters long, so that it would stick out of the snow in the off-season and function as a marker; it could also be used to shovel snow off the shelter when it was covered over.

“Water wasn’t a problem—the shelter was built on a rock spur two meters above a flat glacier. I really wanted to walk on it, but the girl told me that it was dangerous because of the crevasses, and that if you ended up in a crevasse nobody would come pull you out, because they knew that it was your own fault and, besides, it wasn’t even worth the effort because you’re usually dead by the time you hit the bottom—from the force of the impact and the sheer terror of it all—and if you’re not, then you die from the cold before help can arrive. They had explained all this to her down in the valley, at the ranger’s office; whether or not it’s true I couldn’t tell you for certain because, seeing two fools like us, I’m sure they would have taken every precaution. Like I said, we had no problem getting water, because it had been warm for several weeks, the snow on the glacier had melted, the glacier was exposed, and, on its icy surface, the water had carved out a bunch of narrow, greenish channels, all running parallel, so that it looked like a hatching design. You see, you don’t always have to go to Alaska to

find strange things. And also the water that ran down those channels was like nothing I'd ever tasted before; I wouldn't know how to describe it, because as you know, tastes and scents are hard to describe without resorting to examples, like, for instance, the scent of garlic or the flavor of salami; but I can tell you that this water actually tasted like sky, and in fact it came, quite directly, from the sky.

"We had no food problems, either, because we'd carried everything we needed and collected some wood along the way, and we even lit a fire and cooked over it, just like they did in the olden days; and when night fell, there was a sky over our heads like nothing I'd ever seen before, not even in my dreams—so full of stars that it seemed to me excessive. What I mean is, for two people like us—city people, a rigger and a school-teacher—it was too much, a luxury wasted on us. The foolishness of a twenty-year-old! Believe it or not, we spent almost half the night asking ourselves why there were so many stars, why they were there at all, how long they'd been there, and also why we're here and so on, what happens after we die—questions that, in short, have no meaning for anybody with a head on his shoulders, and certainly not a rigger. As for the second half of the night, well, you can use your imagination, but the whole time we were in a silence so complete, and a darkness so thick, that we seemed to be in another world, and were almost frightened, especially since we heard noises that we couldn't identify, like distant thunder or a crumbling wall—distant but deep, making the ground tremble under our backs.

"But then, at a certain point in the night, we began to hear a different sound, and there was no *almost* about it—this one really did scare me, a sharp fear, so that I put on my shoes and started to go outside and see what it was, but with such faint conviction that when the girl said to me, in a whisper, 'No, no, let it be, you'll get cold,' I lay down and slid back under the covers. It sounded like a saw—but a saw with blunt, widely spaced teeth—that was trying to saw through the shelter's metal wall, and since the shelter functioned like a sound box, there was a racket like you've never heard. It scraped feebly one or two times against the shelter, then there was silence, then it scraped one or two times more; between the scrapes we could hear snorting and a kind of coughing. The long and short of it is that, using the cold as our excuse, we stayed closed up indoors until we saw a sliver of light creep in all around the doorway—and we couldn't hear the noise of the saw anymore, either, only the breathing, which was growing

fainter and fainter. I finally went outside, and there was an ibex slouching against the wall of the shelter. It was large but it seemed sick, and it was ugly, too—all mangy, coughing and drooling. It looked like it was about to die, and it pained us to think that it might have wanted to wake us up so that we could help it, or that it simply wanted to die close to us.

"What does all of this mean? It was a signal, as if by scratching the metal with its horns the ibex wanted to tell us something. Here I had thought that the girl and I were at the start of something, but really we were at the end. The rest of the day we didn't know what to say to each other anymore; then, after we went back to Turin, I'd call her up and try to make plans, and though she didn't say no, she assented in a tone that made it clear she wasn't interested. I can't say for sure, but it seemed like she'd found a better guy than me, probably a guy who punches a clock—and that's not to say she wasn't right to do so, considering the life I lead. I mean, right now, for example, she'd be alone."

The door was flung open and, along with a gust of mushroom-scented air, a driver entered. Bundled from head to toe in a waterproof outfit shiny with rain, he looked like a deep-sea diver. He informed us that our car had arrived and was waiting outside, in front of the gate. Two? No, there weren't two cars, just one, but it was quite large enough. We explained to him that we had to go to two different places, but he said that wasn't a problem—he'd take me first, and then Faussone, or vice versa, whatever we wanted. Outside, at the gate, there wasn't a car but a tourist bus, with fifty seats, all for us; we'd arrive at our respective work destinations late—Faussone by two hours, and me by nearly three. "A land without time," Faussone repeated.

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7. A reference to the forest of the Suicides in Inferno Canto XIII, where the damned, including Pier della Vigna, are transformed into trees and bushes.
8. A popular Russian song sung by boatmen on the Volga; one line goes "Haul until you die."



The Bevel Gear

“. . .Because you shouldn’t assume for a second that this type of scheming happens only in our country, and that we’re the only ones who are good at cheating people and not being cheated ourselves. I’m not sure how much you’ve traveled, but I’ve traveled a fair amount, and I’ve seen that countries aren’t always the way you’re taught about them in school, or the way they come across in jokes—you know, all the English are refined, the French are jokers, the Germans are severe, the Swiss are honest. It’s not like that at all; no, the whole world is the same.”

In just a few days the season had changed: a dry, hard snow was falling outside, and every so often a gust of wind dashed a handful of tiny hailstones against the windows of the cafeteria. Through the veil of sleet you could make out, surrounding us, the implacable black forest. I tried, without success, to interrupt Faussone so I could protest my innocence; maybe I hadn’t traveled as much as he had, but certainly enough to appreciate the emptiness of the clichés on which popular geography is based. But no such luck: trying to stop a Faussone story was like trying to stop a tidal wave. He’d already got started, and it wasn’t difficult to make out, behind the drapery of the prologue, the corpulence of the story he was introducing. We’d finished our coffee, which was detestable, as it is in every country (Faussone had explained this to me at great length) where the accent of the word “coffee” falls on the first syllable. I offered him a cigarette, forgetting that he didn’t smoke, and that I myself, the night before, thinking that I’d been smoking too much, had made a solemn vow to quit; but really, after a coffee like that, and on a night like that, what can you do?

“The whole world is the same, as I was saying. That’s true of this country, too, and in fact it’s here that the story took place. No, not on this trip—six or seven years ago. You remember the boat ride with Difference, the wine, the lake that was almost an ocean, and the dam that I showed you from a distance? We ought to go one Sunday, I’d like to show it to you, because it really is a fine piece of work. The people here may be oafs, but when it comes to big jobs, they’re better than us, no doubt about it. Well, I was the one who constructed the biggest crane at the worksite: I mean, I was the one who organized the rigging, because it’s one of those things that rig themselves, sprouting out of the ground like a mushroom, which is really an amazing sight to see. Excuse me if I keep coming back to this, this matter of rigging cranes; by now you’ve probably figured out that I’m one of those guys who like their profession. Even if the work is sometimes uncomfortable—like this time that I’m telling you about, for instance, we were doing construction in January, working even on Sundays, and everything was frozen, even the cable grease, which we had to soften with steam. At one point a layer of ice formed on the truss, two fingers thick and hard as steel, and it was impossible to slide one piece of the tower into another; that is, they were sliding all right, but when they got to the top they wouldn’t budge.”

In general I could understand Faussone well enough, but I didn’t know what he meant here by the word “budge.” I asked him about it, and Faussone explained that it referred to the situation in which a long object passes into a rectilinear duct and then reaches a curve or an angle, and you can’t budge it—it gets stuck, in other words. That time, in order to get it sliding again, they had to chip away the ice centimeter by centimeter, following the instructions in the rigger’s manual: real shit work.

“Anyway, through good and bad, we reached the day of the inspection. More bad than good, like I said; but on the job, and not only on the job, if there weren’t any problems the story wouldn’t be fun to tell afterward; and telling stories, as you know—you’ve even said as much to me—is one of the joys of life. I wasn’t born yesterday, and I had performed my own part-by-part inspection beforehand; all the operations went divinely, and even the loading test was fine. On the day of the inspection there’s always a festive atmosphere: I gave myself a smooth shave, put Brilliantine in my hair (yeah, right here in the back—I still got a little left), put on my

corduroy jacket, and got to the site bright and early, a good half hour ahead of time.

"So the interpreter arrives, the head engineer arrives, and then one of those little old ladies of theirs who you never understand what they have to do with it—they stick their noses into everything, ask you nonsensical questions, scribble your name down on a piece of paper, eye you skeptically, and, after all that, they sit down in a corner and start knitting. The engineer of the dam also arrives—she was actually an engineeress, nice, radiant as the sun, with shoulders like this and her nose broken like a boxer's. We had run into each other several times in the dining hall and we'd even started a little friendship: she had a good-for-nothing husband and three children (she showed me a photograph), and, before she got her degree, she had driven a tractor on the kolkhozy. At meals, she made an impression: she ate like a lion, but before her first bite she'd toss down a hundred grams of vodka without batting an eye. My kind of person. A few other good-for-nothings arrived and I had no idea who they were: that early in the morning they were already bombed; one had a large flask of liquor, and they all just kept drinking by themselves.

"Finally the inspector arrived. He was a little black man, dressed in black, in his forties, with one shoulder higher than the other, and a face that gave the impression of poor digestion. He didn't look like a Russian at all: he looked like a cat, yes, one of those cats that develop the unfortunate habit of eating lizards, after which they stop growing, become melancholic, don't lick their fur, and instead of meowing go *hhhh*. But almost every inspector is like this. It's not a very cheerful job; if you don't have a little bit of malice, then you're not going to be a good inspector, and if you're not malicious to begin with, you will be in time, because life isn't easy when everyone gives you dirty looks. And yet they're necessary—even I can admit it—in the same way that laxatives are necessary.

"So he arrives and everyone gets quiet. He turns on the current, climbs up the little ladder, and closes himself in the cabin, because at the time cranes had all their controls in the cabin. Now? Now they're on the ground, so that they're protected from lightning. He closes himself in the cabin, yells down to get out of the way, and everyone clears out. He tests the gearshift, and it's fine. He moves the dolly along the arm, and it glides as smoothly as a boat on a lake. He hooks one ton and lifts it up—it works perfectly, like it doesn't even feel the weight. Then he tries the rotation and

Armageddon breaks out. The arm, which is more than thirty meters long, jerks all the way around, with such an awful shriek of iron it'd make your heart weep. You know, when you hear equipment that doesn't work right, that stutters and grinds, it's even more painful than watching a Christian suffer. It jerked three or four times, and then all of a sudden it stopped, and the whole structure trembled and swayed from right to left, left to right, as if it were saying, Oh, no, for heaven's sake no, I can't go on like this.

"I ran up the ladder, all the while yelling to the guy up there not to move—for the love of God, don't try any more maneuvers. I got to the top and I swear it was like being in the middle of the ocean during a storm, but there's my little man sitting there all calm, on his little seat, already writing his report in his booklet. I didn't know much Russian then and he didn't know any Italian, so we did the best we could with a little bit of English, but you can imagine that, between the cabin that kept jigging about, the terror, and the language problems, our discussion was pretty nonsensical. He kept saying, *Nyet, nyet*, that the machine was *kaput*, that he couldn't give us a pass. I tried to explain to him that I wanted to figure everything out calmly and clearly before he wrote his report. At this point, I already had my suspicions: first of all, as I already told you, I had done my own tests the previous day and everything had been fine; second, because I had known for some time that there were certain Frenchmen around. You see, there was another contract available for three cranes just like the one we built, and I knew that we had only won the competition for our crane by a hair, and those Frenchmen had been the runners-up.

"I didn't do this for the boss, you know. The boss doesn't mean anything to me, as long as he pays me the right amount and lets me do the rigging my way. No, I do it for the job, and to assemble a machine like that, work on it with my hands and with my head for so many days, see it grow, as tall and straight, as strong and slender as a tree, only for it not to work—it's painful. It's like a pregnant woman giving birth to a crippled or mentally deficient son, if that idea makes any sense."

It did make sense, that idea. Listening to Faussone, I felt cohering within me a tentative hypothesis that I had never before articulated and which I hereby submit to the reader: as everyone knows, the term "freedom" has many meanings, but perhaps the most accessible form of freedom, the most subjectively enjoyed and most beneficial to the social

order, derives from being competent in one's own work, and thus taking pleasure in doing it.

"Anyway: I waited for him to come down, and I started to look around to see what was going on. There was certainly something wrong with the bevel gear . . . what are you laughing at?"

I wasn't laughing. I was only smiling, without being aware of it. I hadn't had any dealings with a bevel gear since I was thirteen years old, when I stopped playing with my Meccano set, and the memory of that solitary, absorbing play-work, and of the tiny bevel gear of bright milled brass, had moved me for an instant.

"You know, those things are more delicate than cylindrical gears. More difficult to rig, too, and if you use the wrong kind of grease, they seize up real bad. Besides—and I don't know, it's never happened to me—but doing conflict-free jobs, where everything goes smoothly, must be pretty boring, and in the long run makes you stupid. I think that men are made like cats, and I'm sorry to bring up cats again, it's only on account of the profession. If they don't know what to do with their time, if they don't have any mice to chase after, then they scratch each other, they escape onto the roof, or maybe they climb up a tree and start meowing because they can't get back down. I really believe that in order to live happily you need to have something to do, but it shouldn't be too easy; or you should have something to wish for, but not an impossible wish—something that you can hope to achieve one day.

"But back to the bevel gear: five minutes later I suddenly figured it out. The alignment—do you see? It's the most delicate point, because a bevel gear is what you could call the heart of a crane, and the alignment is—well, without alignment, a gear, after two revolutions, is ready for the scrap heap. I won't give you the whole explanation, but someone had been up there, a professional, and he had redrilled, one by one, the holes in the supports, and he had rerigged the base of the gear so that it appeared to be straight but was actually misaligned. It was a work of true artistry, and if it weren't for the fact that they were trying to dupe me I would have even saluted them; but, given the circumstances, I was as mad as a wild dog. It was the Frenchmen, see: I don't know if they did it themselves or hired someone else—like that inspector, maybe, who was in such a rush to file his report.

". . . Yes, of course, there were charges filed, witnesses, expert opinions, legal action: but it stays with me still, like a shadow, like a grease stain,

hard to get out. Many years have passed, but the trial is still going on: eighty pages of expert evidence from the Sverdlovsk Technological Institute, with the deformations, photographs, X-ray pictures, the whole thing. What do you think is going to happen? I already know. It’s the same thing that happens every time matters of iron turn into matters of paper: it comes out twisted.”

Anchovies I

I raised my mouth from the plate, saying to myself, “You want me to renew . . .”[9] Faussone’s last words had hit me where it hurt. The Sverdlovsk Technological Institute was in fact my adversary at that very moment; it had torn me from my factory, from my laboratory, from my loved and hated desk, and had hurled me there. Like Faussone, I was oppressed by the menacing shadow of a dossier drafted in two languages; I, too, had arrived there in the role of defendant. I had been led to believe that this episode was in some ways a watershed, a singular point on my earthly journey, and furthermore I felt that a curious destiny had determined that my life’s most decisive moments would occur in that great and strange country.

Since the role of defendant is not particularly comfortable, this would be my final adventure as a chemist. I’d had enough. With a sense of nostalgia, but without regret, I would choose another path—the path of the storyteller—since I had the ability to do it and I still had the strength. I’d start with my own stories, until I’d emptied my sack of them, and then I’d use other people’s stories: stolen, plundered, extorted, or received as gifts, like Faussone’s, for example; stories shared by everyone and no one, stories written in the clouds, painted on a veil—as long they had some meaning for me, or might provide the reader with a moment of wonder or laughter. Some people say that life begins at forty; well, for me it would begin, or begin anew, at fifty-five. And when your job for thirty years has been to stitch together long molecular strands, supposedly for the benefit of your fellow man, and you have the corresponding job of convincing your fellow man that your molecules are, in fact, useful to him, you surely learn

something about the art of stitching together words and ideas, or at least about the general and specific properties of your fellow human beings.

With some hesitation, and after repeated requests, Faussone finally granted me permission to use his stories, and that's how this book was born. Upon my mention of the Sverdlovsk lawsuit, he gave me a wary, curious look.

"So you're here because of some problem. Don't worry about it. I mean, don't worry about it too much, otherwise you won't be able to function. It happens even in the best families, you make a mess, or you have to clean up someone else's mess; besides, I can't think of a single profession that doesn't have its own troubles. Well, okay, there are a few, but they're not really professions, they're like cows sent out to pasture—except cows at least make milk and, besides, they ultimately get slaughtered. Or like the little old men who play bocce in Piazza d'Armi and mumble to themselves. But tell me about your troubles. It's your turn to tell a story, since I've already told you a bunch of mine, and that way I can compare. Besides, hearing about other people's problems makes you forget your own."

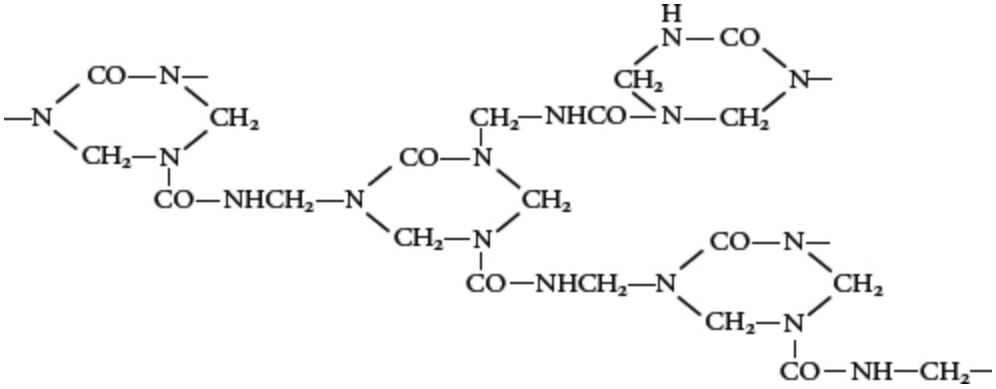
So I told him:

"My true profession, the one that I studied in school and which has provided me with a living up to now, is chemistry. I'm not sure how much you know about it, but it bears some resemblance to your line of work, except the structures that we assemble and disassemble are very small. We're divided into two main branches, those who assemble and those who disassemble, and both types are like blind people with sensitive fingers. I say blind people because the things that we handle are too small to be seen, even by the most powerful microscopes, so we've invented a number of clever tricks that allow us to recognize these things without seeing them. You have to keep one thing in mind here, which is that a blind man has no problem telling you how many bricks there are on a table, what position they're in, and the distances between them; but if, instead of bricks, you've got grains of rice, or, worse, ball bearings, then naturally a blind man would be embarrassed if you asked him where they were, because as soon as he touches them, they move: and that's how it is with us. In fact, we often feel less like blind men than like blind elephants at a watchmaker's workbench, so clumsy are our fingers when we try to attach or detach all those tiny parts.

“The disassemblers—the analytical chemists—need to be able to disassemble a structure part by part, without damaging it, or at least without damaging it too much, and then line up these dismantled parts on the counter—again, without ever seeing them—and identify them, one by one, and be able to say in what order they were attached. Today there is some wonderful equipment that makes their job easier, but it used to be that you had to do everything by hand, and it required an incredible amount of patience.

“As for me, however, I’ve always been an assembly chemist, a synthesizer, meaning someone who builds custom-made structures. They give me a little model, like this . . .”

Here—just as Faussone had done, on many occasions, in order to explain his truss towers to me—I grabbed a napkin and scribbled on it a design that looked something like this:



“. . . or sometimes I do it myself, and then I have to manage as best I can. With a little experience, you can easily distinguish from the start the structures that might work from the ones that will fail or go to pieces right away, or those others which are possible only on paper. But we’re always blind, even in the best-case scenario, that is, when the structure is simple and stable. We’re blind, and we don’t have those tweezers we so often dream about at night—the way a thirsty man dreams of a well—which would allow us to take a segment, hold it precise and straight, and glue it, facing in the right direction, onto the section that has already been assembled. If we had those tweezers (and who knows, maybe one day we will), we would have already done some pretty elegant things that, until now, only God Himself has accomplished, like creating, for instance—well, I won’t say a frog or a dragonfly but at least a microbe or a mold spore.

“But we don’t have them yet, so the result is that, as assemblers, we’re rather primitive. We are like elephants who are given a small locked box containing all the pieces of a clock; we’re very strong and patient, and we shake the box every which way and as forcefully as possible, and maybe we even heat it, because heat is another way of shaking it up. Sometimes, if it’s not a very complicated type of clock, we succeed, as a result of the shaking, in assembling it; but of course it’s more sensible to get there by doing a little at a time, first attaching just two pieces, then the third, and so on. It requires more patience, but in fact you’ll get there faster, and most of the time that’s exactly how we do it.

“As you can see, you’re luckier, since you’re able to see your structures grow in your hands and in front of your eyes, monitoring them as they develop, so that if you make a mistake it’s not hard to correct it. True, we have one advantage: each of our construction projects produces not one tower but many at a time. So many, in fact, that you can’t conceive of the number, a number with twenty-five or twenty-six digits. If this weren’t so, then obviously—”

“Then obviously you could pick up and change professions,” said Faussone, completing the sentence. “Move on, because you can always learn something new.”

“We could always pick up and change professions, and sometimes, in fact, we do: for instance, when things get screwed up, and our tiny towers don’t all come out the same; or they’re all the same but they have some unexpected feature, and we don’t realize it right away, because we’re blind. The client notices it first. Look, that’s the reason I’m here—not to write stories. The stories, if they happen, are a by-product, at least for now. I have in my pocket a letter complaining that our shipment doesn’t conform to the terms of the agreement. If we’re right, all is well, and they’ll even have to refund my travel expenses; but if they’re right, we have to replace six hundred tons of merchandise, plus damages, because it’ll be our fault if their factory can’t reach the quota mandated in the contract.

“I mentioned that I was an assembly chemist, but I haven’t told you that I’m a paint specialist. It’s not a specialty that I chose myself, out of some personal preference. It’s just that after the war I needed work: it was an urgent need, and when I found a job in a paint factory I thought, Good enough; but I didn’t dislike the work, I ended up becoming a specialist, and, ultimately, I stayed put. I realized soon enough that making paint is a

strange profession: what you're really doing is making films, that is, artificial skins, which, however, should have many of the same qualities as our natural skin—no easy feat, as skin is a valuable commodity. Our chemical skins, likewise, need to have contradictory qualities: they need to be flexible but also injury-resistant; they have to stick to the flesh, meaning the surface, but dirt can't stick to them; they need to have beautiful, delicate colors yet must also be resistant to light; they have to be permeable to water and at the same time impermeable, and this rule is so contradictory that not even human skin can satisfy it, because although it's sufficiently resistant to rain and ocean water (it doesn't absorb water, it doesn't swell up, and it doesn't dissolve), if you press your luck, you'll come down with rheumatism—which means that a little bit of water does pass through, and of course sweat must pass through as well, but only from the inside out. You can see that it's not so simple.

"I had been assigned to design a varnish to coat the interior of tin cans, for export (the paint, not the cans) into this country. I can assure you that it had to be an excellent skin: it needed to adhere to the tin, withstand sterilization at 120°C, bend this way and that on a mandrel without cracking, withstand abrasion when tested with a device that I couldn't begin to describe to you; but, above all, it needed to be able to withstand a whole series of onslaughts that we don't usually encounter in the laboratory, including anchovies, vinegar, lemon juice, tomatoes (the varnish couldn't absorb the red coloring), brine, oil, and so forth. The varnish couldn't take on the odors of these goods, and it couldn't impart any odor to them—but in order to test these characteristics we had to rely upon the nose of an inspector. Finally, the varnish needed to be applied with special tinplate printing machines, where the sheet of metal enters at one end, unrolling from a spool, receives the varnish from a kind of ink roller, passes into an oven, to be baked, and winds around a shipping roller; under these conditions, it had to produce a smooth, polished coating, with a yellow-gold color that fell in the spectrum between the two color samples stipulated by the terms of the contract. Are you following me?"

"Yeah, I get it," replied Faussone, in a somewhat offended tone. I suppose I might be losing the reader, here and elsewhere, whenever there's talk of mandrels, molecules, ball bearings, and crimp terminals. If so, I don't know what to do about it. I'm sorry, but there just aren't any synonyms for these terms. If you've ever gotten through one of those

nineteenth-century seafaring books, as I'm sure you have, then you would have had to digest bowsprits and sloops, so be brave, and either use your imagination or consult a dictionary. Besides, it might even come in handy, since we now live in a world of molecules and ball bearings.

"I'll tell you right away that I wasn't being asked to invent anything—there already exist a large number of varnishes like this—but it was crucial to pay attention to detail in order to make sure that the product could pass all the scheduled tests, especially the baking time, which was to be fairly short. The bottom line was that I had to design a type of Band-Aid made out of a rather closeknit fabric, with stitches that weren't too tight, so that it could maintain a certain amount of elasticity, but not too loose, either, otherwise the anchovies and the tomatoes might get through it. It also had to have a lot of sturdy, tiny hooks that would mat together and cling to the sheet metal during the baking, but would fall away afterward, so that the varnish wouldn't absorb color, odor, or taste. And it goes without saying that it couldn't contain any toxic elements. You see, that's the way we chemists think about things. We try to imitate you, like that monkey who was your assistant. We mentally construct a mechanical model, even though we know it's crude and puerile, and we follow it as closely as possible, but always with that old envy for you men with five senses, who fight between the sky and the earth against eternal enemies, working in centimeters and meters instead of our invisible tiny sausages and nets. Our exhaustion is different from yours. We don't feel it in our spine, but further up; it doesn't hit us after a tiring day, but instead when we try to understand something and fail. Sleep doesn't usually cure it. Yes, this is how I'm feeling tonight, and that's why I'm telling you about it.

"So everything was going well; we sent the sample to the state agency and waited seven months for the response, which was a positive one. We sent a prototype can here, to this plant, waited nine more months, and then we received a letter of acceptance, the ratification, and an order for three hundred tons; soon afterward, who knows why, we received another order, with a different signature, for another three hundred, and this second one was marked extremely urgent. Probably it was merely a duplicate of the first, the result of bureaucratic confusion; in any case, it was properly documented, and it was exactly large enough to allow us to meet our production goal for the year. Everyone was suddenly in a good mood, there were huge smiles in all the hallways and workshops of the factory—six

hundred tons of a varnish that wasn't difficult to produce, all of the same composition, and at a price that was nothing to sneeze at, either.

"We're conscientious people: from each batch we fastidiously drew a sample and tested it in the laboratory, to make certain that the specimens would be resistant to all those substances I mentioned before. Our laboratory was full of new and pleasant scents, and the inspectors' office looked like a grocery store. Everything was going well, we felt that we were in the clear, and every Friday, when the fleet of trucks that carried the drums of varnish was driven to Genoa to be shipped off, we had a little party, and even made use of the provisions intended for the inspection, 'so that they wouldn't go bad.'

"Then we had our first alarm: a polite telex, proposing that we perform the anchovy resistance test again on a certain batch that had already been shipped. The girl who had done the test chuckled and told me that she'd be happy to repeat it immediately, but she was quite sure of the results—that varnish would resist sharks even. But I knew how these things go, and I began to get stomach cramps."

Faussone's face crinkled into a surprisingly sad smile. "Yeah, I get that, too, only I get the pain here, on the right side—I think it's my liver. But in my opinion a man who's never failed an inspection is not a real man; it's like he's not yet past his first communion. Needless to say, it's something I know a lot about. When it happens, you feel bad, but if you don't suffer through it, you don't mature. It's kind of like getting bad grades in school."

"I just knew it—I know how these things go. Two days later, another telex arrived, and this one wasn't polite at all. That first batch couldn't withstand the anchovies, nor could the successive ones that had arrived in the meantime; we were to send immediately a thousand kilos of effective varnish by air delivery, otherwise we'd get a stop payment and a citation for damages. The heat was on now, and the laboratory was full of anchovies: Italian, big and small, Spanish, Portuguese, Norwegian; and two hundred grams that we intentionally let spoil, to see what effect that had on the varnished tin. You see, we could all make varnish well enough, but none of us were anchovy specialists. Like madmen, we prepared sample after sample, hundreds of samples a day, we exposed them to anchovies from every sea in the world, but nothing happened—all our tests turned out fine. Then it occurred to us that Soviet anchovies might be more aggressive than ours. We sent off a telex right away, and seven days later the specimen was

on our table. They hadn’t messed around: the anchovies arrived in a thirty-kilo drum when thirty grams would have been sufficient. It was probably the kind of package used for shipments to school cafeterias or the armed forces. And I can attest to the fact that they were excellent, because we tasted them. But even these anchovies did nothing, they had no effect on any of our samples, not even on those we prepared in the sloppiest manner, in an effort to reproduce the least favorable conditions—insufficiently baked, not thick enough, creased before the inspection.

“Meanwhile we had received from Sverdlovsk the expert’s report, the one I mentioned earlier. I have it up in my room, in the drawer of the bedside table, and I swear, it gives off a stench. No, not of anchovies: it’s a stench that rises out of the drawer and poisons the air, especially at night, because at night I’ve been having some strange dreams. Perhaps it’s my fault. I’ve taken it too much to heart—”

Faussone looked sympathetic. He interrupted me to order two vodkas from the girl who was dozing behind the counter. He explained that this was a special kind of vodka, illegally distilled, and in fact it had an unusual aroma, not displeasing, which I preferred not to inquire about.

“Drink, it’ll do you good. Of course you took it to heart—that’s natural. When you put your signature on something, it doesn’t matter whether it’s an IOU or a crane or an anchovy—sorry, I mean a varnish—you have to answer for it. Drink, and you’ll sleep well tonight, and won’t dream about test samples, and tomorrow, you’ll see, you’ll wake up without a headache. This stuff may be black market, but it’s the real deal. And, in the meantime, tell me how the story ends.”

“It hasn’t ended yet, and I can’t really say how it will, or when. I’ve been here for twelve days, and I don’t know how much longer I’ll have to stay. Every morning they send for me, sometimes with a car and a driver, sometimes with a Pobieda;[10] they take me to the laboratory and then nothing happens. The interpreter comes by and apologizes: either the technician isn’t there, or there’s no electricity, or the whole staff is in a meeting. It’s not that they’re rude to me; it’s just that they seem to forget I’m there. I haven’t spoken with the technician for more than half an hour so far; he showed me their test samples, and I’m completely stumped, because they’re nothing like ours; ours are smooth and clean, while theirs have lots of small lumps. It’s clear that something happened in transit, but I can’t imagine

what; or there's something wrong with their tests, but, as you know, it's bad form to blame others, especially your clients.

"I told the technician that I wanted to observe the whole process: the preparation of the test samples, from start to finish. He seemed irritated and though he said it would be fine, he hasn't shown up since. Instead of the technician, I've had to deal with this terrible woman. Ms. Kondratova is small, fat, elderly, with a ravaged face, and it's impossible to get her to keep to the subject. Instead of talking about varnishes, she's spent the whole time telling me her life story, which, by the way, is an awful story—she was in Leningrad during the siege, her husband and their two sons died at the front, and she worked in a bullet-making factory where it was always ten degrees below zero. I feel sorry for her, but I'm also furious, because my visa expires in four days, and how can I return to Italy without having resolved anything, and, more important, without having understood anything?"

"Have you told this woman that your visa is going to expire?" asked Faussone.

"No. I don't think she has anything to do with my visa."

"Listen to me—tell her. From what you've said, she must be a pretty important person, and when a visa expires the people here get on it right away, because otherwise they're the ones who get in trouble. Give it a try: trying never hurt anyone, and you have nothing to lose."

He was right. At the mere mention of the imminent expiration of my visitor's visa, there was a surprising change all around me, as in the final scene of an old comedy. All of them, beginning with Ms. Kondratova, suddenly accelerated their actions and their words; they were sympathetic and cooperative, the laboratory opened its doors to me, and the man who prepared the test samples put himself entirely at my disposal.

Not much time remained, so I started by asking to examine the contents of the last containers to arrive. It wasn't easy to identify them, but by midday we succeeded. We prepared the test samples with the utmost care, they came out smooth and shiny, and after spending an intimate night with the anchovies, their appearance had not changed. One could conclude either that the varnish had been compromised by the conditions of their local warehouse, or that something had happened when the Russians drew their sample. The morning of my departure I had just enough time to examine one of the oldest shipments: there were some suspect test samples, streaked and granular, but at this point there wasn't time to study them in depth. My

request for an extension had been refused. Faussone came to see me off at the station, and we parted with promises to meet again, either there or in Turin; but probably there. In fact, he would be remaining there for several months: with a group of Russian riggers he was repairing one of their colossal excavators, which are as tall as a three-story house and can range over any terrain, walking on four giant legs like a prehistoric saurian; and I needed to take care of two or three things at the factory, but undoubtedly I'd be back within a month at the latest. Ms. Kondratova had told me that they'd go ahead for a month, anyway; just that day she'd received the news that another canning factory was using a German varnish, which so far didn't seem to be causing any problems. They would have a shipment sent immediately while they tried to clear up our situation. Yet, with an inconsistency that surprised me, she insisted that I return as soon as possible: "all things considered," our varnish was preferable. For her part, she'd do everything in her power to get me a new visa that could be extended as needed.

Faussone asked me, since I was going to Turin, to deliver a package and a letter to his aunts, offering his apologies: he'd have to spend All Saints' Day on the job. The package was light but bulky; the letter was just a card, and on it the address was printed in the clear, meticulous, somewhat pretentious handwriting of someone who has studied drawing. He urged me not to lose the document listing the value of the package's contents, and we parted.

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9. A reference to *Inferno* XXXIII:4, where Count Ugolino speaks.
10. A Russian economy car.

The Aunts

Faussone's aunts lived on Via Lagrange in an old, two-story house, wedged between newer (but equally neglected) buildings at least three times as tall. On the modest façade, which was of an indistinct earthy color, fake windows and small fake balconies had been painted, in a brick red that had almost completely faded. Stairway B, which I was looking for, was at the back of the courtyard; I paused for a second to observe the courtyard, while two housewives eyed me suspiciously from their balconies. The courtyard and the entrance portico were paved in cobblestones, and under the portico ran two carriage lanes, of stone from Luserna, furrowed and worn away by generations of wagons. In one corner there was a discarded washtub; it had been filled with soil, and a weeping willow had been planted in it. In another corner was a pile of sand, evidently dumped there for some repair job and then forgotten; the rain had eroded it in such a way that it resembled the Dolomites, and cats had dug comfortable lairs in it. Opposite was the wooden door of an antique latrine; the bottom was worn away by humidity and alkaline fumes, while farther up it was coated with an ash-gray paint that had cracked over the darker background, assuming the aspect of crocodile skin. The two balconies ran around three sides of the courtyard, divided only by rusty gates with iron spikes that extended beyond the railings. In that courtyard, eight meters from the congested, overbearing street, one inhaled a vaguely cloistered scent that carried with it the humble charm of things once useful but now long abandoned.

On the second floor I found the nameplate I was looking for: ODDENINO GALLO. So they must have been the mother's sisters, not the father's—or maybe distant aunts, or aunts only in the vaguest sense of the

term. Both of them came to the door, and at first glance I could see between them the false resemblance that, absurdly, we often recognize in two people, no matter how different they are, whom we meet in the same place at the same time. No, in reality they didn't look much like each other: nothing beyond an indefinable familial likeness in their solid bone structure and the decorous modesty of their dress. One had white hair, the other's was a dark brown. Dyed? No, I don't think so—from close up I could see a few white hairs on her temples, which convinced me. They accepted the package, thanked me, and had me sit on a small sofa with two seats, which was rather threadbare and of a shape that I'd never seen before: it was twisted at the middle into two segments, set at a right angle to each other. The brown-haired sister sat on the other seat, the white-haired sister opposite us in a little armchair.

"Would you mind if I open the letter? Tino writes so little, you know, and . . . yes, indeed, look at this: 'Dearest aunts, I'm taking advantage of a friend's kindness to send you this little gift, warm greetings and kisses, you're always in my thoughts, your Tino,' period, end of letter. That certainly didn't give him a headache. So you're a friend of his, is that right?"

I explained that I wasn't exactly a friend, if only because of the age difference, but we had found ourselves together in that distant place, and spent a lot of evenings together, so we were good company for each other, and he told me a lot of very interesting stories. I caught a rapid glance from the white-haired sister to the brown-haired sister.

"Really?" she said. "You know, when he's with us, he barely says a thing. . . ."

I tried to repair my error—I said that there isn't much to do for fun over there, actually there's nothing to do, so when two Italians find themselves amid so many foreigners, it's only natural for them to start talking. Besides, he basically talked only about his job. In an effort to be polite, I tried to situate myself so that I could alternate between speaking to one woman and then the other, but it wasn't easy. The white-haired aunt rarely looked at me; for the most part she stared at the floor, or, even when I turned directly toward her, fixed her eyes on her brown-haired sister's. The few times that she spoke, she addressed her sister, as if she were speaking a language that I wouldn't be able to understand, and the brown-haired one would have to serve as interpreter. When the brown-haired one was speaking, however, the

white-haired one watched her intently, with her chest leaning toward her slightly, as if she wanted to keep a close watch and was ready to pounce on any mistake.

Brown hair was loquacious and in cheerful spirits. Before long I'd learned a great deal about her: she was a widow without children, she was sixty-three years old and her sister was sixty-six, her name was Teresa and the white-haired one was Mentina, short for Clementina; her poor husband had been a ship's engineer in the merchant marine, but during the war they had shipped him out on a destroyer and he had gone missing in the Adriatic at the beginning of '43, the same year Tino was born. They had just been married at the time. Mentina, however, had never married.

". . . but tell me about Tino. He's well, isn't he? He doesn't catch cold, up there on the scaffoldings? And what about food? You've seen what he's like. He's got hands of gold: he's always been that way, you know, even as a child, whenever there was a leaky faucet, or the Singer broke down, or the radio gave off static, he'd fix it right away. But there's another side to this story, in the sense that when he was studying he always had to have some object in his hands, something to take apart and put back together—and of course taking apart is easy but putting back together, not so much. But then he learned, and after that he never caused any more problems." I could see them now, Faussone's hands: long, solid, and quick, much more expressive than his face. They illustrated and clarified his stories, imitating, in turn, the shovel, the monkey wrench, the hammer; in the stale air of the company dining hall they traced the elegant catenaries of the suspension bridge and the spires of the derricks, coming to the aid of his speech whenever it stalled. They brought to mind long-ago readings of Darwin, of the craftsman's hand that, making tools and bending matter, rescues the human brain from indolence, and still to this day guides, stimulates, and pulls it forward, as a dog does with his blind master.

"He's like a son to us. You know, he lived eight years in this house, and even now—"

"Seven, not eight," Mentina corrected, with inexplicable severity, and without looking at me. Teresa continued without noticing:

"—and you know, he barely gave us any trouble, at least as long as he stayed at Lancia, or, in other words, as long as he led a relatively normal life. Now, of course, he makes more money, but tell me, do you think someone can really go on like that his whole life? This way, like a bird on a

branch, here one day and gone the next, boiling in the desert one moment, in the snow the next? Not to mention the exhaustion—”

“—and the danger of working at the top of those towers—I get dizzy just thinking about it,” Mentina added, as if to reproach, and perhaps blame, her sister.

“I hope he’ll calm down a little, as the years pass, but for the time being there’s nothing to be done. You should see him when he’s here in Turin. After two or three days he’s like a lion in a cage, he’s almost never home, and sometimes I even think that he goes to a pension and doesn’t bother to come visit us. If he keeps on like this, strong as he is, mark my words—he’ll end up ruining his stomach. There’s no way to make him come to our house at a reasonable hour, sit calmly at the table, and have a warm, hearty meal. It’s like he’s sitting on nails—a sandwich, a piece of cheese, and he’s off, and he doesn’t come back until the two of us are already asleep, because we go to bed early.”

“And cooking him a decent meal makes us happy, too, because just doing it for ourselves isn’t worth the effort, and he’s the only nephew we have, and we have all the time in the world. . . .”

By now we had established a set routine, though not without a certain discomfort on my part. When Teresa spoke, she looked at me; when Mentina intervened, she looked at Teresa; and while I listened, I mostly watched Mentina, sensing in her a kind of vague hostility. I couldn’t figure out whether it was directed at me, or at her sister, or at her far-off nephew, or at his fate, which after all didn’t seem particularly deserving of pity. I recognized in the two sisters an example of that divergence and polarization that one often observes in couples, and not only husbands and wives. At the beginning of their cohabitation, the differences between them—between the instinctively prodigal member and the avaricious one, the organized one and the disorganized, the sedentary and the world traveler, the loquacious and the taciturn—might be minimal, but over the years they become accentuated until each member has a distinct specialization. In some cases, this may be due to an avoidance of direct competition, as when one member shows signs of dominating in a certain field and the other, rather than fighting it out, chooses a different one, which may or may not be related; in other cases, it so happens that one of the members tries, consciously or not, to compensate for a deficit in the partner’s behavior, as when the wife of a man who’s either absent-minded or lazy is forced to take care of practical

matters. An analogous differentiation can be observed in many animal species, in which, for instance, the male does all the hunting and the female has a monopoly on caring for the offspring. In this way Aunt Teresa specialized in contact with the outside world, while Aunt Mentina defended the fort at home: one handled foreign affairs, the other internal affairs, but evidently not without mutual resentment, irritation, and criticism.

I tried to reassure the two women:

"No, don't worry about his eating. I saw how Tino lives: on the job, one needs to keep a regular schedule, no matter what country you end up in; and rest assured, the farther one is from the civilized world, the easier it is to eat nutritious food. Strange, perhaps, but nutritious, so it won't ruin your health. Besides, from what I've seen, Tino is the picture of health, isn't he?"

"He is, that's true," interjected Mentina. "He never comes down with anything, he's always just fine. He never needs anything. He never needs anyone." She was quite transparent, poor Aunt Mentina; unlike him, she needed somebody to need her—Tino, to be specific.

Aunt Teresa offered me a liqueur and macaroons, and asked my permission to open the package that I'd brought from Russia. It contained two fur shawls, one white and one brown. I'm no fashion expert, but I had the impression that these weren't particularly expensive models; they were probably from one of the Beriozhka stores, a mandatory stop in Moscow for weekend tourists.

"How wonderful! And you're so kind to bring them all the way here. We're terribly sorry for the inconvenience—you could at least have telephoned, we would have come to get them. He must have spent a fortune, the poor boy. And these are much too luxurious for people like us. I suppose he thinks we like to go promenading up and down Via Roma. Well, why not? Maybe it's time to change our habits. What do you think, Mentina? We're not decrepit yet."

"Tino doesn't say much, but his heart is in the right place. In this, he takes after his mother. To look at him, you'd think he was tough, but that's just for show."

I nodded out of politeness, but I knew I was lying. It wasn't just for show, Faussone's toughness: perhaps he wasn't born with it, perhaps he had been different once, but it was quite real now, it had been acquired, and reaffirmed, by countless duels with his adversary, who was tough by definition—the iron of bolts and beams, which never forgives your

mistakes, and often punishes them disproportionately. The man I had come to know was different from the personage that the two aunts ("One is clever, the other not so much") had invented in order to make him the object of a love that was only tepidly reciprocated. Their cloistered hermitage on Via Lagrange, sealed off for decades, and perfectly epitomized by the *causeuse* in which I was sitting, made for a poor observatory. Even if Faussone had agreed to speak a little more, there was no way in the world that—amid all that upholstery—he would be able to bring to life his defeats and victories, his fears and inventions.

"What he needs, our Tino," said Teresa, "is a good woman. Don't you agree? We've thought about this God knows how many times, and many times we've even tried to do something about it ourselves. It may seem easy, too, because he's a good man, a worker, he's not ugly, he doesn't have any vices, and he makes good money. It's hard to believe, but when we introduce him to a woman, they meet, talk, go out two or three times, and then the girl comes here and starts crying—it's all over. And it's never clear what's happened. He doesn't say anything, of course, and with the girls it's a different story each time. He's antisocial, he made her walk six kilometers without saying a word, he's full of himself—in other words it's a disaster, and by now everybody knows, everybody talks about it, and we don't dare set him up with anyone anymore. And yet though he might not think about his future, we do, because we're a few years older than him, and we know what it means to live alone; and we also know that in order to be with someone you need a permanent residence. If not, you start to become uncivilized; I run into enough men like that, especially on Sundays. I can spot them right away, and, every time, I think of Tino and I get depressed. But maybe, I don't know, one night when you're talking, man to man, would you mind having a word with him?"

I promised I would, and again I knew I was lying. I wouldn't say any such thing to him, I wouldn't give him advice, I wouldn't try in any way to influence him, to help chart his future, or divert the future that he was charting for himself, or that destiny was charting for him. Only a deep, ancient blood love, like the one his aunts felt for him, could presume to know what effects might spring from those causes—what metamorphoses the rigger Tino Faussone might undergo if tied to a woman and a "permanent residence." It's hard enough for a chemist to foresee, outside his own experience, the interaction between two simple molecules, and

completely impossible to predict what might happen when two moderately complex molecules interact. How then to predict the interaction between two human beings? Or the reactions of an individual put into a new situation? Nothing can be known—nothing certain, nothing probable, nothing honest. Better to make an error of omission than of commission: better to refrain from guiding the destiny of others, since it's already so difficult and uncertain to steer one's own.

It wasn't easy for me to take leave of the two ladies. They kept finding new topics of conversation, and they maneuvered to intercept me every time I tried to make my way to the front door. The rumble of an airline jet could be heard, and through the dining-room window the pulse of the landing lights came into view against the sky, which was already dark.

"Every time one of those passes overhead I think of him, how he was never afraid of crashing," said Aunt Teresa. "And to think that we've never been to Milan, and only once to Genoa, to look at the sea!"

Anchovies II

"They're wonderful, of course, only sometimes they can get a little meddlesome. Thanks for dropping off the package, I hope you didn't waste much time. So you're leaving on Tuesday, too? On the *samolyot*? Good, we can travel together: we're going the same route—at least as far as Moscow."

It was a long and complicated route, and I was happy to have company, especially since Faussone had done the trip many times, and knew it better than I did; most important, he knew all the shortcuts. I was also happy because my battle against the anchovies had been resolved, decisively, in my favor.

It was drizzling; according to our itinerary, a car from the factory was supposed to pick us up at the square and take us to the airport, which was about forty kilometers away. Eight o'clock came, then eight thirty; the square was full of mud and still no one was there. Around nine a van arrived, the driver got out, and he asked us:

"Are there three of you?"

"No, there are two," replied Faussone.

"Are you French?"

"No, we're Italian."

"You need to go to the train station?"

"No, we need to go to the airport."

The driver, a young Hercules with a radiant face, tersely replied, "Then get in."

He loaded our baggage and we left. The road was disrupted by huge puddles. He must have been quite familiar with it, because he sliced right

through some of them without slowing down, while others he maneuvered around with caution.

“I’m happy myself,” Faussone told me, “first because I was starting to have enough of this place, second because of that huge beast down there, that excavator with the legs, I was fond of it, and I saw it all the way through its construction. It hasn’t begun to work yet, but anyway I’ve left it in good hands. And your story, about the cans for the fish, how’d that turn out?”

“It turned out well: ultimately we were in the right, but it’s not a great story. In fact it’s a stupid story, and not particularly enjoyable to relate, because when I retell it I remind myself how dumb I was not to have figured it all out sooner.”

“Don’t let it bother you,” said Faussone. “Stories about work are almost always like that. Really, it’s true of any story about trying to understand something. It’s the same as when you get to the end of a mystery novel, and you slap yourself on the forehead and say, ‘Of course!’—but it’s only an impression. In real life, things are never that simple. The only simple problems are the ones you’re assigned in school. So what happened?”

“So I stayed in Turin for more than a month, I redid all the tests again, and I came back here confident that the cards were in my favor. I found that the Russians, however, were sure that all the cards were in their favor; they had examined several dozen drums, and according to them at least one out of every five drums was defective, meaning that it produced granulose test strips; and there was no doubt that all the granulose test strips—but only those—could not withstand the anchovies. The technician treated me with all the patience one shows a dimwit: he himself had made a discovery—”

“Keep a safe distance from clients who make discoveries. They’re worse than mules.”

“No, no—he discovered something that I considered quite serious. You see, I was convinced that there was some local factor. I suspected that the granularity came from the thin sheet metal used for the test samples, or from the brushes they used to spread the varnish; but now my back was against the wall, because he had found a way to demonstrate that there were clots already in the varnish. He took a viscometer—not a very complicated instrument. It’s a cylindrical cup with a conical base, which tapers at the bottom to a calibrated nozzle; you plug the nozzle with your finger, fill the cup with varnish, and allow the air bubbles to float to the top; then you

remove your finger and press a stopwatch at the same time. The time it takes for the cup to drain is a measure of viscosity. It's an important check, because the viscosity of a varnish shouldn't change while it's in storage.

"So the technician discovered that he could pick out the defective drums even without applying varnish to the test samples. You just needed to watch the stream of varnish carefully as it drained from the nozzle of the viscometer. If it was a good drum, the flow would be as smooth and still as glass; if it was a bad drum, the flow would have some interruptions, it would sputter—three, four, even more times per cup. So the clots were already present in the varnish, he said. I felt like Christ on the Cross, and I argued that there was no other way they could be seen—the varnish was completely clear both before the measurement and afterward."

Faussone interrupted: "I'm sorry, but it sounds like he was right. If you can see a thing, that means it's probably there."

"Of course, but as you know, blame is an ugly animal that no one wants to adopt. Standing in front of that little golden stream that was flowing in spurts, as if it were trying to mock me, I felt the blood rise to my head, and a lot of confused ideas were whirling around in my mind. On the one hand, I thought back to the tests I'd done in Turin, which had gone so well. On the other hand, I knew that varnish is more complicated than you might imagine. Some engineer friends of mine have explained to me that it's quite difficult to know for certain even how a brick or a coil spring will perform over the long run; well, believe me, I've been doing experiments for many years, and I can tell you that varnishes have more in common with us than with bricks. Like us, they're born, grow old, and die, and when they're old, they get loopy; and they're full of tricks when they're young, too, they're even capable of lying to you, of pretending to be something they're not—sick when they're healthy, healthy when they're sick. It's easy enough to say that the same causes should produce the same effects, but this notion was invented by people who don't do anything themselves but have everything done for them. Try asking a farmer, or a schoolmaster, or a doctor, or, especially, a politician about that: if he's honest and intelligent, he'll laugh in your face."

All of a sudden we were tossed into the air, our heads slamming into the roof of the vehicle. The driver had come to a closed railroad crossing and swung the wheel abruptly to the right, sending us careening into a ditch, then off the road altogether, and now we were driving parallel to the tracks

in a freshly plowed field. He turned around with a joyous look on his face—not to determine whether we were all right but to yell something that I couldn't understand.

"He says we'll go faster this way," Faussone translated, without much conviction. A little while later, the driver proudly pointed out another closed railroad crossing, and gestured as if to say, "Did you see that?" and impulsively he clambered up the slope and put us back on the road. "That's the Russians for you," Faussone muttered. "They're either boring or insane. Fortunately, we're almost at the airport."

"My Russian, that technician, was neither boring nor insane. He was just like me, playing his part and trying to do his duty, and only slightly too enamored of his discovery with the viscometer, but I have to admit that, these past few days, I haven't felt like showing him the brotherly love that the Bible preaches. I needed some time to clarify my thoughts, and I begged him to allow me to conduct a full battery of tests. By this point all three thousand drums from our factory had arrived in their warehouses, numbered chronologically. I asked him if I could retest them, perform a kind of cross-examination—if not all of them, then at least a third. It was a long, tedious job (and in fact it took me fourteen days), but I didn't see any other way out.

"We prepared test samples eight hours a day, hundreds of test samples. We didn't even bother testing the rough ones, but placed the smooth ones under the anchovies at night; they all held up. After four or five days, I felt that I could detect a certain pattern, though I couldn't put my finger on it and it didn't appear to explain anything: it seemed that there were good days and bad days, meaning smooth days and granulose days. But there wasn't a clear-cut distinction. On the smooth days there were still granulose samples, and on the granulose days there were a good number of smooth samples."

We had arrived at the airport; our escort said goodbye to us, spun the vehicle around with a loud screech of the tires—as if he were in an extraordinary rush—and sped away. Faussone, his gaze following the van, which flew off between two curtains of mud, grumbled, "The mother of fools is always pregnant, even out here." Then he turned back to me: "Sorry, but could you hold off on telling the rest of your story for a minute? I want to hear it, but we have to go through customs now. I'm interested, because I once had to deal with a crane that broke down on certain days and

on other days didn’t. Later we figured it out—it wasn’t anything unusual, just the humidity.”

We got in the line for customs, but right away a little middle-aged woman who spoke decent English came over, and took us to the front of the line without anyone protesting. I was astonished, but Faussone explained that we had been recognized as foreigners; in fact, the factory might have called ahead to alert them to our presence. We went through in a second—we could have smuggled out a machine gun or a kilo of heroin. The only delay was when the customs officer asked me whether I had any books. I had one, written in English, about the life of dolphins, and the officer, perplexed, asked me why I had it, where I’d bought it, and whether I was English and an expert in fish. I wasn’t? Then how did it come into my possession, and why did I want to take it to Italy? After listening to my responses, he consulted with one of his superiors, and then let me pass.

The airplane was already on the runway, prepared for takeoff, and almost every seat was filled; it was a small turboprop, with a cozy interior. There were entire families, evidently peasants: children sleeping in their mothers’ arms; baskets of fruits and vegetables all over the place, and in one corner three live chickens tied together by the legs. There was no partition separating the pilot’s cabin from the passenger area, or it had been removed; the two pilots, waiting to receive the signal for takeoff, were nibbling on sunflower seeds and chatting with the stewardess and—by radio—with someone in the control tower. The stewardess was a beautiful girl, very young, compact and pale; she wasn’t in uniform, but wore a little black dress and a violet shawl wrapped casually around her shoulders. After a while she glanced at her watch, came over to the passengers, and greeted two or three she knew; then she announced that her name was Vyera Filíppovna and she was our stewardess. She spoke with a soft voice, in a familiar manner, forgoing the mechanical intonation used by so many of her colleagues. She continued, saying that we’d take off in just a few minutes, or maybe half an hour, and that the flight would last an hour and a half or maybe two. Would we please fasten our seat belts, and refrain from smoking until takeoff? From her handbag she took out a bundle of long plastic envelopes and said, “If you have a fountain pen in your pocket, please drop it in here.”

“Why?” asked one passenger. “Isn’t this aircraft pressurized?”

“Yes, it’s somewhat pressurized, comrade; but follow my advice just the same. Besides, everyone knows that fountain pens often leak, even on the ground.”

The airplane took off, and I resumed my story.

“As I was saying, there were, roughly speaking, good days and bad days; and in general the test samples done in the morning were inferior to those done in the afternoon. I spent the days doing the test samples, and the evenings thinking about them, and not reaching any conclusions. When they called me from Turin to find out how things were going, I’d turn red with shame—I made promises, I delayed, and I felt as if I were rowing, I mean, rowing a boat tied to an anchor, slaving away like a dog and not advancing an inch. I thought about it all evening, and into the night, because I couldn’t sleep; once in a while I’d turn on the light and start reading the book about dolphins to pass the time.

“One night, instead of reading my book, I started to reread my diary. It’s not really a diary—it’s just notes that I took every day, a habit that everyone who does somewhat complicated work develops, especially as the years pass and you start to mistrust your memory. So as not to make anyone suspicious, I didn’t write during the day, but I put down my notes and observations in the evening, as soon as I got back to my room—which, by the way, was really depressing. But rereading the diary was even more depressing, because truly nothing constructive came of it. There was a pattern, but it couldn’t have been more than a coincidence: the worst days were the ones on which Ms. Kondratova showed up—yes, the woman with the children and husband who died in the war, remember? Perhaps it was the misfortunes she had suffered, though as a matter of fact that poor woman didn’t just get on my nerves, but on everyone else’s. I had noted what days she came by, because she was the person handling the visa issue, or, rather, she should have been handling it, but she was too busy telling me about her woes—both ancient and recent—and distracting me from my work. She also teased me about the anchovies; I don’t think she was mean, perhaps she didn’t even realize that I was being held personally accountable, but she certainly wasn’t someone who was lovely to be around. In any case, I don’t believe in curses, and I refuse to accept the notion that Kondratova’s misfortunes could become lumps in the varnish. Besides, she didn’t touch anything with her hands and she didn’t come every day. But when she did come she arrived early, and the first thing she

did was scold everyone in the laboratory because, she said, it wasn't clean enough.

"It was this question of cleanliness that put me on the right path. It's true enough that night brings counsel, but only if you don't sleep well, and if your head doesn't go on vacation but keeps churning. That night I seemed to be at the movies and they were showing a terrible film: besides being terrible, it was also malfunctioning. It kept stalling and starting all over again, and the first character who came on the screen was Ms. Kondratova. She entered the laboratory, greeted me, made her usual complaints about the cleanliness, and then the film snapped. And what happened next? Well, after who knows how many interruptions, the scene unfolded for a few more frames and I saw the woman send one of the girls to get some cleaning rags; then I saw a close-up of the rags, and some of them weren't rags but a thin white fabric that looked like one of those hospital bandages. You know how it is—it's not that the dream was some kind of miracle, it's likely that I had actually witnessed the scene but was distracted, maybe I was thinking of something else, or Ms. Kondratova was telling me the story of Leningrad and the siege. I must have stored the memory without realizing it.

"The next morning, Ms. Kondratova wasn't there. I acted as if everything were normal, and headed immediately to the chest containing the rags. They were bandages all right, bandages and scraps. Relying on gestures, persistence, and intuition, I figured out from the technician's explanations that these were medical supplies that had not passed inspection. Clearly the man was playing dumb, taking advantage of our language problems; it didn't take me very long to understand that the stuff had been obtained illegally, perhaps through bartering or from friends. Perhaps the monthly shipment of rags was missing or late, and he had made do—with the best of intentions, naturally.

"It was a sunny day, the first sunny day after a week of clouds; to be honest, I think that if the sun had come out before then, I would have figured out sooner what had happened with the granulose test samples. I took a rag out of the chest and shook it two or three times; a moment later, in the opposite corner of the laboratory, an almost invisible ray of sunlight was filled with tiny luminous particles, which flickered like fireflies in May. Now I should tell you (though perhaps I already have) that varnish is sensitive, especially when it comes to hair, or really anything that flies

through the air; a colleague of mine once had to pay a small fortune to get a local property owner to chop down a row of poplar trees six hundred meters from the factory, because otherwise, in May, those lovely tufts, which carry seeds in them and fly great distances, would end up in the batches of varnish during the milling phase, and would ruin them. Mosquito nets and fly catchers didn't help at all, because the tufts entered through every crack in the windows, they collected overnight in hard-to-reach places, and in the morning, as soon as the ventilation fans got going, they started twirling through the air like crazy. And I once had a bad experience with fruit flies. I'm not sure whether you know this, but scientists love fruit flies because they have very large chromosomes; in fact, it seems that almost everything we know today about heredity, biologists learned from the bodies of these flies, crossbreeding them with one another in every possible manner, shredding them, injecting them, starving them, and giving them strange things to eat—so, you see, showing off can often lead to trouble. *Drosophila*, as they're called, are beautiful, with red eyes, they're just three millimeters long, and they don't harm anyone—in fact, maybe against their will, they've done us a lot of good.

"Those little creatures love vinegar, but I couldn't tell you why; to be precise, they like acetic acid, which is in vinegar. They can smell it from impossible distances, they come from every direction like a cloud, for instance on must, which actually does contain traces of acetic acid. If they actually find an open container of vinegar they're like drunks, they fly in very tight circles around the top, and often they end up inside it and drown."

"Yep," said Faussone. "Curiosity killed the cat."

"As for smell—and that's a figure of speech, because they don't have noses, they detect scent with their antennae—but when it comes to smell, they're superior to us, and to dogs, too, because they smell the acid even when it's diluted, for instance in ethyl or butyl acetate, which are solvents of nitro paints. We once had a nitro nail polish of an unusual color, in fact, it had taken us two days to get the color right, and we began passing it through the three-cylinder mill. And I couldn't say why—perhaps it was their mating season—but either they were hungrier than usual or maybe word had got around, but they arrived in swarms, came to rest on the cylinders while they were spinning, and were ground into the polish. We realized this only at the end of the process, and there was no way to filter it,

so in order to avoid throwing out the whole batch, we had to recycle it in an anti-rust paint, which came out a nice pinkish color. Anyway, sorry for the digression.

“So at this point I finally felt that I was back in business. I explained to the technician my hypothesis, by now a conviction, which I held so firmly that I was about to ask permission to telephone the factory in Italy with the news. But the technician didn’t give in: with his own eyes he had seen a number of different varnish specimens, just taken from the drums, that flowed out of the viscometer in spurts. How would there have been time for these to pluck, out of the air, filaments from the rags? For him it was clear: the filaments might or might not have something to do with it, but the lumps were already present in the drums in the shipment.

“I had to demonstrate to him (and also to myself) that it wasn’t true, that there was a filament in every lump. Did they have a microscope? They had one, an unsophisticated model that magnified only by a factor of two hundred, but that was enough for what I wanted to see. It also had a polarizer and an analyzer.”

Faussone interrupted me: “Hold on a sec. When I was telling you stories about my line of work, you have to admit, I was never pretentious. I realize that this is a happy day for you, but even so, that’s no reason to get all pretentious. You need to tell the story in a way that a person can understand, otherwise it’s just no fun. Or have you already crossed over to the other side—one of those writers who make the reader do all the work, especially now that he has already paid for the book?”

He was right. I’d allowed myself to get carried away. On the other hand, I was in a hurry to finish my story, because Vyera Filíppovna had already come back through the cabin to announce that she thought we’d be landing in Moscow in about twenty or thirty minutes. So I limited myself to explaining to him that there are long molecules and short molecules; that only long molecules, whether they’re man-made or occurring in nature, can form strong filaments; that the molecules in these filaments, whether they’re wool, cotton, nylon, silk, or whatever, are oriented lengthwise, and in lines that are roughly parallel; and that the polarizer and the analyzer are instruments that allow you to observe this parallelism, even in a piece of filament that’s barely visible under a microscope. If the molecules are oriented—that is, if it’s a fiber—then you see beautiful colors, but if they’re

scattered all over the place, you don’t see a thing. Faussone let out a grunt, indicating that I could continue.

“I also found, in a drawer, some beautiful glass teaspoons, the kind used for precise measurements—I wanted to demonstrate to the technician that there was a thread inside every lump that came out of the viscometer, and that where there weren’t threads, there weren’t lumps. I had them clean everything with wet rags, and remove the chest of old rags, and in the afternoon I began my hunt: I needed to catch the lump with the teaspoon right out of the air, as it fell from the viscometer, and hold it under the microscope. It could make for a good sport, I think, a type of skeet shooting you could do at home; but it wasn’t that fun while being watched by four or five pairs of skeptical eyes. I had no success in the first ten or twenty minutes; I kept getting there too late, after the lump had already fallen, or, overly anxious, I’d stick the teaspoon under an imaginary lump. Then I learned that it was important to sit in a comfortable position, use strong lighting, and hold the teaspoon very close to the flow of varnish. The first time I successfully captured a lump, I carried it over to the microscope, and there was the filament. I compared it with a filament I’d removed from one of the bandages, and, sure enough, they were identical, both cotton.

“The next day, which was yesterday, I got good at it, and I taught the trick to one of the girls. There was no doubt about it, each lump contained a filament. The filaments were like a fifth column in the anchovies’ attack on the varnish, because cotton fibers are porous, so they functioned as a little channel—but the Russians didn’t request any further analysis. They signed my emancipation proclamation and sent me off with an order for a new shipment of varnish in my pocket. By the way—despite the fact that I have a very poor knowledge of Russian, I did understand that, with some pretext or another, they would have given me the order in any case, because the German varnish that Ms. Kondratova had mentioned last month was apparently behaving just like ours, at least with respect to lumps and anchovies. And it turned out that the technician’s discovery, which had caused me so much concern, had an equally ridiculous cause: between measurements, instead of washing the viscometer with cleaning solvent and then drying it, they were cleaning it directly with the rags from the chest, meaning that, as far as the lumps were concerned, the viscometer itself was the main source of infection.”

We landed in Moscow, retrieved our baggage, and boarded the shuttle bus that was to take us to our hotel in town. I was disappointed by my effort to match Faussone: he had listened to my entire story with his typically blank countenance, barely interrupting me or asking any questions. But he must have been deep in thought, because, after a long silence, he said:

"So you really want to close up shop? I'm sorry, but I'd think about it a little more if I were you. See, it's a real blessing to work with your hands; you can size things up and see what you're worth. You make a mistake, you correct it, and the next time you don't make the same mistake. But you're older than me, and maybe, over the course of your life, you've already seen enough."

. . . What was needed of course was Captain MacWhirr. Directly I perceived him I could see that he was the man for the situation. I don’t mean to say that I ever saw Captain MacWhirr in the flesh, or had ever come in contact with his literal mind and his dauntless temperament. MacWhirr is not an acquaintance of a few hours, or a few weeks, or a few months. He is the product of twenty years of life. My own life. Conscious invention had little to do with him. If it is true that Captain MacWhirr never walked and breathed on this earth (which I find for my part extremely difficult to believe) I can also assure my readers that he is perfectly authentic.

—JOSEPH CONRAD, FROM THE AUTHOR’S NOTE TO *TYPHOON*

Translator’s Afterword

Work is fiction’s greatest blind spot. Work occupies more of our hours than sleep, love, and family, yet it’s rare to find a novel that takes as its main subject the daily routines, obligations, and petty indignities that consume most of our lives. (Novels about writers don’t count.) Work tends to be a secondary consideration, useful for providing character detail, a plot point, or a setting, and little more. It has been this way since the invention of the form. The earliest novels, written by people wealthy enough not to have to work, tended to be about the lives of people wealthy enough not to have to work. The subject of work has been largely avoided ever since, as if it is seen as pedestrian, tedious, even distasteful. Novels are about what happens after punch-out.

Primo Levi’s *The Wrench* (*La chiave a stella*) is a glorious exception to this rule. It is an unapologetic ode to the joys, and frustrations, of labor. It is a celebration of diligence, exertion, and the pride required to doing a job well, no matter what job—whether it’s erecting a derrick, designing a varnish to coat the interior of tin cans, or even combining words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs.

The translation of Levi’s novel, as it turned out, was one of the most challenging literary jobs I’ve had—not nearly as difficult as, say, rigging a gantry crane, but perhaps on the order of assembling a small truss tower, or at least just as time-consuming. One difficulty was posed by Faussone’s “particular language,” as clunky as a bag of hammers and screwdrivers, with its run-on sentences, liberal use of vernacular terms, phrases drawn from obscure regional dialects, and frequent divagations. But the greater challenge was his heavy use of industrial vocabulary: the cofferdams, ball bearings, mandrels, autogenous welding, coke forges, and bevel gears that, as Levi writes, “are effectively the heroes of the stories.”

When I translate I keep two dictionaries within arm’s length, an Italian dictionary and an Italian-English dictionary. Translating Levi’s novel I

found myself reaching, at least electronically, for a third kind of reference text: technical manuals and trade journals. More than definitions, I needed diagrams. I watched industrial videos and I sent queries to Italian engineers. Even the novel's title, *La chiave a stella*, presented an unresolvable linguistic puzzle. Literally, it means a "star-shaped key," or "key to the stars"; practically, however, it describes what is known in English as a socket wrench. "The Wrench" lacks the original's celestial aspect, though it does evoke something of the novel's linguistic complexity. Faussone's language is frequently throwing a wrench into the narrator's efforts to understand him.

It was reassuring to read that Levi himself had misgivings about the novel's language. The use of regional dialect meant that other Italians only got, by his estimation, 70 percent of the jokes. He also worried that the technical terms would be lost on most Italian readers. But he needn't have worried. The joy of the novel lies not in understanding exactly how to float an oil derrick in the middle of a churning sea, but in sharing in Levi's appreciation for the joy that Faussone finds in doing difficult work, and doing it well. This is a universal joy and I felt it too while translating Levi, as he translated Faussone.

NATHANIEL RICH

Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980

Translated by Alessandra Bastagli and Francesco Bastagli

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The Death of Marinese

No one was killed. Sante and Marinese were the only ones captured by the Germans. It made no sense, it was almost incredible, that, of us all, the two of them had been taken. But the older men in the group knew that it is always those who are captured of whom it is later said “Who would have guessed!” And they also knew why.

When the two were taken away, the sky was gray and the road was covered with snow that had hardened into ice. The truck barreled downhill with the engine off: the chains on the wheels rattled around the bends and clanked rhythmically along the straight stretches. About thirty Germans were standing in the back of the truck, packed shoulder to shoulder, some of them hanging on to the frame of the canvas roof. The tarp had come loose, so that a thin sleet struck their faces and came to rest on the fabric of their uniforms.

Sante was wounded; he sat mute and still on the rear bench of the truck, while Marinese was at the front, standing, with his back against the driver’s cab. Trembling with fever, Marinese felt himself slowly overcome by drowsiness, so that, taking advantage of a bump in the road, he slid to the wet floor and remained sitting there, an inanimate object amid the muddy boots, his bare head wedged between the bony hips of two soldiers.

The pursuit had been long and exhausting, and he wanted nothing more than this—for it all to be over, to remain sitting, to have no more decisions to make, to surrender to the heat of his fever and rest. He knew that he would be interrogated, probably beaten, and then almost certainly killed, and he knew, too, that soon all this would regain importance. But for now he felt strangely protected by a burning shield of fever and sleep, as if it

were an insulation of cotton wool that separated him from the rest of the world, from the facts of the day and the things to come. Vacation, he thought, almost in a dream: how long had it been since he had had a vacation?

With his eyes closed, he felt as if he were submerged in a long, narrow tunnel that had been dug into a soft, tepid substance, crimson, like the light that penetrates closed eyelids. His feet and his head were cold, and he seemed to be moving with difficulty, as if pushed, toward the exit, which was far away but which he would finally, inexorably, reach. The exit was barred by a swirl of snow and a tangle of hard, frozen metal.

For Marinese a long time passed in this way, during which he made no attempt to break out of his cradle of fever. The truck reached the plain, and the Germans stopped to take off the chains. Then the drive resumed—faster, the jolts more violent.

Perhaps nothing would have happened if the Germans hadn't suddenly begun to sing. A voice, starting up in the cab, reached them muffled and indistinct. But once the first verse was over, a second burst forth like thunder from every chest, drowning out the rumble of the engine and the rush of the wind—even Marinese's fever was overwhelmed. He found himself again able to act and therefore, in some way, obliged to take action—which was how it was for all of us at that time.

The song was long; every verse ended abruptly, in the German manner, and the soldiers stamped twice on the wooden floor with their hobnailed boots. Marinese had opened his eyes and raised his head again, and every time they stamped their feet he perceived a light touch on his shoulder; he soon realized that it was the handle of a grenade, tucked diagonally into the belt of the man on his left. In that moment the idea took hold.

It's probable that, at least in the beginning, he hadn't considered using the grenade to save himself, to open up a path with his own hands, even though, as we shall see, his final actions cannot be interpreted otherwise. It's more likely that he was moved by hatred and rancor (feelings that had become habitual to us by then, almost an elementary reflex) toward those blond men in green, well nourished and well armed, who for many months had forced us to live in hiding. Perhaps more than that, he wanted to take revenge and yet at the same time cleanse himself of the shame of a final escape—the shame that weighed and still weighs on our souls. In fact,

Marinese had a gentle soul, and none of us thought him capable of killing, except in self-defense, revenge, or anger.

Without turning his head, Marinese carefully groped for the handle of the grenade (the type shaped like a stick, with a timer) and, bit by bit, he unscrewed the safety cap, using the jolts of the vehicle to conceal his movements. This operation was easy enough, but Marinese never would have thought that it would be so difficult to occupy and get through the last ten seconds of his life—he would have to fight hard, with all his will and with all his physical strength, so that everything would go according to plan. He dedicated his last few moments to this alone: not to self-pity, not to the thought of God, not to taking leave of the memory of those he loved.

With the cord firmly in his grasp, Marinese tried to imagine, in an orderly fashion, what would happen in the ten seconds between the rip and the explosion. The Germans might not notice, might simply register his sudden movement, or might understand everything. The first option was the most favorable: the ten seconds would be his own, his time, to spend as he wished, perhaps to think of home, perhaps to think of how he would manage, taking shelter at the last minute behind the man on his right, but then he would have to count to ten and that thought was strangely worrisome. Fool, he thought suddenly. Here I am racking my brains with the cord in my hand. I could have thought of it sooner, couldn't I. Now the first son of a bitch who sees the cap missing. . . . But no, I can always pull, no matter what happens. He laughed to himself: (Even a situation like this has its advantages!) Even if they hit me in the back of the neck? Even if they shoot me? . . . But yes, thanks to some mental mechanism, evidently illusory and distorted by the imminence of the decision, Marinese felt sure he could pull the cord no matter what, even the very instant he lost consciousness, perhaps even the instant after.

But unexpectedly, out of some unexplored depths, from some recess of his body—the animal, rebel body that has trouble deciding to die—something was born and grew beyond measure, something dark and primeval, and unfathomable, because its growth arrests and then replaces all the powers of knowledge and determination. It dawned on Marinese that this was fear, and he understood that in a moment it would be too late. He filled his lungs to prepare for battle and pulled the cord with all his might.

Rage was unleashed. A paw struck his shoulder, followed by an avalanche of bodies. But Marinese was able to tear the bomb away from the

belt and roll up like a hedgehog, facedown, his knees drawn up against his chest, the grenade wedged between his knees, his arms tight around them. The fierce blows of fists, musket butts, and heels rained down on his back; hard hands tried to violate the stronghold of his contracted limbs. But all in vain: it was not enough to overcome the insensitivity to pain and the primordial strength that, for just a few moments, nature grants us in a time of dire need.

For three or four seconds Marinese lay under a pile of bodies writhing in violent battle, every fiber of his being contracted. Then he heard the squeal of the brakes, the truck stopping, and the rushed thuds of men jumping to the ground. At that instant he sensed that the time had come. In a final, perhaps involuntary extension of all his powers, he tried, too late, to free himself of the grenade.

The explosion ripped apart the bodies of four Germans, and his own. Sante was executed by the Germans on the spot. The truck was abandoned, and we captured it the following night.

Il Ponte, *August–September 1949*

The Deported. Anniversary

Ten years after the liberation of the Lagers, it's remarkable, and sad, to have to observe that, at least in Italy, the subject of the extermination camps, far from becoming history, is starting to be completely forgotten.

There is no need here to recall the figures; to recall that it was the most enormous slaughter in history, nearly annihilating, for example, the Jewish populations of entire nations of Eastern Europe; to recall that, if Nazi Germany had been able to complete its plan, the technique tested at Auschwitz and elsewhere would have been applied, with the notorious meticulousness of the Germans, to entire continents.

Today it is unseemly to speak of the camps. One is at risk of being accused, in the best hypothesis, of self-pity or a gratuitous love for the macabre; in the worst, of pure and simple dishonesty, or maybe indecent behavior.

Is this silence justified? Must we tolerate it, we survivors? Should it be tolerated by those who, stunned by fear and revulsion, by blows, curses, and inhuman shouts, witnessed the departure of the sealed freight cars and also, years later, the return of the very few survivors, broken in body and spirit? Is it right that the task of bearing witness, which at the time was felt as a need and as an immediate duty, should be considered done?

There is only one answer. We must not forget, we must not be silent. If we are silent, who will speak? Certainly not the guilty and their accomplices. If our testimony is missing, in a not distant future the deeds of Nazi bestiality, because of their very enormity, will be relegated to legend. And so we must speak.

Yet silence prevails. There is a silence that is the product of an insecure conscience, or even a bad conscience. It is the silence of those who, urged or forced to express an opinion, try by every means to change the subject, bringing up nuclear weapons, indiscriminate bombing, the Nuremberg trials, and the troublesome Soviet labor camps—subjects not in themselves without importance but completely irrelevant for the purposes of a moral justification for the Fascist crimes, which in method and extent constitute a monument to ferocity so great that in all human history we find no comparison.

But it will not be out of place to allude to another aspect of this silence, this reticence, this evasion. That people in Germany are silent, that the Fascists are silent is natural, and basically we're not sorry about it. Their words serve no purpose, we are not waiting for their laughable attempts at justification. But what to say about the silence of the civilized world, the silence of our culture, our own silence, before our children, before friends returning from long periods of exile in distant countries? It's not due to weariness alone, to the passing of the years, to the normal attitude of *primum vivere*. It's not due to cowardice. There lives in us a more profound, more creditable requirement, which in many circumstances advises us to be silent about the camps, or at least diminish them, censor the images, still so vivid in our memory.

It is shame. We are men, we belong to the same human family that our executioners belong to. Before the enormity of their crime, we feel that we, too, are citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, and cannot be exempted from the charge that an otherworldly judge, on the basis of our own testimony, would bring against all humanity.

We are children of that Europe where Auschwitz is: we lived in the century in which science was bent, and gave birth to the racial laws and the gas chambers. Who can say for sure that he is immune to the infection?

And other things remain to be said: harsh, painful things that, to those who have read *The Weapons of the Night*,[1] will not sound new. It is vanity to call the death of the innumerable victims of the extermination camps glorious. It wasn't glorious: it was a defenseless, naked death, ignominious and obscene. Nor is slavery honorable; there were some who were able to endure it unharmed, and they were an exception, to be considered with reverential amazement. But it is an essentially ignoble condition, a source of almost irresistible degradation and moral shipwreck.

It’s good for these things to be said, because they are true. But it should be clear that it doesn’t mean uniting victims and murderers: that doesn’t help; in fact, it makes the guilt of the Fascists and Nazis a hundred times worse. They have shown for all the centuries to come what unsuspected reserves of savagery and madness lie latent in man after millennia of civilized life, and this is a diabolical work. They labored tenaciously to create a gigantic machine that generated death and corruption: no greater crime can be imagined. They insolently built their kingdom with the tools of hatred, violence, and lies: their failure is a warning.

In Torino*, 31, no. 4 (April 1955, special issue devoted to the tenth anniversary of the liberation); a shorter version appeared in* L’Eco dell’Educazione Ebraica *(April 1955, special issue for the tenth anniversary of the liberation)*

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1. The resistance fighter Jean Bruller (1902–1991), who was a cofounder of Éditions de Minuit, wrote this book under the pseudonym Vercors.

Monument at Auschwitz

Within the next two years, perhaps sooner—in a relatively short time, considering the size of the work—a monument will rise at Auschwitz, on the very site of the biggest massacre in human history. In the second round of the competition to select the designers for the project, which was held recently, a group of Polish artists and two groups of Italian architects and sculptors came in first. The working plan arose from their collaboration, and since July 1, 1959, it has been on display at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome. To be precise, the monument will not "rise" literally, since a large part of it will be at ground level or underground. It will not be a monument in the common sense of the term, because it will occupy no less than seventy-five acres and will not be in the center of Auschwitz—that is, not in the Polish town of Oświęcim—but, rather, at Birkenau.

There are few people to whom the name Auschwitz will be unfamiliar. Around 400,000 prisoners were registered in this camp, only a few thousand of whom survived. The extermination plants built by the Nazis at Birkenau, two kilometers away from Auschwitz, swallowed up almost 4 million more innocents. They weren't political opponents; the vast majority were entire families of Jews, including children, the elderly, and women, taken from the ghettos or directly from their homes, often with only a few hours of warning, and the order to bring "everything you'll need for a long trip," and the unofficial advice not to forget gold, cash, and any valuables they might have. Everything they brought (everything—even shoes, underwear, eyeglasses) was taken from them when the convoy entered the camp. On average, one-tenth of every transport was sent on to forced-labor camps; nine-tenths (which included all the children, the elderly, the

handicapped, and most of the women) were immediately eliminated with a toxic gas originally meant for ridding ships' holds of mice. Their bodies were cremated in colossal facilities built specifically for this purpose by the honorable company Topf & Sons, of Erfurt, which had been commissioned to produce ovens capable of cremating 24,000 cadavers a day. Seven tons of women's hair was found at the liberation of Auschwitz.

These are the facts: deadly, repulsive, and essentially incomprehensible. Why, how did they take place? Will they happen again?

I don't think these questions can be answered comprehensively, not today and not in the future; and perhaps it's better that way. If they could be answered, it would mean that the facts of Auschwitz fit into the fabric of the works of man, that they had a motive, and thus a seed of justification. In some way, we can put ourselves in the shoes of the thief, of the murderer, but it's not possible for us to put ourselves in the shoes of the deranged. It is equally impossible to retrace the path of those responsible for Auschwitz; their actions and their words remain, for us, shrouded in darkness, we can't reconstruct their development, we can't say "from their point of view. . . ." Man acts in pursuit of an end; the massacre of Auschwitz—which destroyed a tradition and a civilization—did not benefit anyone.

From this point of view (and only this one!), it is highly instructive to read the diary of Rudolf Höss, the former commander of Auschwitz. The book (the Italian edition is about to be published) is a terrifying document. The author is not a bloodthirsty sadist, or a fanatic full of hatred, but an empty man, a tranquil and diligent idiot who endeavored to carry out as carefully as possible the bestial initiatives entrusted to him, and in this obedience he seems to find every doubt or worry put to rest.

It seems to me that the facts of Auschwitz can be interpreted only in this manner—that is, as the insanity of a few men and the stupid and vile consent of many. In fact, even if we leave aside all moral judgment and limit ourselves to the sphere of "pragmatic policies," we come to realize that efforts like Hitler's, carried out at Auschwitz and meticulously planned for the whole of New Europe, were colossal mistakes. Everywhere, in all countries, there exists a capacity for indignation—a consensus of judgment in the face of such atrocities—that Nazism did not take into account, and to which, in the end, the German people owe the state of quarantine they currently find themselves in. Logically, a recurrence of the concentration camp shouldn't be a threat.

But it is imprudent to base predictions on logic. Not long ago Jemolo[1] observed, in these very pages, how futile it is to attribute long-range plans and diabolical acumen to our enemies; it's like saying that stupidity and irrationality are historically active forces. Unfortunately, experience has proved it, and continues to prove it. A second Hitler could be born, maybe already has been born; we must take this into account. So Auschwitz can be repeated. All techniques, once established, take on a life of their own, retain their potential, waiting for an occasion to be applied again. In fifteen years, techniques of destruction and propaganda have progressed. Destroying a million human lives by pressing a button is easier today than it was yesterday; corrupting the memory, conscience, and judgment of 200 million people becomes easier every year.

But there is more. The Nazi massacre bears the mark of folly, but also another mark. It is the mark of the inhuman, of human solidarity negated, forbidden, shattered; of slave-like exploitation, of the shameless establishment of the law of the strongest, smuggled in under the banner of order. It's the mark of bullying, the mark of fascism. It's the realization of an insane dream, in which one person rules, no one thinks anymore, everyone always stays in line, everyone obeys to the death, everyone always says yes.

And so it's good, it's important, that, in this era of easy enthusiasms and profound exhaustion, a monument should rise at Auschwitz. It has to be a monument that is both new and everlasting, that can, today and tomorrow and centuries from now, speak clearly to whoever visits it. It doesn't have to be "beautiful," it doesn't matter if it borders on the rhetorical, or falls into it. It must not be used for partisan ends; it must be a monument-admonishment that humanity dedicates to itself, in order to bear witness, to repeat a message that is not new in history but is too often forgotten: that man is, and must be, sacred to man, everywhere and always.

La Stampa, *July 18, 1959*

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1. Arturo Carlo Jemolo (1891–1981) was a legal scholar, an anti-Fascist, and a contributor to La Stampa.

“Arbeit Macht Frei”

As everybody knows, these words could be read above the entrance gate of the Lager at Auschwitz. Their literal meaning is “Work makes you free.” Their true meaning is much less clear; it cannot but leave us puzzled, and it lends itself to a number of observations.

The Lager at Auschwitz was created quite late; it was conceived from the beginning as an extermination camp, not as a labor camp. It became a labor camp only around 1943, and only in part and in an incidental way; and so I think we must assume that that sentence—in the mind of whoever dictated it—was not intended to be understood in its basic sense, in other words in its obvious meaning as a proverb-moral.

It is more likely that the sentence had an ironic meaning, that it arose from that heavy, arrogant, grim vein of humor to which Germans hold the secret, and that only in German has a name. Translated into explicit language, the sentence, it seems, would sound something like this:

“Work is humiliation and suffering, and it is not suitable for us, *Herrenvolk*, a nation of gentlemen and heroes, but it is for you, enemies of the Third Reich. The freedom that awaits you is death.”

In reality, and despite appearances to the contrary, repudiation of and contempt for the moral value of work was and is essential to the Fascist myth in all its forms. Under all militarism, colonialism, and corporatism lies the precise determination of one class to exploit the work of others, and at the same time to deny them any human worth. This determination was already clear in the anti-worker character that Italian fascism assumed from the beginning, and it continued to assert itself, with increasing precision, in the evolution of fascism in its German version, up to the vast deportation to

Germany of workers from all the occupied countries. But it reached its crowning achievement and, at the same time, its reduction to the absurd in the universe of the concentration camp.

The exaltation of violence has the same purpose. It, too, is essential to fascism; the stick, which quickly acquires symbolic value, is the implement used to goad pack and cart animals to work.

The experimental nature of the Lager is evident today, and gives rise to an intense retrospective horror. Today we know that the German camps, both the labor camps and the extermination camps, were not, so to speak, a by-product of a national emergency (first the Nazi revolution, then the war), nor were they a sad, temporary necessity. Rather, they represented the first, precocious buds of the New Order. In the New Order, certain human races (Jews, Gypsies) would be eliminated. Others, for example the Slavs in general and the Russians in particular, would be enslaved and subjected to a carefully planned regimen of biological degradation that would transform them into useful beasts of burden, illiterate, devoid of any initiative, incapable of rebellion or criticism.

So the camps were, in substance, “pilot plants,” harbingers of the future assigned to Europe in the Nazi plans. In light of these considerations, sentences like “Work makes you free” at Auschwitz, or like “To each his own” at Buchenwald, take on a precise and sinister meaning. They are portents of the new Tablets of the Law, dictated by the master to the slave, and true only for the latter.

If fascism had prevailed, the whole of Europe would have been transformed into a complex system of forced-labor camps and extermination camps, and those words, cynically uplifting, would be read over the entrance to every workshop and every construction site.

Triangolo Rosso, *ANED (Associazione Nazionale Ex-Deportati), November 1959*

The Time of the Swastikas

The Exhibition on Deportation, which opened in Turin on a minor note (it's fair to say), achieved an unexpected success. Every day, at every hour, a packed crowd paused with emotion in front of those terrible images; the closing date had to be postponed twice. Equally surprising was the Turinese public's response to the two subsequent talks, intended for young people, that took place at the Cultural Union, in Palazzo Carignano; the audience was large, attentive, and thoughtful. These two occurrences, in themselves positive and deserving of serious reflection, contain a germ of reproach: maybe we delayed too long, maybe we wasted years, were silent when it was time to speak, failed to fulfill an expectation.

But they also contain a lesson (not really new, because, after all, the history of customs is a series of rediscoveries): in this epoch of ours—noisy and bureaucratic, full of open propaganda and hidden suggestions, of mechanical rhetoric, of compromise, of scandals and exhaustion—the voice of truth, instead of getting lost, acquires a new timbre, a clearer prominence. It seems too good to be true, but it is so: the wide devaluation of the written and spoken word is not definitive, not general. Something has been saved. Strange as it may seem, today one who tells the truth receives attention and is believed.

We should feel heartened. However, this manifestation of faith requires, compels us all to examine our consciences. Were we also wrong when it came to the thorny issue of how to convey to our children a moral and sentimental legacy that we consider important? Yes, probably we were wrong. We sinned by omission and by commission. In keeping silent we committed the sin of laziness and of lack of faith in the power of the word;

and when we did speak we sinned, often, by adopting and accepting a language that was not ours. As we know, the Resistance had and still has enemies, who, naturally, maneuver so that as little as possible is said about it. But I suspect that this suppression is also achieved, in a more or less conscious manner, by subtler means—that is, by embalming the Resistance before its time, relegating it obsequiously to the noble castle of the History of the Homeland.

Now, I'm afraid that we have contributed to this embalming process as well. To describe and convey the events of yesterday we too often adopted a rhetorical, hagiographic, and therefore vague language. Excellent arguments can be made for and against the appropriateness of calling the Resistance the Secondo Risorgimento,[1] but I ask myself if it is right to underline this aspect of it, or if it is not preferable to insist on the fact that the Resistance continues, or at least should continue, because its objectives have been achieved only in part. By linking the Resistance with the Risorgimento we end up asserting an ideal continuity between the events of 1848, 1860, 1918, and 1945, to the detriment of the far more critical and obvious continuity from 1945 to today. The break of the Fascist decades loses its prominence.

In conclusion, I believe that if we wish our children to feel these concerns, and therefore feel that they are our children, we should speak to them a little less of glory and victory, of heroism and sacred ground, and a little more of that hard, dangerous, and thankless life, the daily strain, the days of hope and of despair, of our comrades who died doing their duty in silence, of the participation of the populace (but not all of it), of the errors made and those avoided, of the conspiratorial and military experience painfully acquired, through mistakes that were paid in human lives, of the hard-won (and not spontaneous, not always perfect) agreement among the supporters of different parties.

Only in this way will the young feel our most recent history as a fabric of human events and not as a "*pensum*" to add to the many others of the ministry's programs.

Il Giornale dei Genitori *2, no. 1 (January 15, 1960)*

1. The Risorgimento is the nineteenth-century social and political movement that led to Italian unification, in 1861.

Bear Meat

Evenings spent in a mountain hut are among the most sublime and intense that life holds. I mean a real hut, the kind where you seek shelter after a four-, five-, or six-hour climb and where you find few so-called comforts.

Not that chairlifts and cable cars and such comforts are to be looked down on: they are, on the contrary, logical achievements of our society, which is what it is, and must be either accepted or rejected in its totality—and those who are able to reject it are few. But the advent of the chairlift puts an end to a valuable process of natural selection, by which those who reach the hut are sure to find, in its pure state, a small sample of a little-known human subspecies.

Its members are people who don't speak much and of whom others don't speak at all, so there is no mention of them in the literature of most countries, and they should not be confused with other, vaguely similar types, who do speak, and of whom others speak: hot shots, extreme climbers, members of famous international expeditions, professionals, etc. All worthy people, but this story is not about them.

I arrived at the hut at sunset, and I was very tired. I stayed outside, on the wooden porch, to consider the frozen mystery of the seracs at my feet until everything had vanished behind silent ghosts of fog, and then I went in.

Inside it was almost dark. By the glow of a small carbide lamp one could distinguish a dozen human figures gathered around three or four tables. I sat down at a table and opened my backpack. Across from me was a tall, large man, middle-aged, with whom I exchanged a few words about

the weather and our plans for the following day. This is a standard conversation, like the classic opening moves of a chess game, where what matters, much more than what one says (which is brief and obvious), is the tone in which one says it.

We found ourselves in agreement on the fact that the weather was uncertain (it always is in the mountains; when it isn't, it is nonetheless declared to be so, for obvious magical reasons), and on the forecast for the following day. A little later, two lanky men in their twenties entered, with long beards and ravenous eyes. They had arrived from another valley and were attempting an intricate series of crossings. They sat down at our table.

After we had eaten, we started to drink. Wine is a more complex substance than one might think, and, above two thousand meters and at close to 0 degrees centigrade, it displays interesting behavioral anomalies. It changes flavor, loses the bite of alcohol, and regains the mildness of the grape from which it comes. One can take it in heavy doses without any undesired effects. In fact, it eliminates fatigue, loosens and warms the limbs, and leads to a fanciful mood. It is no longer a luxury or a vice but a metabolic necessity, like water on the plains. It is a well-known fact that vines grow better on a slope: could there be a connection?

Once we started drinking, the conversation at our table became much less impersonal. Each of us spoke of our initiation, and we established with some surprise that we had all begun our mountaineering careers with an extremely foolish act.

As it turned out, the best of these foolish acts, and the best told, was the one recounted by the tall, large man.

"I was fifteen. A friend of mine, Saverio, was also fifteen. Another, Luigi, was seventeen. We had gone out a number of times together, to fifteen hundred, two thousand meters, without a plan or a destination; I should say, without a conscious destination, but, in essence, impelled by a subtle desire to get ourselves in trouble and then get ourselves out of it. Nothing easier: it's enough to go straight up the mountain following your nose, in any direction, by the steepest slope, then struggle for a quarter of an hour across the mountainside, and then try to get back down. Of course, one also learns a few things in this process: that pine trees, when they're available, make

safe and friendly supports, especially during the descent, and that scree is hard to climb but easy to descend by. One learns different types of grasses, those peculiar terraced slopes, and the art of losing the trail and finding it again. Above all, one learns the limits, both quantitative and qualitative, of one's own strength: when the breath, the legs, and the heart give out, and when, so to speak, it's psychosomatic. It's a great school—I wish I had attended it longer.

"September came and we felt like lions. Luigi said, 'The G. Pass is twenty-four hundred meters high—eleven hundred vertical meters from here. According to the guidebooks, it should be a three-hour climb, but it'll take us barely two. There's nothing difficult, just scree and small rocks—no snow this time of year. On the other side, there's a six-hundred-meter descent, one hour, and we arrive at the border-patrol hut; you can see it clearly here on the map. Then an easy return along the road. We'll leave at two today; at four we're at the top, at five at the hut, and home in time for dinner.'

"That was Luigi. We met at his house at two, with our good boots on our feet, but no backpacks, no rope (about whose use none of us had any real notion anyway; but we knew—having studied the Alpine Club guidebook—the theory of the double rope, the respective merits of hemp and manila, the technique for rescuing someone from a crevasse, and other fine points), a hundred grams of chocolate in our pockets, and (may God forgive us!) wearing shorts.

"We progressed well uphill. First, through a pine forest, spurning the mule trail and the shortcuts, and sampling the blueberries; then through an alluvial cone, wasting precious energy. It was the first time we had set off without grownups getting on our nerves with their advice, without uncles, without experts. We were drunk on our freedom, and because of this we delighted in the dirtiest high school slang, accompanied with lofty quotations from the classics, for example:

It is another path that you must take . . .
if you would leave this savage wilderness;

"Or:

That was no path for those with cloaks of lead;

for he and I—he, light; I, with support—
could hardly make it up from spur to spur.

"And also:

. . . he'd see another spur,
saying: 'That is the one you will grip next,
but try it first to see if it is firm.'

"Forgive me if I get a little carried away. You see, I'm not a Dante expert, and yet, believe me, one of these days an honest man will come along and prove that Dante couldn't have just invented these founding principles of rock climbing—he must have been here or in a similar place. And when he says:

Remember, reader, if you've ever been
caught in the mountains by a mist through which
you only saw as moles see through their skin—[1]

"I congratulate him! I, for one, never doubted that he was a professional.

"At any rate, we were climbing at a brisk pace, saying and doing foolish things. And so it happened that we reached the pass at six, not at four, near collapse, and with a certain trembling in our knees that wasn't just from exhaustion. Saverio was the worst off. Luigi and I were already at the top and saw him struggling among the loose rocks fifty meters below us. 'Now you must cast aside your laziness!' Luigi had the gall to shout to him. At which the poor boy paused to catch his breath, looked upward like Christ on the Cross, then clambered up to us and breathed out, in a faint voice, the implausible yet utterly correct reply: 'Go on, for I am strong and confident.'

"When all three of us were at the pass, two unhappy truths became clear. One, that night was falling; and I swear on this bottle that I have never since then (and many years have passed) seen darkness fall in the mountains without feeling an emptiness here in the pit of my stomach. The other truth was that we were trapped.

"From the pass, there was no logical descent to the hut. There was a gentle, rocky valley, with no human trace, and beyond it a terrifying precipice, not vertical, no, but of broken rock and gullies of crumbling earth

—one of those places no one ever wants to go because you'll break your neck without glory or satisfaction.

"With the last light, we pushed on all the way to the edge: you could see the big dark leap of the valley and, if you stuck your nose out, even the light in the hut, almost beneath you. But as for getting down there on our own, we couldn't even consider it; we sat there and started shouting. We took turns. Saverio shouted and prayed. Luigi shouted and cursed. I just shouted. We shouted until we were hoarse.

"Toward midnight, the light in the hut split into two lights, and one of the two blinked three times. It was a signal: we shouted three times in response. At that, a faraway voice called, 'We're coming,' and we replied with a cacophony of shouts. The voice asked, 'Where are you?,' and we three, without a single match among us, blurted out confused and irrelevant information, all at the same time.

"Our rescuers, poor devils, cursed as they climbed, and stopped now and then to sing, drink, and laugh loudly. They weren't very enthusiastic. Many years later, I also happened to be part of a rescue party, so I know exactly how they felt. These expeditions are tedious and dangerous affairs, and in most cases they can only lead to trouble, because no one wants to pay for the emergency supplies—least of all the rescued, who are rarely solvent.

"They reached us at around two in the morning; and here I must tell you that, on top of everything else, they were members of the border patrol. Once they'd found us, a signal was sent to the valley with a flashlight. 'Who are they?' a voice asked from below. 'It's just three whiny *gagnô*' was the fierce reply, in dialect. Then, turning to us, 'Is this what they teach you in school?'

"After that, they tied us up like salami and lowered us down to the valley without talking to us but stopping often to drink, and curse, and guffaw among themselves.

"Pass me the bottle, please."

I passed him the bottle and asked him what a *gagnô* was.

"*Gagnô*," he said, "means child, but it's a word loaded with mockery. Second-grade kids say it to first graders.

"That's how I started. It's not a story to be proud of, you might say. And I'm not. But I'm sure that even this foolish adventure was useful to me later. These are things that make your back broad, which isn't something

Nature gives everyone. I read somewhere—and the person who wrote this was not a mountaineer but a sailor—that the sea's only gifts are harsh blows and, occasionally, the opportunity to feel strong. Now, I don't know much about the sea, but I do know that that's the way it is here. And I also know how important it is in life not necessarily to be strong but to feel strong, to measure yourself at least once, to find yourself at least once in the most ancient of human conditions—facing blind, deaf stone, alone—with nothing to help you but your own hands and your own head. . . . But, excuse me, that's another story. The one I told you ends like this. They called me 'whiny *gagnô*' for years. Some people still do and, I assure you, I don't mind at all."

He drank and silently busied himself with the complex rituals of a pipe smoker.

"I, too, started with an extremely foolish act," a voice interjected at this point, and then we noticed that there were no longer four of us but five at the table. The voice had come from a man who, in the dim light, appeared to be thin, balding at the temples, with a sharp face furrowed by shifting wrinkles. He told his story at an uneven pace, swallowing his words and leaving sentences incomplete, as if his tongue had difficulty following the thread of his thoughts; at other times he struggled to find the words and would stop as if under a spell.

"There were three of us, too, but not so young—in our twenties. One was Antonio, and I wouldn't want to say much about him, nor would I know how to. He was a fine, handsome youth, smart, sensitive, tenacious, and bold, but with something in him that was elusive, dark, wild. We were at that age when you have the need and the instinct and the immodesty to inflict on others everything that is seething in your head and elsewhere; it's an age that can last a long time, but ends at the first compromise. Yet with him, even at that age, nothing had slipped out of his wrapping of restraint; nothing escaped from his inner world—though we sensed it to be rich and dense—except some rare allusion dramatically cut short. He was like a cat, if I may put it this way, whom you live with for years but who never allows you to get under his sacred skin.

“The third was Carlo, our leader. He is dead; it’s best to say it right away, because one can’t help speaking in a different way of the dead than of the living. He died in a way that suited him, not in the mountains, but the way one dies in the mountains. Doing what he had to do: not the kind of duty imposed by someone else, or by the state, but the kind that one chooses for oneself. He would have put it differently, called it ‘reaching the end of the line,’ for example, because he didn’t like big words, or, for that matter, words.

“He was the kind of boy who doesn’t study for seven months, who is known as a rebel and a dunce, and then in the eighth month he absorbs all the courses as if they were water and comes through with straight As. He spent the summer as a shepherd—not a shepherd of souls, no, a shepherd of sheep, and not to show off or to be eccentric but happily, for love of the earth and the grass. And in the winter, whenever he got restless, he would tie his skis to his bicycle and ‘go up’ alone, with no money, only an artichoke in one pocket and the other full of salad. He would come back in the evening or maybe the following day, having slept who knows where, and the more storms and hunger he had endured, the happier and healthier he was. When I met him, he already had a considerable mountaineering career behind him, while I was still a novice. But he was reluctant to talk about it: he wasn’t the type—which I respect, because I’m like that, too—who goes into the mountains to be able to tell a story. On the other hand, it was as if no one had taught him how to speak, just as no one had taught him how to ski: because he spoke the way nobody speaks, he voiced only the essence of things.

“He seemed to be made of steel. If necessary, he could carry a backpack that weighed thirty kilos as if it were nothing, but usually he traveled without a pack: his pockets were enough. Besides the greens, they held a piece of bread, a pocketknife, sometimes the Alpine Club guidebook, and always a spool of wire for emergency repairs. He could walk for two days without eating, or eat three meals in one sitting and then be off. Once, I saw him at three thousand meters in February, in the sleet, bare-chested, eating calmly, a spectacle so upsetting to two men nearby that it turned their stomachs. I have a picture at home of the whole scene.”

He paused, as if to catch his breath. People from the other tables had gone to bed: in the sudden silence we distinctly heard the deep roar of a serac, like the bones of a giant trying in vain to turn over in his bed of rock.

“I beg your pardon. I’m no longer young, and I know that it’s a desperate endeavor to clothe a man in words. This one in particular. A man like this, when he’s dead, is dead forever. He’s not the kind you tell stories about or build monuments to; he’s all in his actions and, once those are over, nothing remains—nothing but, precisely, words. So, every time I try to talk about him, to bring him back to life, as I’m doing now, I feel a great sadness, an emptiness, as if I were on a cliff, and I have to be silent, or else drink.”

He was silent, drank, and continued.

“So one Saturday morning in February Carlo came to us. ‘Tomorrow, eh?’ he said. In his language, what he meant was that, since the weather was good, we could leave the next day for the winter ascent of the Tooth of M., which we had been planning for a while.

“I won’t give you all the technical details. I’ll tell you, briefly, that we left the following morning, not too early (Carlo didn’t like watches—he felt their tacit, continuous warning as an arbitrary intrusion); that we plunged boldly into the fog; that we came out the other side at around one in the afternoon, the sun was shining, and we were on the ridge of the wrong mountain.

“Antonio said that we could go down a hundred meters or so, cross along the mountainside, and climb back up the next mountain. I, who was the most cautious and the least able, said that, while we were at it, we could just as well continue along the ridge and arrive at a different peak—it was only forty meters lower than the other one anyway—and be satisfied with that. Carlo, in perfect bad faith, said with a few harsh, cackling syllables that my proposal was fine but, then again, ‘by the easy northwest ridge’ we could reach the Tooth of M. in half an hour; and that it wasn’t worth being twenty-one if you didn’t allow yourself the luxury of taking the wrong path.

“‘The easy northwest ridge’ was described rock by rock in the battered guidebook that Carlo carried in his pocket, along with the wire I mentioned. He took this guidebook along not because he believed in it but for the exact opposite reason. He rejected it because he perceived it, too, as a constraint, and not just any constraint but a bastard creature, a detestable hybrid of snow and rock and paper. He took it with him into the mountains to scorn it, delighted if he could catch it in error, even if that error was to his own detriment and that of his climbing companions.

“The easy northwest ridge was truly easy, in fact elementary, in the summer, but the conditions we found that day were difficult. The rocks were wet on the side that faced the sun and glazed with ice on the side in the shade; between one rock spike and the next were pockets of wet snow where we sank up to our shoulders. We arrived at the right peak at five, two of us dragging ourselves pitifully, while Carlo was seized by a sinister hilarity that I found slightly irritating.

“‘How will we get down?’

“‘We’ll figure it out,’ Carlo said, adding mysteriously, ‘The worst thing that happens is we taste bear meat.’

“Well, we tasted it, bear meat, in abundance, during the course of that night, the longest of my climbing career. It took us two hours to descend, feebly assisted by the rope. I’m sure you know what an infernal instrument a frozen rope is: ours had become a stiff, evil tangle that got caught on all the outcrops and clanged against the rock like a steel cable. At seven, we reached the shore of a small frozen lake. It was dark.

“We ate the little we had left, built a useless wall of stones to shelter us from the wind, and lay down on the ground to sleep, huddled side by side. We took turns—the man in the middle slept while the others acted as a buffer. For some reason I can’t explain, our watches had stopped—perhaps because we had forgotten to wind them—and without watches we felt as if time, too, had frozen. We stood up now and then to get our circulation going, and it was always the same: the wind was always blowing, there was always a semblance of moon, always in the same spot in the sky, and in front of the moon a fantastic cavalcade of ragged clouds, always the same. We had taken off our shoes, and put our feet in our backpacks. At the first ghostly light, which seemed to radiate not from the sky but from the snow, we got up, our limbs numb and our eyes glazed from sleeplessness, hunger, and darkness, and found our shoes so frozen that, when struck, they rang like bells. In order to put them on we had to sit on them for half an hour, as if we were hatching eggs.

“But we returned to the valley on our own: and when the innkeeper asked us, chuckling, how it had gone, all the while stealing glances at our two-day stubble, we answered without hesitation that it had been a great outing, paid the bill, and left without losing our composure.

“That was bear meat. Now, you must believe me, gentlemen, many years have passed, and I regret having eaten so little of it. I think and hope

that each of you has gleaned from life what I have—a certain measure of ease, respect, love, and success. Well, I'll tell you the truth, none of these things, not even remotely, has the taste of bear meat: the taste of being strong and free, which means free to make mistakes; the taste of feeling young in the mountains, of being your own master, which means master of the world.

"And, trust me, I am grateful to Carlo for having deliberately got us into trouble, for the night he made us spend, and for the various enterprises, senseless only on the surface, that he involved us in later on, and then for various others, not in the mountains, which I got into on my own, by following his doctrine. He was a young man full of earthly vigor who had a wisdom of his own, and may the earth in which he rests, not far from here, lie light on his bones, and bring the news, each year, of the return of the sun and of the frost."

The second narrator fell silent, and he seemed to me to be looking with some embarrassment toward the two young men, as if afraid that he had disturbed or offended them; then he filled his glass but did not drink. His last words had roused in me a rare echo, as if I had heard them somewhere before. And, in fact, I found almost those exact words in a book that is dear to me, by the same sailor, cited by the first man, who had written of the gifts of the sea.

Il Mondo, *August 29, 1961*

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1. These three lines are from *Purgatory* Canto XVII; the verses quoted above and below are from *Inferno* Canto XXIV.

Preface to the German Edition of *If This Is a Man*

And thus we have finished. I am glad, and satisfied with the result, and grateful to you, and at the same time a little sad. You see, this is the only book I have written, and now that we have finished transplanting it into German I feel like a father whose son has come of age and leaves, and no longer needs his care.

But it's not just this. You may have already noticed that the Lager, and writing about the Lager, was an ordeal that changed me deeply; it has given me maturity and a reason to live. Perhaps it is presumption, but here, today, I, 174517, can speak to the Germans through you, remind them of what they did, and tell them, "I am alive, and I would like to understand you so that I can judge you."

I don't think a man's life necessarily has a specific purpose, but if I think of my own life and the purposes I have set for myself, there is only one among them that I can identify consciously and precisely: to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people, to "talk back" to the SS of the truss, to the Kapo who wiped his hand on my shoulder, to Dr. Pannwitz, to the men who hanged the Last One, and to their heirs.

I am sure that you have not misinterpreted me. I have never harbored any hatred toward the German people, and, if I had, I would be cured of it now that I have come to know you. I cannot understand, I cannot bear to see a man judged not for who he is but for the group he happens to belong to. On the contrary, I am aware, since I got to know Thomas Mann, since I learned a little German (and I learned it in the Lager!), that in Germany there is something of value, that Germany, asleep today, is pregnant, is a nursery. It is, at the same time, a danger and a hope for Europe.

But I can’t say that I understand the Germans. Now, something that one does not understand becomes a sore point, a sharp pain, a permanent itch that asks to be satisfied. I hope that this book will have some kind of echo in Germany: not only because of my ambitions but also because the nature of this echo will perhaps allow me to understand the Germans better and to soothe this itch.

Preface to the German edition of If This Is a Man,
published by Fischer Verlag in 1961

Controversial Diary of a Young Pathologist

The presentation to the Turinese public of the diary of Renzo Tomatis, published by Einaudi under the title *Il laboratorio* (*The Laboratory*), has given rise to a controversial incident: members of university medical circles, wrongly or rightly, have recognized themselves or their teachers in the characters of the diary, and have protested Tomatis's harsh verdict on the Italian academic environment.

I don't know if or to what degree that verdict is valid; certainly it constitutes only one aspect of the book, and not one of the most interesting. Tomatis is a young Turinese pathologist, and his diary is not taken up by argument, or at least not by that one, but springs from another kind of suffering, loftier and more solemn than frustration, and from a conflict broader than that between Italian and American universities. *The Laboratory* is an important document because it penetrates to the heart of the modern conflict between "the two cultures": this is its true polemical charge, of which the other, mentioned above, is only the surface wave. Its very publication has a precise meaning: a young scientist entrusts to paper, recklessly, his anxieties, hopes, illusions, and disappointments as a researcher transplanted to Chicago, and the book is made; rough and sometimes slack, but vivid and worthy, accessible to all, full of ideas to ponder; debatable, but never abstract, never vulgar, never obvious. The phenomenon is unusual, I would say revolutionary: it reproduces, with greater seriousness and purity of intention, the same sort of upheaval as pop art.

This could happen, evidently, because the researcher Tomatis is an intelligent and open-minded man, brought up on good reading, and

principally honest. He knows—in fact, he encounters every day—"the effort it costs to be rigorous and strict": the reading of his diary guides us to the discovery of that very demanding, painful honesty of the researcher, whose ambition is exposed to the most violent temptations, whose conscience must resist the slightest indulgences (see for example the discussion with Lopez. Since honesty is often frustrated, the words of Ecclesiastes cited here acquire new strength: "For in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom." That Ecclesiastes is dear to Tomatis should not surprise us: failure, error, and the resulting acute sense of the void are an integral part of the life of the man who is seeking. They are inevitable, his daily bread. The researcher is in the situation of one who, in roulette, bets obstinately on a single number. If he wins, the jackpot is large, but how many times does he win? The recurring, necessary defeat does not make up for the rare victories; it burns up days and years, consumes youth. Why fight, then? To "rescue mankind" from the scourge of cancer? The latter purpose does not seem to be the source from which Tomatis draws the large dose of energy he needs for his work. The human race with its sufferings is not forgotten, but it's distant, remote from the laboratory environment, glass and metal, electron microscopes and air-conditioning. What moves him is something else—a lucid, constant obsession, noble in itself, reward and end in itself, rooted in the essence of man. From these pages the condition of the researcher appears to us as typical of mankind, symbolic of its being and its becoming.

The text is not terribly refined—it's often heavy and digressive—but there is a constant awareness of that tension, of that belonging to the sole genuine human aristocracy, even if it's expressed only occasionally, in strong, concise observations that illuminate like flashes the pages of gray reporting. "Not to know some side of the problem . . . makes me feel a sense of guilt, providing a powerful stimulus to try to make up for my ignorance"; "It's not the moment, it's never the moment to be distracted, lazy, and indolent." From this awareness arises his intransigence, his anger against the "blasphemers," the merchants in the temple; this is also the source of the fundamental power and value of his writing. This laboratory diary, apparently dry, stripped of every rhetorical or dramatic artifice, is not "beautiful" in the ordinary sense, but it's important, and much literature seems pale in comparison. It documents a courageous way of living and a

persistent way of working, against enemies of every sort: against the elusive secret of living matter, against the incomprehension and the laziness (which appears cynical to Tomatis) of his colleagues in Italy and in America, against one's own weariness, one's own haste and one's own ambition. It brought to mind Aschenbach's statement, in *Death in Venice*, that everything great that exists owes its existence to "*als ein Trotzdem*," an "in spite of," because it originated as a resistance to suffering, to poverty, to weakness, to passion, to a thousand obstacles: in a word, more than a scientific document, this is a moral document.

Il Giorno, *March 31, 1965*



Preface to the School Edition of *The Truce*

I was born in Turin in 1919, to a moderately well-off family of Piedmontese Jews. There are many different ways of being a Jew: from strict compliance with religious rules and traditions to total indifference, and to acceptance of the majority's way of thinking and living. For me, being Jewish meant something vague, and not really problematic: it meant a tranquil awareness of the ancient history of my people, a sort of benevolent incredulity in the face of religion, a pronounced tendency toward the world of books and abstract discussions. For the rest, I didn't feel any different from my Christian friends and schoolmates and was at ease in their company.

As a boy, I wanted to follow many different paths. From the age of twelve to the age of fourteen, I wanted to become a linguist, from fourteen to seventeen an astronomer. At the age of eighteen, I enrolled in the university, to take a degree in chemistry. I certainly would not have thought of becoming a writer had I not been led there by a long chain of events. It is easy to infer from the year of my birth that I grew up and finished my studies during the Fascist era. I didn't fully comprehend the oppressive nature of fascism, but I felt an indefinable irritation with and aversion toward the more vulgar and illogical aspects of so-called Fascist culture. In 1938 the racial laws were passed in Italy. They were not like the severe measures that, in Germany, were enveloping the Jewish minority, along with other "enemies of the state," in a deadly net. However, they separated the Jews from the rest of the population and rekindled in our minds sad memories of the ghettos, which had vanished only ninety years before. Absurd, unjust, and oppressive laws followed. Every day the newspapers

were full of lies and insults. It was an inversion, a ridiculous and cruel reversal of the truth. The Jews had “always” been not only enemies of the people and the state but also foes of justice and morality, destroyers of science and art, the woodworms whose hidden activity undermines the foundations of the social edifice; they were to blame for the now imminent conflict. Yet this persistent campaign of defamation caused a reaction in the conscience of Italians, who had been put to sleep by fifteen years of fascism: it created a distinct demarcation line between those who believed and obeyed and those who refused loyalty and obedience, and it opened people’s eyes (not just the Jews’) to the true nature of fascism and Nazism.

When, in the summer of 1943, fascism fell, I felt joy and enthusiasm for what seemed to me a spontaneous act of historical justice, but I was by no means prepared for the hard struggle that followed, and had to follow. I felt undecided, inexperienced, and the prospect of combat frightened me. Nevertheless, I went up into the mountains and joined a group of partisans from the Justice and Liberty movement, a newly formed group, as yet unarmed and very poor. A few weeks later, we were trapped in a Fascist Militia roundup. Many managed to escape; I and a few others were captured. When I was interrogated, I admitted that I was Jewish, in the hope that the Fascists would merely send me to a concentration camp in Italy, or to prison. Instead, in February 1944, I was handed over to the Germans.

In those years, being in German hands meant, for any Jew, a terrible destiny. Hatred of the Jews, which had been latent for centuries in Germany and in the rest of Europe, had found in Hitler its prophet and advocate; and Hitler had found, in millions of Germans, an army of obedient and willing collaborators. For years already, Jews had been excluded from the life of the country, driven to hunger, to confinement in new ghettos, to forced labor for the war industry. But around 1943, secretly, an unprecedented program began to be implemented, so horrible that, even in official documents, it was mentioned only in sinister allusions: “appropriate treatment,” “final solution to the Jewish problem.” This program was simple and terrifying: all the Jews were to be eliminated. All of them, without exception: even the old, the sick, the children; all the millions of Jews who, with the successive invasions in Europe, now found themselves in the hands of the Nazis—German, Polish, French, Dutch, Russian, Italian, Hungarian, Greek, Yugoslav Jews. But to silently kill millions of people, even if they are helpless, is not an easy undertaking, and here the celebrated German

technical and organizational ability came into play. Special structures were built, new machines that had never been thought of before: real death factories, capable of exterminating thousands of human beings in an hour with toxic gasses—like mice in cargo holds—and incinerating their corpses. The biggest of these centers of destruction was called Auschwitz. Every day three, five, ten trains loaded with prisoners would arrive at Auschwitz from all the corners of Europe. Within a few hours of arrival the work of extermination would be complete. Very few were saved from an immediate end: only the younger and stronger men and women, who were sent by the Germans to labor camps. But in these camps, too, death was always lurking, death from hunger or cold, or from illnesses caused by hunger, cold, and exhaustion. Furthermore, all those who were no longer considered able to work were immediately sent to the extermination camps.

The Germans deported me to Auschwitz. I was deemed suitable for heavy work and was sent to the labor camp of Buna-Monowitz; all the prisoners in this camp worked in a huge chemical factory. I lived in Buna for a year, during which three-quarters of my companions died, to be immediately replaced by new prisoners—these, too, destined to die. I survived thanks to an unusual series of fortunate occurences. I didn’t get sick, I received food from a “free” Italian laborer, in the last months I was able to put my training as a chemist to use and work in a laboratory inside the huge factory, rather than outside, in the mud and snow. In addition, I knew a little German and I forced myself to learn this language as quickly and as well as possible, because I had understood that it was essential if I was to find my bearings in the ruthless and complicated world of the concentration camp.

The camp at Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet troops in January 1945, but our hope for a rapid return to Italy was frustrated. For reasons that are unclear—perhaps simply as a consequence of the extreme chaos that the war had left in its wake in the whole of Europe, and especially in Russia—our return home did not take place until October, and it followed a very long, unpredictable, and illogical route through Poland, Ukraine, White Russia, Romania, Hungary, and Austria.

Back in Italy, I had to look for work immediately, to support myself and my family. However, my uncommon experience, the infernal world of Auschwitz, the miraculous rescue, the words and faces of my companions who had died or survived, the freedom regained, the exhausting and

astonishing return trip, all this pressed inside me with urgency. I needed to tell these stories: it seemed important that they not remain lying inside me, like a nightmare; they should be known, not just to my friends but to everyone, to the broadest possible audience. As soon as I could, I started to write, furiously and at the same time methodically, almost obsessed by the fear that even one of my memories might be forgotten. Thus my first book was born. *If This Is a Man* describes my year of captivity in Auschwitz; I wrote it with no effort, and with no problems, with profound satisfaction and relief, and with the impression that these things "wrote themselves," somehow finding a direct path from my memory to the page.

If This Is a Man was a success, but not to the extent that it made me feel like a "writer" in full. I had said what I had to say, I had returned to my profession of chemist, I didn't feel that need anymore, that necessity to tell, which had forced me to pick up my pen. However, this new experience—so foreign to the world of my daily job—the experience of writing, of creating from nothing, of looking for and finding the right word, of creating a balanced and expressive sentence, was too intense and joyful for me not to want to try again. I still had a lot to tell, not terrible, fateful, and urgent things but happy and sad adventures, vast and strange countries, the swashbuckling exploits of my countless travel companions, the multicolored and fascinating maelstrom that was postwar Europe, intoxicated by freedom and yet troubled by the fear of a new war.

These are the subjects of *The Truce*, the book of my long return journey. I think it is easy to see that it was written by a different man, not just older by fifteen years but more serene and tranquil, more attentive to the texture of a sentence, more aware—in short, more of a writer in both the good and the not so good senses of the word. Yet I cannot consider myself a writer, even today. I am satisfied with my double condition, and conscious of its advantages. It allows me to write only when I want to, and it doesn't oblige me to write for a living. On the other hand, my daily profession has taught me (and continues to teach me) many things that every writer needs to know. It educated me to concreteness and precision, to the habit of "weighing" each word with the same scrupulousness as someone carrying out a quantitative analysis. Above all, it accustomed me to that state of mind we call objectivity; that is to say, to acknowledgment of the intrinsic dignity not just of people but of things, and to their truth, which needs to be

recognized and not distorted if one does not want to fall into vagueness, emptiness, and falsehood.

Preface to The Truce, *Letture per la Scuola Media (Readings for Middle School) series (Turin: Einaudi, 1965)*

Resistance in the Lagers

It's hard to perceive the true significance and weight of a historical event while it is taking place, or even a few years after its conclusion: just when the traces are freshest, the wounds most painful, the voices of witnesses and survivors most numerous and agitated—this is exactly when it is arduous, almost impossible, to proceed with the necessary objectivity in the patient and thorough work of historical reconstruction. Time is needed for the full picture to take shape, for the distortions and errors to be erased—even in this epoch of ours, in which the pace of history seems to accelerate with each passing year.

Only in the past few years has the grim phenomenon of slaughter and slavery—restored to modernity in the concentration camps—found a historical perspective in the collective conscience of Europe and the world. Only now is it possible to evaluate its importance and to measure its dangers, to understand what would have been the fate of our civilization if Hitler had prevailed. If this not preposterous hypothesis had come true, we would live in a monstrous world, a world divided, between masters and slaves: of masters above all laws and slaves deprived of all rights, subjected to all sorts of abuses, condemned to an existence of grueling work, of ignorance, of isolation, and of hunger.

In fact, the condition of the prisoner in the modern concentration camp re-creates (dare we write "re-created"?) an intensified, aggravated condition of slavery. The master wants to turn his slave into a contemptible individual, one who knows himself to be, who feels, contemptible: an individual who not only has lost his freedom but has forgotten it, no longer feels the need for it, and maybe not even the desire. Usually the master

succeeds; and then superimposed on material oppression is a bleaker victory, the victory of complete oppression, in the flesh and in the spirit, the destruction of the man as such.

The fact that the seed of European resistance against fascism took root in spite of this inhuman situation, within this discordant, disconnected jumble of humanity, exhausted by hardships and periodic massacres, is extremely important and unprecedented. It deserves careful study, so that we may clarify its limits and its significance. Resistance in the concentration camps, like that which developed in the Polish ghettos, should be counted among the greatest victories of the spirit over the flesh, among the most heroic endeavors in human history—which are also the most desperate, the ones where people fight without any support, where no hope of victory sustains the fighters or renews their strength.

The organization of resistance in the concentration camps was difficult not just because of the constant hunger, the hard work, and the consequent physical exhaustion—there were other, equally grave obstacles.

It was impossible, or very dangerous, to communicate with the outside world, not only to maintain relations with the centers of resistance that had been set up everywhere in the countries occupied by the Germans but even just to receive news from the outside or send it. Of course, there were no weapons, nor was there the money or the means to procure them. Every camp had a branch of the dreaded Gestapo, disguised under the name “Political Department” or “Work Office”; it relied on the services of numerous spies, chosen from among the prisoners, so that any word, any mention of an organization of defense could lead to accusations and extremely harsh collective reprisals. This atmosphere of suspicion, of mutual distrust, poisoned any attempt at human relations and contributed to the erosion of any will to opposition. Finally, the population of the camps was very diverse. Unsurprisingly, the SS commanders in charge of the concentration camps strove to maintain a permanent Babel of languages and nationalities. But that wasn’t all. We must remember that the prisoners in the camps belonged to three main categories (not to mention many minor ones): political prisoners, Jews, and common criminals.

The last, the so-called green triangles, because of the color of their identification badges, were for the most part hardened German criminals, repeat offenders, who had been removed from prison and offered positions of privilege in the concentration camps. In spite of their unruliness and lack

of discipline, in the hands of the SS they turned out to be the most useful tools of oppression, corruption, and espionage, and the most immediate enemies of the political prisoners and the Jews. Significantly, after the defeat of Stalingrad, a large number of the greens were released en masse from the camps and enrolled in the SS fighting units. Since the internal management of the camps was assigned to the prisoners themselves, many camps witnessed a secret power struggle between the greens and the reds (that is, the political prisoners). The reds were strengthened by their conspiratorial experience and their strong anti-Nazi determination, the greens by their better physical condition and by the support of the SS. Self-defense or opposition cells could be established by the other two categories only in those camps where the greens had lost out.

However, despite these many adverse circumstances, in almost all the major camps there was resistance. It was easier in the camps where the political prisoners were more numerous and better organized—such as Mauthausen and Buchenwald, where powerful clandestine defense committees were set up, in which the principal parties and nationalities of the camp were represented.

It would not have been realistic to propose impossible or premature undertakings, like armed resistance or liberation of the camp from the inside. The actions of the committees were directed toward more immediate and concrete aims. Men of solid political loyalty were placed in key posts in the administration of the camp, the infirmary, the work office, the secretary's office, the supply office. Thus it was possible to limit, or at least control, the decimation of those who were most useful politically; to save Allied parachutists, and eliminate many spies and collaborators; to carry out cautious actions of sabotage in the workshops and at the worksites, especially in the weapons factories; to listen to and spread news of the war at the front by means of secretly built radios; to maintain relations with other camps. Finally, and this was perhaps the activity most immediately useful and beneficial to fellow prisoners, it was possible to eliminate or mitigate the grave injustices and thefts in the distribution of food rations, a fundamental requirement for survival.

Nor should the morale factor be underestimated. The perception, the rumor that inside the barbed wire a friendly presence survived—a power mysterious and undefined but different from and opposed to National

Socialism—was extraordinarily valuable to all the prisoners, and helped sustain their will to live.

In many cases, a real, active resistance was prepared for, which would be activated by the approach of the front and would block possible attempts by the Germans to annihilate the camp and its prisoners, or to deport them en masse toward the center of the country. In Buchenwald and Mauthausen rudimentary weapons were built with explosives pilfered from the worksites. However, in the general collapse that everywhere accompanied the German retreat, these emergency squads rarely had the opportunity to act.

Things went differently in the camps that are properly given the name (coined by the Germans themselves) *Vernichtungslager*, annihilation camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Majdanek, Sobibór. Prisoners entered these places of horror only to die; the average survival time was no more than three months. The population of these camps, continuously renewed, consisted primarily of Jews, who arrived already exhausted by months or years of ghetto life, hunger, desperate escapes, a precarious existence at the margins of human society. For the most part, these were entire families, including women, children, the old, and the sick. After a cursory selection, four-fifths of every convoy ended up in the mass-extermination machines a few hours after arriving. Only the younger men and women deemed fit for work entered the camp. However, after a few weeks exhaustion, hunger, illnesses, and beatings got the better even of those who were strongest and most determined to resist.

It’s understandable that in this wretched mass of humanity the will to resist took the form only of individual and occasional efforts—principally, on the initiative of young members of Zionist organizations. But in the death camps, too, the internal structure determined by the Germans, based on the corruption and collaboration of “chosen” functionary-prisoners, became, paradoxically, the vehicle and matrix of resistance. Mixed in with the oppressed, and the many docile and despicable instruments of oppression, men of superhuman courage acted in the shadows. At times, they succeeded in impeding and obstructing the German death machine, but most of all they succeeded in saving human dignity in the Lagers. They collected and hid documentary evidence, sometimes even photographs, taken with extreme audacity under the eyes of the SS, diaries, lists of names, copies of archival documents, that were intended to transmit (as in

fact they did) to posterity an authentic image of the concentration-camp world.

The most important episode of active rebellion against Nazi authority in the extermination camps was the uprising of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944. It was a tragic and sinister episode, whose exact details will never be known, because all the participants were exterminated. Beneath the reticent name of Sonderkommando (Special Squad) a monstrous institution was concealed: a group of prisoners assigned to the gas chambers and cremation ovens. It consisted of between 900 and 1000 strong young men of various nationalities who had been given the choice of serving in the death factories or dying. Their horrendous work was compensated with exceptional treatment (abundant food, tobacco, alcohol, good clothes and shoes). Yet everyone knew, and they knew it themselves, that within two or three months they, in turn, would be massacred and replaced by new men.

When the deportation of 100,000 Hungarian Jews came to an end, news spread in the camp that the systematic massacres would be suspended. The men of the Sonderkommando knew that this meant their immediate death; the Germans certainly wouldn’t leave such witnesses alive. When the Germans, on some pretext, removed and killed the first 160 men of the Kommando, the revolt, which was supposed to be coordinated with Polish partisans in the surrounding forests, flared up prematurely, under the pressure of necessity. The remaining men attacked the SS garrison with desperate audacity, armed with a single machine gun, a few pistols, and rudimentary hand grenades made with glass bottles. One of the four cremation ovens was set on fire, and it exploded. A section of the barbed-wire fence through which ran a high-tension electric current was knocked down. Only a few dozen insurgents were able to leave the camp alive. They found refuge on a Polish farm, were reported, captured again, and killed.

In this desperate fight at the doors of the cremation ovens only a dozen SS men were killed. Nevertheless, the insurrection, which immediately became known in all the camps of the Auschwitz district, was an event of enormous importance. It revealed a gap, a crack in the steely edifice of the concentration camp; it proved that the Germans were not invincible. For the Germans themselves it must have sounded an alarm, because a few days later the camp command at Auschwitz started to dismantle and blow up the workshops of death that alone had swallowed more human lives than all the

other concentration camps combined. Maybe they acted in the absurd hope of destroying all evidence of the greatest crime ever committed in the entire, and yet so bloody, history of mankind.

In Il telefono della Resistenza, *a booklet published by the telephone company*
STIPEL on the twentieth anniversary of the Resistance (Turin: 1965)

The Engineer-Philologist and His Forbidden Dreams

It's natural, and in general fitting, that the writer of science fiction grows in a different, more specialized soil than the plain writer; if that's not the case, he has to gather material, as every serious writer does or should do. Isaac Asimov's brief preface to the collection *Dodici volte domani*,[1] which appeared recently in Italy, seems to me exemplary in this way; exemplary in the opposite sense is the conspicuous failure of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Physicists*, due precisely to a lack of research. But Roberto Vacca has no need to gather information: given the man, it seems obvious that he moves in a literary terrain that is his alone, and the only one that can give him all the freedom of expression he needs.

A militant engineer, a university teacher, polyglot by nature and by family tradition, intensely dynamic, thoroughly Roman but at home in America and elsewhere, a good mathematician and physicist and a humanist, Vacca is integrated in the best sense of the word: the world of today flows around him, variegated and friendly, full of suggestions and temptations, without inspiring distrust or anguish. His science fiction dreams are never nightmares, not even when he would like them to be: the not forgotten *Robot and the Minotaur* (1963), the *Perengane Chronicles*, and the recent *Esempi di avvenire* (*Examples of the Future*) are his portrait and his autobiography.

They depict (something unusual in our literature) a man at the peak of his strength, curious, extremely intelligent, often ingenuous, not neurotic, not abstract, engaged in a respectful dispute with the marvels and monsters of technological civilization. The "impious cynicism" on which he prides

himself should shock no one: in spite of himself, even where he is most fiercely prepared to prove that man is a very complex sequential machine, he displays a joyous force, a youthful love of the world, that up to now no machine has produced.

The profound knowledge of cybernetics and neurology that Vacca demonstrates is both the value and the limitation of these stories. Not all are accessible to all: the most serious and conceptual, especially the essays, leave the average reader perplexed and therefore cold; Vacca demands that he find his way among alphanumeric codes and memories of the "pushdown" type. It seems to me that this excess of technicalities and, elsewhere, of calques from slang and American colloquialisms is not always useful, and reveals a certain amount of ingenuous exhibitionism. The same could be said of the complacency with which far too often details of time and place are accumulated, in open contradiction to the "prohibition against useless discourse," and yet this nevertheless leads to one of the most amusing sketches.

Elsewhere, instead, Vacca conforms to that "prohibition" with extremist zeal: it's really a pity that so many splendid ideas appear here as flashes, just as they were conceived—I mean, as rapid outlines, "informal stories," as if there were others that the author could develop in a more worthwhile manner. For example: the State of Israel that claims from the entire Christian world the royalties (including arrears) on all editions, translations, and adaptations of the Bible ("private literary property"); the proposal to use bank deposits during the hours when the banks are closed ("credit extension"); the metaphysical "controversy" between red and white blood cells ("We feel we have free will, and you?"), which is criminally cut off after half a page, as if such inventions could be found at every crossroads.

In conclusion, Vacca sometimes appears to have trouble finding an equilibrium between verbosity and shorthand, but when he finds it, his privileged condition as a *doctus utriusque juris*, as a scientist doubling as a philologist—that is, a modern minotaur—allows him to write stories of a high quality, at once fantastic and plausible. This is, after all, the highest praise that can be given to practitioners of this literary genre. Stories like "The Neglected Senses," "Two in a Single Flesh," and the exemplary "Incommunicability 1," which descends in spirals, like the vulture, toward its unexpected and chilling conclusion, kindle the imagination and make us think: they are an entertainment accessible to all, and yet at a high level.

Il Giorno, *January 5, 1966*

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1. *Dodici volte domani* (*Twelve Times Tomorrow*) is a collection of Asimov stories, mainly from *Nightfall and Other Stories*, published by Mondadori and not available in English.

Foreword to *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People* by Yitzhak Katzenelson

No reader can help stopping, in perturbation and reverence, at the "singing" of Yitzhak Katzenelson. It can't be compared with any other work in the history of any literature: it's the voice of a man about to die, one among hundreds of thousands who are about to die, and horrifically aware of his individual fate and the fate of his people. Not a distant fate but one that is imminent. Katzenelson writes and sings from the midst of the slaughter, German death is circling around him, it has already completed more than half of the massacre, but the measure is not yet full, there is no reprieve, there is no breathing space; it's about to strike again and again, down to the last old man and woman and the last child, and the end of everything.

That in these conditions and in this state of mind the man who is about to die sings, and reveals that he is a poet, leaves us trembling with hatred and with exaltation at the same time. These are necessary poems, if ever there were any. I mean, if doubt so often seizes us, as we read a page, whether the things written should or should not be written, or could or could not be written in another way, here every doubt is silent.

Beyond the horror that grips us every time in the face of this testimony, even though it is known, we cannot repress a gesture of admiring astonishment at the purity and force of the voice.

It's the voice of a cultural universe that was unknown in Italy and today has disappeared: the voice of a people that weeps for itself. The verses in

which Katzenelson's anguish becomes sharper and more concrete are precisely those in which the cultural world of Eastern Judaism lives again: "Rising over the Lithuanian and Polish towns the sun will never find / A radiant old Jew at the window reciting psalms . . . / the market is dead . . . / Never more will a Jew grace the market, and give it life." This culture, whose age-old tool is the Yiddish language, is frankly popular: its verbal vein has always been more vivid than the written and has always nourished it. Into it flowed an extraordinary musical sensibility, whose roots were in the village festivals described by Babel and painted by Chagall, and which led to the finest modern schools of practitioners; into it flowed a marvelously dynamic theater tradition, which Hitler's massacres, blow by blow, cut off. It's a varied, lively literature, richly spiritual, with a sad humor, and a humble and strong will to life, immortalized in the small masterpiece Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*.

Katzenelson, too, like the majority of Yiddish writers, musicians, and dramatists, is a poet of the people; but he emerges and draws nourishment from a people unique in Europe and the world, a people in whom culture (whose particular culture) is not a privilege of a class or a caste but belongs to all, and in whom the book has replaced Nature as the preeminent source of every mystical, philosophical, or poetic intuition. Therefore we shouldn't be surprised to find in Katzenelson's desperate and sometimes crude lament the echo of eternal words, the legitimate continuation and inheritance of Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Job, nor should we be surprised that he himself is proud and conscious of it: "In every Jew cries a Jeremiah, a desperate Job."

Precisely because of this accepted and proclaimed Biblical inheritance, it seems to me that the best poem in this collection is the one entitled "To the Heavens": it's Job who speaks here, a modern Job, truer and more complete than the ancient, wounded to death in the things most dear to him, his family and his faith—now bereaved (why? why?) of both. But voices were raised in response to the eternal questions of the ancient Job, the cautious and respectful voices of the "miserable comforters," the sovereign voice of the Lord; no one responds to the questions of the modern Job, no voice comes out of the whirlwind. There is no longer a God in the womb of the "null and void" heavens, which witness impassively the completion of the senseless massacre, the end of the people who created God.

Foreword to Yitzhak Katzenelson, Il canto del popolo ebraico massacrato (The Song of the Murdered Jewish People)*, edited by F. Beltrami Segré (Turin: Beit Lohamei Haghetaot, 1966)*

Note on the Dramatized Version of *If This Is a Man*

Whoever wrote that “books have a destiny of their own” knew exactly what he was saying—one has only to call on memory for a moment, and strange and unpredictable itineraries immediately crowd in. Books illustrious at birth, beloved for decades, that now elicit only the interest of a few specialized readers. Books so heavy with prophecy or satire or threats that they are rejected by their first readers and reduced, perhaps for centuries, to reading for children. Others that bloomed before their time, and were incomprehensible to contemporary critics, yet are popular and famous today. Still others that, loaded with an indeterminate explosive charge, are obscure to this day, but whose sinister ticking, like that of a time bomb, can be perceived from the outside.

I don’t know (no writer ever can know) how much *If This Is a Man* is worth and which of the above fates awaits it in the near and distant future; but I think I can say that, up to now, it has had a curious and instructive life.

The book deals with the concentration camp at Auschwitz, and had its origin in Auschwitz. The Lager was not a place where it was easy to reflect on one’s experiences, much less capture them in written form. In fact, any kind of personal possession was prohibited, or, rather, unthinkable: all the more reason that the possession of a pencil and a piece of paper was impossible, and would have represented an extreme danger anyway, an absurd as well as useless act of daring. And yet for many of us the hope of surviving merged with another, more precise hope. We hoped not to live *and* tell but to live *to* tell. It is the dream in all eras of those who return, of

the strong man and the coward, of the poet and the simple soul, of Ulysses and Ruzante.[1]

But it was, at the same time, a more profound and deliberate need—the harsher the experience, the stronger the urge to convey it. It was the same need that compelled the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto to dedicate part of their last desperate energies to writing down the *drama* they were living and entrusting it to a secure hiding place so that it could become history; and in fact it became history, and would not have without their superhuman diligence. It was clear to all of us that the things we had seen needed to be told, that they could not be forgotten. If it was impossible to write in the Lager, it became possible, on the other hand, for those few lucky enough to survive to communicate with the world. All of us survivors, as soon as we got home, were transformed into indefatigable, imperious, maniacal narrators. We didn't all say the same things, because each of us had lived through imprisonment in our own way, but no one knew how to talk about anything else or could tolerate that anything else should be talked about. I, too, started to talk even before I had satisfied my hunger, and I am still not finished. I became like the ancient mariner in Coleridge's ballad, who grabs the wedding guests on the street to inflict on them his sinister story of evil and ghosts. In a few days, I had repeated my stories dozens of times, to friends, enemies, and strangers. I then noticed that the tale was crystallizing into a fixed, constant shape; I needed only pen, paper, and time to write it. Time, so scarce today, grew around me like magic. I wrote at night, on the train, in the factory canteen, in the factory itself, amid the roar of the machines. I wrote hurriedly, without hesitation and without order. I wasn't conscious of writing a book, I wasn't conscious of preparing a statement, I was a thousand miles from any kind of literary scruple, and it seemed to me that these things wrote themselves. In a few months my work was finished; driven by the urgency of my memories, I had written the seventeen chapters almost in reverse order—that is, starting from the last one. Then I wrote the preface and finally I added an epigraph, a poem that had already been dancing in my head in Auschwitz and that I wrote a few days after my return.

I submitted my manuscript to two publishers, who rejected it with routine excuses. It's possible that they were right, at least from a commercial point of view; the time wasn't ripe, the public wasn't ready to comprehend and measure the nature and importance of the Lager

phenomenon. Indeed, when a third publisher (De Silva, in Turin, which at the time was headed by Franco Antonicelli) accepted the book and published it, it came to a standstill after selling barely two thousand copies, along with the publishing house and my slim hopes of a literary future.

The book was well received by the critics, but after a year *If This Is a Man* was forgotten. It was still talked about in Turin, among a narrow group of readers who were particularly sensitive or had been personally affected. Ten years went by. The public read Vercors's *Weapons of the Night, Scourge of the Swastika* by Lord Russell of Liverpool, the two books by David Rousset, Piero Caleffi's *It Is Easy to Say Hunger*, Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*, Ernst Wiechert's *Forest of the Dead*. People started to talk again about concentration camps, with greater detachment and from a broader perspective, as a part of history and no longer as an emotional chronicle. In 1957 Einaudi agreed to reprint the book. Since then, it has taken on, so to speak, a life of its own. In 1959 the British and North American editions appeared, in 1961 the French and German editions, in 1962 it was translated into Finnish, in 1963 into Dutch. In the meantime, in 1962, I had started to write *The Truce*, a sequel to *If This Is a Man*, and a diary of my difficult journey home. *The Truce* had barely begun when I received a letter. Radio Canada announced that it had adapted *If This Is a Man* for the radio and was asking my advice on certain details. Soon afterward, I received the script and a tape recording. I had probably never received such a welcome gift—it was not only an excellent work but, for me, a true revelation. The authors of the script, far away in time and space, and strangers to my experience, had drawn from the book everything I had put into it, and even something more: a spoken "meditation," on a high technical and dramatic level and, at the same time, meticulously faithful to reality. They had understood very well the importance of the lack of communication in the camp, exacerbated by the lack of a common language, and had courageously based their work on this theme, the theme of the tower of Babel, of the confusion of languages:

"For the listener whose only language is English, we believe that this use of foreign languages will not prove a hindrance. The sense of what is said in them is nearly always evident either from the context or else from Levi's comments on it and when it is not thus evident, when for a moment we grope in the bewilderment of alien and incomprehensible speech—then in a sense we can enter briefly into part of Levi's experience, for this

isolation was a real part of what he was made to suffer. And what he suffered, what all the concentration camp prisoners suffered, was a deliberate attempt to exile them from the community of mankind, to destroy their identity, to reduce them from men to things."

The initiative, its outcome, and the medium of radio itself, new to me, were enthralling. A few months later I proposed to RAI an Italian adaptation of the book, which I had written, not quite retranslating the Canadian version but developing the episodes that I thought were most appropriate, and preserving, within reasonable limits, that technique of multilingual dialogue that seemed to me fundamental.

It was my friend Pieralberto Marché's idea to adapt the book for the theater. At first I was opposed to his suggestion. It seemed to me that *If This Is a Man* had already changed skins too many times, that I had already cooked it in too many sauces; I was afraid of boring the public. I was also afraid of the theater itself: I didn't know it well enough, either as a spectator or as a reader, to go about such an undertaking. The audience that reads or listens to the radio is distant, hidden, anonymous; the audience in a theater is there, looks at you, waits for you to make a wrong move. It judges you.

On the other hand, it was, once again, a question of telling a story: this time, in fact, of telling a story in the most immediate manner, of making diverse and vaster audiences relive our experience, ours and that of our dead comrades—inflicting it on them, to see and measure and test their reactions. Thus, in spite of my doubts, in spite of the obvious dangers and a sense of violated reserve, I agreed to bring the Lager to the stage, and began working with Marché.

We tried to say everything, and at the same time not to overdo it. The material was too hot already; it was a question of distilling it, channeling it, drawing from it a universal and civilizing message, guiding the spectator to a conclusion, to a verdict, without yelling in his ears, without presenting it ready-made. To this end, for example, the SS never appear onstage, and we looked for the marginal episodes and aspects of camp life, the moments of relief, of reflection, of dreaming, of rest. We also tried to preserve the original human impulse of each character, even when it was worn down by the continuous conflict with the savage and inhuman environment of the camp.

From the dramatized version of If This Is a Man *(Turin: Einaudi, 1966)*

1. The title character of Il parlamento de Ruzante (The Dialogue of Ruzante), by the Italian actor and playwright Angelo Beolco (1496–1542). In this short dialogue, Ruzante tells of his return from the Venetian war front, only to find that he has lost his wife, his land, and his honor.

The Deportation of the Jews

Since I was a Jew and was therefore banished from the army and the university, around September 8[1] I joined a group of partisans. We met large numbers of Italian soldiers coming from France, from all over Italy, traveling in the opposite direction—some were going home, others were looking for weapons, still others were looking for a leader.

All the former soldiers we talked to had only one thing to say: we must no longer fight along with the Germans. They had seen what the Germans had done—they had been to the front in Greece, in Yugoslavia, in Russia—and were saying: "*This is not war, these are not allies, they are not soldiers—they are not men*." The unity that bound us originated in this very human testimony, which is that of humanity pure and simple, and, in spite of the Italians' many flaws, is still alive in Italy. This, it seems to me, is the first element that we must not neglect in describing the contribution of the interned soldiers.

The second is this: although I was captured as a partisan, foolishly, unconsciously, if you will, I declared myself to be Jewish and ended up in the camp at Auschwitz.

Next to the labor camp where I worked was the camp where English, American, Russian, Polish, French, and even Italian prisoners were held. Some were soldiers, others were rounded-up civilians, still others were the so-called volunteer workers. The Italian prisoners weren't much better off than we were. It's true that in their camps there were no gas chambers and crematoriums, and this is a very important detail, but at first their living situation and their clothes were not very different from ours.

Nevertheless, we all received help from those Italian soldiers, who, because they were specialized workers or had a trade, found themselves in better conditions. And help came not just from them but also from the Italian civilian prisoners, and everyone was grateful for it, not just we Italians. The kindness of our compatriots was touching. The Germans knew that the Italians were "*brava gente*,"[2] as they said scornfully, and this was true, it was generally accepted. I think this is consistent with what we discussed at length tonight, namely the high percentage of Italian soldiers—nearly all of them—who refused to join the Republic of Salò, because it implied endorsement of Nazism and of the inhumanity of the Nazi systems.

That said, and although I was arrested as a partisan, I bring here, tonight, the testimony of all those who had no choice; while for the youth, the youth of my generation, there could have been a choice (and in my case it came later): the choice of saying no, of not joining.

I bring the testimony of those who could not choose, that is to say of all Italian and foreign Jews. These people had no choice: women, old people, people who had been excluded for years from any contact with the outside world. They had lived clandestinely since 1939, and for them a choice was clearly impossible. I should say *almost* impossible, because in spite of everything, in spite of the enormous difficulties, in spite of the absence of an organization, there was resistance. Not only within the Jewish, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian minorities but also in the concentration camps themselves, groups merged and collaborated with other clandestine movements that arose and operated in all the camps.

Of course, the question is different for those who were in the camps for political prisoners and those who were, instead, in concentration camps like Auschwitz, where the majority were Jews. The reasons are obvious: in a camp of political prisoners or where the majority were political prisoners, the detainees had behind them a school, a hard school, where they had received an education in politics. They were for the most part vigorous men, at the peak of their strength, for whom deportation had occurred, in many cases, in the middle of their normal professional career. Then, there was a natural solidarity, at least among national groups and also because of political affinities. In the camp at Auschwitz, things were different. It was a Babel, at least for us Italians; it was like falling into darkness, in other words being catapulted into a world that was not understandable and that we could not comprehend. We didn't comprehend it for many reasons: to

begin with, the language, and then because the camp was governed by iron rules that no one taught us and that we had to learn through intuition, speaking little, making mistakes, dying. And, further, because the mosaic of nationalities, places of origin, and ideologies was so complicated and confused that it took months to orient yourself, and in months you were dead.

At Auschwitz, 95 percent of the prisoners were Jews and around 5 percent were political prisoners and so-called greens, meaning common criminals. Legally, there was no difference, but in fact a difference existed, and it was enormous. Almost all the political prisoners and the greens were Germans, and the Germans themselves never forgot this. Even the German Communists, the majority of whom had been exterminated by Hitler, were considered totally different from the Jews, because of their language and their race. The German political prisoners, who often behaved very well toward us, had been prisoners for five or ten or twelve years, and everyone knows what it means to "have a career." They had had a career; those who hadn't weren't there anymore. So, outside all the rules, they did receive different treatment or organized it for themselves, even though they had no right to it.

The average life span in the camp where I worked, which was a good one because it was a labor camp, was three months. In three months the population was halved, but it was replenished with new arrivals. I said it was a good camp for a number of reasons, because it was a labor camp, because there were many opportunities to make contact with Italian soldiers, even with English soldiers; the barrier that separated us from the world was not completely impermeable and some breaches, some gaps, existed. But everyone knows what the camp at Birkenau was. It was a camp that you couldn't leave, where there was no talk of an average life span; its sole purpose was destruction. . . .

I'm not saying this to establish a priority or an aristocracy among those who were interned, far from it. I only wanted to note that, in spite of the circumstances, even in the camp at Auschwitz a resistance movement arose; it was not just clandestine but came to light with an episode that, to this day, is outside history, because it had no survivors: the sabotage of the cremation ovens.

It is to be hoped that in some way we will be able—on the basis of a surviving witness, on-site investigations—to clarify fully the way it

happened. In those *zero* conditions, of nothingness, a nucleus of people was nevertheless able not only to blow up the cremation ovens but also to find weapons and fight the Germans, to kill many of them and attempt to escape.

It is also worth remembering that some thirty men were able to cross the boundary of the camp. They were returned to the Germans by the Poles, who had an insane fear of the Germans. And so these few dozen heroes who had succeeded in making a hole in Auschwitz for the first time—that was to be not only for themselves but also for the whole population of the camp—saw their attempt fail miserably.

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1. On September 8, 1943, Italy surrendered to the Allies, and Hitler immediately took possession of northern and central Italy, installing a puppet government, with Mussolini as its head, known as the Repubblica Sociale Italiana, or Republic of Salò.
2. "Good folk": an expression at times used by Italians when referring to themselves.

“More than Any Other Country Israel Must Live”

I would like to follow up on what Carlo Casalegno[1] said the day before yesterday. He talked about the young people in Israel, in whose eyes, he observed, one reads neither fear nor anxiety. I have to admit: a profound anxiety has arisen in me recently. It’s an anxiety distinct from fear, which I also feel, and which I think every man with a conscience should feel when faced with the prospect of war. It’s an anxiety that has its roots in distant but ever-present memories of places that should no longer exist, of experiences and acts of violence that we hoped had been erased from the history of civilization; but lately words have been superimposed on these memories, words that we thought were extinct. The language is absurd and savage, not new: “With the help of God, we will win and we will exterminate our enemy.”

I can’t imagine a worse blasphemy. On the panels behind me is written, “You shall not take the Lord’s name in vain,” but this is worse than taking his name in vain—it is calling for his help in a massacre. Are there still people in this world who believe in holy war, and equate it with total war?

Heaven knows how much we love peace. I mean all of us, but particularly those of us who have experienced the most repugnant aspect of total war, the extermination camp. Heaven knows how deeply we believe that peace implies tolerance, is tolerance; how we have preached it, and supported it, and practiced it as much as possible, so that the responsibilities of the ungodly would not be attributed to the righteous. As a result, because it is a matter of pride—a vital necessity, in fact—for us to feel that we are in the right, that we are honest, we have tried with all our might to resist what our feelings naturally suggested to us; we have tried to judge from on high,

from above the fray. This has not been easy—the relationship of every Jew, even if he is not a Zionist, to the State of Israel is obvious and profound. Dare I say that such is also the relationship of every Christian to Israel and, indeed, of every civilized man? I would like to be able to answer yes; I would like to know that everyone sees Israel as we see it—as a small country, originating in persecution and massacre, to be a guarantee and a seal that there will be no more persecutions, no more massacres. As a socialist country, heir to both ancient and modern traditions, seeking its own difficult equilibrium, but open to political dialogue, receptive to all opinions, maybe even those we find repugnant. As a country created out of nothing, thanks to labor, as "the land"—the emblematic land, the land one "ascends to," to build on and to be built by. Finally, as a country of return, unique and irreplaceable, like the country of the Bible, in which every hill, every road takes us back in spirit to the generations that preceded us.

We have tried, we have made an effort, not to give in to feelings; to bury in ourselves, to silence these so to speak personal bonds that tie us to Israel. What is left? What remains to confirm our feelings of solidarity? It is my conviction that something remains, and not a little, but a lot; certain considerations remain, which I think are universal and fundamental, and because of which Israel must live.

Israel must live, in the first place, because every country must live and every man must live. Just as there can be no offense for which a man should be killed, there is no political circumstance in which a country should be destroyed, a population exterminated. Do not speak to us of retaliation. The existence of Israel may be inconvenient for some, may be harmful to some reputations, but it threatens no one; if there is a people in this world that has millions of graves on its conscience, that is not us. Israel threatens no one, above all for the same reason that Finland doesn't threaten the Soviet Union and Albania never threatened Italy—namely, because it has a far smaller population and is not governed by madmen.

Israel must therefore survive, because, like every other country, it has the right to live—but it is not a country like other countries. It is a country with its back against the wall, from a geographical point of view and from a spiritual point of view. It is not asked to renounce one of its provinces, or to abandon a political structure, or to break an alliance: it is asked simply to cease to exist. This is perhaps (I say perhaps) more a war cry than a considered objective, but everyone should understand that, for Israel and for

us, the words have a sinister sound—in the not too distant past that threat was formulated at length and carried out, slowly, methodically, relentlessly, and without mercy. Everyone should remember that the generation that created Israel consists almost entirely of people who escaped the massacre of Judaism in Europe. This is not a figure of speech or an exaggeration, but is literally true, man for man. The pioneers of Zionism are the survivors of the tsarist pogroms, of the ghettos, of the mass graves, of Hitler's Lagers. For this reason, I say, Israel is not like other countries; it is a country to which the whole world is indebted, it is a country of witnesses and martyrs, and it is also the country of the insurgents of Warsaw, of Sobibór, and of Treblinka. If it is criminal to speak of "*torre via*" Florence,[2] or any other country, the goal of inflicting dispersion and massacre on the survivors of dispersion and massacre is doubly criminal—and we wouldn't mind if some new Ghibelline, without for this ceasing to be a Ghibelline, expressed his thoughts openly on the matter.

In fact, perhaps more painful to me than the intransigence of the Arabs, whom we don't fully understand, but who are certainly one of the parties involved, is the intransigence and the hasty acquiescence of some of their improvised allies. We fear we recognize in their mechanical repetition of rigid formulas and fabricated prejudices an ancient evil that in recent times has done a lot of damage; namely, the habit of obeying without question, of always saying yes, of delegating to others the human right to form one's own opinion. This is servility and moral anesthesia, and is what ultimately brought some people to the Nuremberg trials and beyond.

Yes, Israel is an ally of the United States or—to use one of those rigid formulas—it is a pawn of imperialism. This is embarrassing, and not everyone likes it, not in Israel and not here in Italy. In fact, the alliance is liked less and less as the prestige of the United States diminishes, following its ugly adventure in the Far East, and, unfortunately, tends to make us forget that Israel came into being precisely to serve an anti-imperialist function, exploiting and hastening the collapse of British colonialism. Is this alliance determining and constraining? I don't think so. The Israeli constitution seems to me solidly constructed on a socialist and democratic base, and the interest of the government is directed toward internal matters much more than toward power politics, which, after all, is natural for a small country. Finally, one might claim that every alliance is constraining—and yet haven't other great countries also been allies of the United States of

America without being contaminated? Yes, in war, people will say—but is Israel not in a state of war?

There is another, I would say specific, reason that Israel has a right to life; and not just to life but also to the friendship and respect of all humanity. We, the human species, we men, perhaps alone in the universe, through a history of hundreds of millennia filled with error and pain, are bringing to completion a great undertaking, which is the peaceful conquest of nature and victory over hunger, suffering, want, and fear. We cannot prevail if we are divided—every war, even local, every discord, distances us from the goal and makes us lose ground that we have laboriously gained. Humanity will be one, or it will not be.

Well, I dare to suggest that we interpret the history of Israel in this spirit—namely, as sum and symbol of the history of humanity, just as, in the development of every seed, we can discern the sum and the symbol of the species from which the seed came.

In the endless history of humanity, and in the brief history of Israel, the virtues and the vocation of the human race can be read; we can perceive the overcoming of dispersion, of discord, of differences in language, origin, and race, and their fusion—at first exhausting, then easy—into a civil coexistence. In Israel one discovers the construction of a state, and the restoration of a law, which is a product of courage, intelligence, imagination, and mercy: in a word, it is a human product. One discovers the conquest of the desert, the transformation of nature from enemy to friend, which is the highest vocation of science and its essential role in the destiny of man. Indeed, perhaps in no country in the world is the relation between man and trees more intimate and fruitful than in Israel. And do not think that money suffices for this redemption of the earth. With money alone one can do any number of things—one can corrupt, one can build cannons, one can waste rivers of it, as is the case elsewhere, but one cannot build anything good if goodwill is missing.

We would not want, we do not want, this corner of land so painfully created from nothing to be destroyed. It will not be; but, if it were, a far greater portion of humanity would perish with it than the bare numbers might make us think. Beyond the factions and the cynical political game, beyond the money and the oil, the land of Israel is an idea. Ideas are precious and few; they must not and cannot be suppressed.

Speech at an event sponsored by the Jewish community in the Turin Synagogue, May 31, 1967; published in Resistenza: Giustizia e Libertà *21, no. 7 (July 1967)*

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1. Casalegno (1916–1977) was a journalist at *La Stampa*; he was killed by the Red Brigades.
2. Inferno X:92: The Ghibellines proposed that Florence, a Guelph city, should be razed ("torre via") in order to strengthen their party.

Encounters in the Kibbutzim

A traveler's feelings and memories can be traced back to two frames of reference: his country of origin, and the more or less arbitrary image he already had of the country he is visiting.

I had read and heard a lot about Israel, from the time (more than thirty years ago) when the first Zionist "messengers" came to Italy; I had created an image of it in my mind, and, confronted by the real country, I found the image out of focus and sketchy. I thought of Israel as a corner of Europe, or rather, of the West, set into the oriental world: it is not so, or it is so only in very small part. Israel is not Europe: though heir to all the currents of European thought, Israel visibly lacks that historical sediment that makes Europe one, from Gibraltar to the Urals, and constitutes the framework of all its urban conglomerates. Here "middle age," which dominates Paris, Berlin, Prague, is missing; everything is extremely new (and often transient), or ancient beyond any of our measures, of an age in which history and the human presence fade into geology.

Twenty years since statehood, and sixty or seventy years since the first Zionist word, Israel is still a country of pioneers, meaning of practical people, efficient and Spartan, who pay attention to the tangible and don't care much about manners. You experience here not the art of living but, rather, that of building, of making things grow: the nobility and the soul of Israel have two centers, evident even to the hurried visitor—planting trees and rearing children. Both trees and children are shown to the guest with the sincere and solemn pride of the artisan: "Look, I made this with my own hands." Trees and children are the future, and in Israel, a newborn country,

the sense of the future is alive in everyone's consciousness, much more than any sense of the past.

Israel's past, as we all know, is an illustrious patrimony, unique in the world; prehistory, the Bible, and the Gospels come toward you at every step, in every corner of the country, evocative and profoundly poetic. The Bible inspired the thinking of Zionism's great prophets, but today the accent falls elsewhere: this extremely young country cannot yet afford much luxury, and living in an aura of myths is a luxury. Israel was born and grew up amid terrifying problems, external and internal. From the pogroms and the Lagers to the redemption of the land, it has traveled an incredibly hard road, with its survival at risk. At times Israel made mistakes, maybe it is still making mistakes, but it acquired experience, and exists, and has the right to exist. Thus, today, the accent falls on the problems of today: adornments, beauty, sweetness, comfort, will come later, when the framework has been consolidated, the borders secured, the refugees settled, the hundred races melded.

Alas, there were few occasions to speak tranquilly with people in the streets, with workers, children, soldiers, women, with different representatives of the astonishing mosaic of peoples that fill Israel; however, every encounter was memorable. This is a young country, both in its institutions and in its consciousness, and therefore active, simple, energetic, and intemperate. Faith in oneself and in the State, identification with the State—these civic virtues so debilitated in Italy and Europe, so deeply buried by our age-old political skepticism, by our moral desperation—shine here in the light of the first day. The borders are a step away, in every family there is a soldier, everyone is engaged: the government's decisions are approved or questioned, maybe harshly, but not ridiculed or buried in indifference; there are at least seven daily newspapers, and they are read avidly. What happened to the subtle, happy-sad, tormented, cerebral spirit of Central European Judaism, leavening of Western civilization? One can see no trace of it in the serious, clear, direct gaze of the new generation: one more generation and it will be impossible (as well as useless) to establish whether your interlocutor is originally from the forests of Volhynia or from the ghetto in Rome, from the port of Salonika or the desert plains of Yemen.

The most memorable encounters are in the kibbutzim. The numerical weight of the kibbutz has diminished, primarily because of the rapid

increase in the country's population in the past decade: no more than a hundred thousand people live on kibbutzim today. The goal of modeling the entire country on the collective principle proved to be elusive, which shouldn't be surprising, but the spirit of the first pioneers, egalitarian and Tolstoyan, survives intact. It has passed the most dangerous test, which is that of prosperity: today, in most of the kibbutzim, people live without serious collective problems, and without any individual problems, because the community, supported by the State, provides liberally for all their needs. But there are no signs of regression: the same meticulous care is taken to avoid the establishment of a dominant class, and the rotation of tasks is rigorously respected, even at the cost of lower productivity; the equality of rights does not permit exceptions. If the numerical weight of the kibbutz is reduced, its moral weight remains very high: the workers in the kibbutz are the intellectual, technical, and spiritual aristocracy of Israel; they are admired by all and have no enemies. The atmosphere of the kibbutz is both severe and serene, one of both joy and commitment. It is the microcosm and the utopia, but it is a utopia, perhaps the only one, that has been realized, that for many decades now has been nourishing itself, has borne fruit, and has caused no casualties.

Resistenza: Giustizia e Libertà *22, no. 4 (April 1968)*

Foreword to *Auschwitz* by Léon Poliakov[1]

Almost a quarter of a century after the liberation of the Lagers, it is still impossible to read their history with a dispassionate mind. Every passing year contributes to the definition and expansion of the historical proportions of the phenomenon, and it's now abundantly clear to most of us that the extermination camps of the Third Reich, which annihilated a civilization and created an incalculable sum of pain and death, constitute, along with nuclear arsenals, the dark center of contemporary history.

All, or almost all, the "what" is now known, including even the most recondite details of the organization of the Lagers, since the care taken by the defeated Nazis to destroy the traces was not sufficient. Much less, on the other hand, is known about the "whys": for what reasons and causes, proximate or distant, a gigantic factory of death could come into being on this civilized continent, and function with atrocious efficiency until the German collapse, remains enigmatic. The shock of the Allied troops when, incredulous and overwhelmed, they first penetrated that nether world has not disappeared, and while the explanations offered by historians, sociologists, psychologists may be perceptive and clever, none of them are truly satisfying.

It is not a rebuke to Poliakov's diligence or to his documentation (both indisputable) to observe that his work, introduced here, doesn't solve the enigma: the author himself, in the chapter "Auschwitz and Germany," implicitly admits it, and, besides, no essay, no treatise could solve it, because what happened at Auschwitz can't be comprehended, in fact, maybe it *shouldn't* be comprehended. Let me explain: to "comprehend" an intention or human action means (etymologically as well) to contain it, to

contain the author, put oneself in his place, identify with him. Now—and for the same reason reading these pages distresses us—we will never be able, no normal man will ever for an instant be able, to identify with the revolting human specimens (Himmler, Göring, Goebbels, Eichmann, Höss, and many others) abundantly cited here. It distresses us, and at the same time brings us relief: because it's good, it's desirable, that the words of these men, and unfortunately also their works, not be comprehensible. They shouldn't be understood: they are extra-human words and deeds, or, rather, contra-human, without historical precedents, scarcely comparable to the cruelest events of the biological struggle for existence. War can be traced back to that struggle, but Auschwitz has nothing to do with war, it is not an episode of war, it is not an extreme form of war. War has always been a grim fact; it is terrible, but it is in us, an archetype, its seed is in the crime of Cain, in every conflict between individuals. It is the extension of anger, and who does not know anger, who has not felt it in himself, maybe repressed, or maybe, rather, elaborated and enjoyed?

But in Auschwitz there is no anger—Auschwitz is not in us, it is not an archetype, it is outside of man. The authors of Auschwitz, who are presented to us here, are not racked by anger or delirium: they are diligent, tranquil, vulgar, and flat; their discussions, statements, testimony, even posthumous, are cold and empty. We can't understand them: the effort of understanding, of tracing them to their source, seems vain and sterile. We hope that the man capable of commenting on them does not appear too soon—the man who can explain to us how, in the heart of our Europe and our century, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" was turned upside down.

And yet every civilized man is bound to know that Auschwitz existed, and what was perpetrated there: if to comprehend is impossible, to know is necessary. In that sense, Poliakov's vast historical work is necessary, and especially this collection of documents, which is its summation. Auschwitz is outside of us, but it is around us, in the air. The plague is over but the infection spreads: it would be foolish to deny it. In this book its symptoms are described: the denial of human solidarity, obtuse or cynical indifference to the suffering of others, the abdication of the intellect and the moral sense in the face of authority, and, mainly, at the root of it all, a tide of cowardice, an abysmal cowardice, masked as warrior virtue, love of country, and loyalty to an idea. We cannot read without dispiriting surprise the abject, servile voices quoted here, of the Nobel Prize–winning physicist Johannes

Stark, of the philosopher Heidegger, Sartre's teacher, of Cardinal Faulhaber, the supreme Catholic authority in Germany.

The plague is over, but Bormann and Dr. Mengele live undisturbed in South America; the Austrian and German courts provide increasing numbers of outrageous absolutions and half-absolutions; Globke enjoys a respectable pension after having been for many years Adenauer's secretary; deportation and torture have reappeared in Algeria, in Stalinist Russia, and elsewhere; in Vietnam an entire people is threatened with destruction.

As long as this is happening around us, the reading of these bitter pages is a duty for us all. They provoke bewilderment, despair, and retrospective fury, but they are a vital nourishment for anyone who resolves to keep watch over his own conscience and that of his country.

Foreword to Léon Poliakov, Auschwitz *(Rome: Veutro, 1968)*

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1. In 1964, Léon Poliakov, a French historian who studied the archives of the Third Reich, published a collection of documents and testimony on Auschwitz; four years later, Levi wrote this foreword to the Italian edition.

1972 Preface: To the Young

When this book was written, in 1946, many things were not yet known about the Lagers. It was not known that in Auschwitz alone millions of men, women, and children were exterminated with scientific meticulousness, and that not only their belongings and their clothes were “utilized” but also their bones, their teeth, and even their hair (at the liberation of the camp seven tons of hair were found). Nor was it known that the victims of the entire concentration-camp system added up to 9 or 10 million. Above all, it was not known that Nazi Germany and, with it, all the occupied countries (including Italy) formed a single monstrous web of slave camps. A map of Europe of the time makes one dizzy. In Germany alone, there were hundreds of Lagers in the strict sense (that is, antechambers of death, as they are described in this book), and to that should be added thousands of camps belonging to other categories; the Italian soldiers who were interned alone numbered around 600,000. According to an estimate by William Shirer (in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*), in 1944 there were at least 9 million forced laborers in Germany.

From the pages of this very book the intimate bond between German heavy industry and the administration of the Lagers emerges; certainly it was not a coincidence that, of all places, Auschwitz was chosen as the site of the enormous industrial plants of Buna. This was a return to a pharaonic economy and, at the same time, a wise planning decision: it was manifestly desirable for the grand works and the slave camps to be side by side.

Thus the camps were not a marginal and accessory phenomenon; the German war industry was founded on them. They were an essential institution of fascistic Europe; and the Nazi authorities made no secret of

the fact that the system would be preserved, and in fact extended and perfected, in the case of an Axis victory. They openly projected a New Order based on an “aristocracy”: on one side a dominant class consisting of the Master Race (that is, the Germans themselves) and on the other an immense flock of slaves, from the Atlantic to the Urals, to work and obey. It would have been the full realization of fascism: the consecration of privilege, the definitive establishment of non-equality and non-freedom.

Now, fascism did not win: it was swept away, in Italy and in Germany, by the war that it had wanted itself. The two countries rose renewed from the ruins and began a laborious reconstruction: with horror and disbelief the world learned about the “cadaver factories” at Auschwitz, Dachau, Mauthausen, Buchenwald, and at the same time felt relief at the thought that the Lager was dead, that it was a monster that belonged to the past, a tragic but unique cataclysm, the fault of a single man, Hitler, and Hitler was dead, and his bloody empire had collapsed with him.

A quarter century has passed, and today we look around and note uneasily that perhaps that relief was premature. No, gas chambers and cremation ovens no longer exist anywhere, but there are concentration camps in Greece, in the Soviet Union, in Vietnam, in Brazil. In almost every country there exist jails, reformatories, psychiatric hospitals, in which, as in Auschwitz, man loses his name and his face, dignity and hope. Above all, fascism is not dead: consolidated in some countries, in others waiting cautiously for revenge, it has not ceased promising the world a New Order. It has never repudiated the Nazi Lagers, even if it often dares to cast doubts on their existence. Books like this one, today, can no longer be read with the serenity with which we study the evidence of past history: as Brecht wrote, “The womb that gave birth to this monster is still fertile.”

For this very reason, and because I don’t believe that the respect owed to the young implies silence on the mistakes of our generation, I gladly agreed to edit a scholastic edition of *If This Is a Man*. I will be content to know that even just one of the new readers has understood how dangerous the road is that begins with nationalistic fanaticism and the surrender of reason.

Preface to If This Is a Man*, Letture per la Scuola Media (Readings for Middle School) series (Turin: Einaudi, 1973)*

Technographers and Technocrats

The energy crisis—highlighting some absurd and crude mistakes of technological society—has brutally drawn in us science fiction writers, because all of us, consciously or not, have colored our stories with prophecy. Were we wrong? how? in quality or in quantity? Everyone noticed long ago that our predecessors and precursors—those who, to be clear, wrote radiant forecasts for the Year 2000 and for magnificent and progressive destinies—were wrong. But we, too, were mistaken, in inventing titanic, tragically glorious catastrophes. We aren't yet at the end, but its possibility is visible, and it is a petty, sordid, prosaic end, like bankruptcy. Nothing remains for us technographer-prophets but to make amends. To our teachers, to the technocrats of all countries, is left the urgent task of reining in their mad race toward immediate profit, and to use the colossal wealth of knowledge accumulated in the past decades to present humanity with a less precarious and less painful destiny.

Corriere della Sera*, January 20, 1974*

“A Past We Thought Would Never Return”

If, twenty-nine years ago, when the Lagers were liberated, someone had predicted that the free world, which was about to reabsorb us, would be less than perfect, we wouldn’t have believed it. It would have seemed absurd, a hypothesis so foolish that it could not be taken seriously.

It was a naïve dream, but we all had it: our experience would have appeared utterly senseless, and therefore all the more cruel, the death of our comrades all the more unjust, if we had imagined that the fascism that we fought against—and that had made us into slaves, branded us like beasts—was defeated but not dead, and would be transplanted from country to country. Our condition as prisoners without terms, condemned without trial to an existence of hunger, beatings, cold, and exhaustion, and, in the end, to death by gas, like mice, was in itself so unjust that, we thought, it would be amply sufficient to discredit Nazi-fascism in the eyes of all, to prove its iniquity as theorems prove the truth of geometry: in fact, to make it disappear for generations, perhaps forever.

Only those who did not want to see would not have seen: the proof was so abundant and eloquent that every thinking man would have had to realize that what was called the concentrationary universe—in Nazi Germany and in the occupied and Allied countries—was not at all a marginal and accessory phenomenon but the essence itself of fascism, its crowning achievement, its ultimate and definitive fulfillment. At the cost of repeating things described many times, and attested to today by an impressive mass of documents, I would like to recall the nature and the reach of the Lager phenomenon.

The first concentration camps, around fifty of them, were established as early as 1933, right after Nazism came to power. They were abandoned barracks or factories where the political enemies of Nazism were hastily locked up. The prisoners were subjected to a regime of inhuman torture, at the discretion of the individual commanders; the original purpose was just to spread terror and to cut off every party or movement that attempted to oppose the new regime. But soon order prevailed: of the first "primitive" Lagers only Dachau and Oranienburg survived, and in 1934 they were already institutions intended to last, housing several thousand prisoners. Individual acts of bestiality were replaced by a coldly organized regime of repression and collective suppression.

In 1936–37 the proliferation began. The commanders—all of whom belonged to the SS—had set the example, and groups of prisoners were re-deported to various regions of Germany and then Austria, where, following a well-defined plan, they were surrounded with new barbed wire; Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, Mauthausen, and many other camps were established.

In 1939, at the beginning of the war, there were about a hundred Lagers: but, with the swift occupation of Poland, the Third Reich found in its hands, according to Eichmann's expression, the "biological source of Judaism," and a second purpose for the Lagers emerged. Maydanek, Treblinka, and then Auschwitz were rapidly set up, and these Lagers were something new, never before seen in the history of humankind. They were no longer a cruel version of jail, where political enemies are made to suffer and die, but reverse factories, where trains arrived every day, packed with human beings, and only the ashes of their bodies, their hair, and the gold of their teeth came out.

After several experiments, the most "profitable" method was found, and the commander of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, boasts of it in his memoirs: gas chambers, where more than a thousand human beings at a time were killed with hydrogen cyanide, even before they were registered; and cremation ovens, where their bodies were incinerated. Auschwitz alone could destroy ten thousand lives in one day, and up to thirty thousand when necessary.

But the war gave no sign of ending, it devoured men on all fronts, and the labor necessary for the war effort in Germany became increasingly scarce. A conflict was emerging between the SS, who insisted with blind fanaticism that the massacre continue, and the industries, which needed

workers. A compromise was reached: the most able-bodied men and women in each convoy would work to exhaustion, the others (the less strong, the old, the children) would leave “by the chimney.” This was the third function that the Lagers could serve, and at the same time it was a model for the New Order that the Nazis and the Fascists wished to impose on Europe. It was a New Order on an “aristocratic” basis: on the one hand, the Master Race, that is, the ruling class, who plan and command, and on the other an immense crowd of slaves, from the Atlantic to the Urals, who work and obey.

It would be the full realization of fascism, of its order, of its hierarchy: the consecration of privilege, of non-equality, of non-freedom. I don’t believe that gas chambers and cremation ovens exist anywhere in the world today, but one can’t read without apprehension that the first concern of the colonels in Greece, and of the generals in Chile, was the establishment of big concentration camps, in Yaros and in Dawson, respectively; and today in almost every country there are jails, reformatories, hospitals, in which, as in Auschwitz, man often loses his name and his face, dignity and hope.

The experience of the past, for its inherent crudeness, has turned us into accusers rather than judges: but it is for us a subject of constant meditation and horror, to see the seeds of fascism take root in the same countries (not in the people) to which the world owes the defeat of Nazi-fascism. There are still, in the Soviet Union, labor camps whose inmates leave humiliated and broken. Indiscriminate bombing has returned in Vietnam, torture is being practiced in all the countries of South America that have puppet governments supported by the United States.

Every era has its fascism; the warning signs can be seen wherever the concentration of power denies a citizen the opportunity and the capacity to express and carry out his will. There are many ways of arriving at this point —not necessarily through the terror of police intimidation but also by censoring and distorting information, polluting justice, paralyzing schools, disseminating in many subtle ways nostalgia for a world where order reigned supreme, and where the security of the privileged few rested on the forced labor and forced silence of the many.

Corriere della Sera, *May 8, 1974*

Foreword to *Two Empty Rooms* by Edith Bruck

Edith Bruck, the daughter of a “poor Jew,” who wandered in many countries until she landed in Italy, left us in her previous books (and particularly in *Who Loves You Like This*) passionate and unforgettable testimony of her descent into hell. She is among the few survivors of the Holocaust, as it is called today, by antonomasia: among those who, like Job’s messengers, escaped to tell.

The three long stories in this collection also fall under the heading of the Holocaust. They are transparently autobiographical, and this is a necessity, because the theme of the slaughter does not lend itself to elaboration and fiction: the few novels that have been published on the subject are detestable, and one reads them with disgust.

The three stories together constitute testimony about the ultimate effect of the massacre: a further dispersion, an uprooting that can’t be remedied. The three female figures, against three different backdrops—a native village in Hungary revisited; a lesser America, crude and materialistic; a ship going to Israel—are united by this theme, which pervades all the states of mind and all the dialogue: lost identity, torn-up roots.

In this regard, the first story is exemplary: nothing here is idealized, nothing is simplified—the return from nothingness to the small town, parochial and gossipy, little by little becomes a chorus of a hundred different voices in which before and after, gratitude and contempt, jealousy and compassion alternate.

By now, the author shows an admirable mastery of our language, so the story flows clear and unimpeded. For someone who wrote about the Lager with the native vigor of the wounded creature, it is moving to discover here

the incurable sadness of one who closes accounts and doesn’t resign herself to emptiness.

Foreword to Edith Bruck, Due stanze vuote (Two Empty Rooms) *(Venice: Marsilio, 1974)*

This Was Auschwitz

There were never many of us. We were a few hundred, out of too many thousands deported, who brought back to Italy, and displayed to the speechless astonishment of our loved ones (those of us who still had any), the light blue number of Auschwitz tattooed on our left arms. So it was true what Radio London had said; it was true what Louis Aragon had written, word for word, "*Marqué comme un bétail, et comme un bétail à la boucherie*."[1]

We are now reduced to a few dozen; maybe we are too few to be heard, and, besides, we often have the impression of being troublesome narrators. At times, even, a curiously symbolic dream that haunted our nights of captivity comes true before our eyes: our interlocutor does not listen, does not understand, gets distracted, goes away and leaves us alone. And yet we must tell the story: it is our duty toward our companions who did not return, and it is a task that gives meaning to our survival. It happened (though not through any merit of ours) that we lived a fundamental experience, and learned some things about Man that we feel compelled to expose.

We found out that man is domineering; he has remained so, in spite of millennia of laws and courts of law. Many social systems propose to curb this urge toward injustice and abuse of power; others, instead, praise it, legalize it, and point to it as the ultimate political goal. Without distorting the term, these systems can be designated as Fascist. We know other definitions of fascism, but it seems more precise, and more consistent with our specific experience, to define as Fascist all regimes and only those which deny, in theory or in practice, a basic equality of rights among all human beings. Now, because the individual or the class whose rights are

denied rarely submits, in the Fascist regime violence or fraud becomes necessary. Violence, to eliminate opponents, of whom there is no shortage. Fraud, to reassure those who are loyal that this exercise of abuse is laudable and legitimate, and to convince the oppressed (within the limits, which are broad, of human credulity) that their sacrifice is not a sacrifice, or that it is indispensable in the light of some undefined and transcendent purpose.

The various Fascist regimes differ on the basis of whether fraud or violence is prevalent. Italian fascism, Europe's firstborn and in many regards pioneering form, erected, on the original foundations of a relatively not so bloody repression, a colossal edifice of mystification and fraud (those who studied during the Fascist years retain a burning memory of it), the effects of which endure to this day. National Socialism, enriched by the Italian experience, nourished by ancestral barbarian ferments, and catalyzed by the diabolical personality of Adolf Hitler, aimed at violence from the outset, and, rediscovering in the concentration camp an old institution of slavery, an *instrumentum regni* endowed with the desired terrorist potential, proceeded along this path with incredible speed and coherence.

The facts are (or should be) known. The first Lagers, hastily and immediately prepared by the SA,[2] beginning in March 1933, three months after Hitler's rise to the Chancellery; their "regularization" and multiplication, up to more than a hundred on the eve of the war; their monstrous growth, in number and size, to coincide with the German invasion of Poland and the western edge of the USSR, which contain the "biological source of Judaism."

Starting in those months, the Lagers changed in nature: from instruments of terror and political intimidation, they became "bone mills," instruments of extermination on the scale of millions (four in Auschwitz alone), organized like industries, with equipment for collective poisoning and cremation ovens as big as cathedrals (up to twenty-four thousand corpses could be burned a day in Auschwitz alone, the capital of the concentration-camp empire). Then, coinciding with the first German military defeats and the consequent scarcity of manpower, a second transformation took place, in which the goal of creating a gigantic army of slaves, without compensation and forced to work until death, joined and coexisted with the goal (never denied) of exterminating political enemies.

At this point, a map of occupied Europe causes vertigo: in Germany itself, the actual Lagers—that is, the ones whose inmates did not get out

alive—number in the hundreds, and to these we must add thousands of camps meant for other categories of people. For example, the Italian soldiers who were interned numbered around six hundred thousand. According to an estimate by William Shirer, in 1944 the forced laborers in Germany were at least nine million.

The camps were not, therefore, a marginal phenomenon. German industry was based on them, they were a fundamental institution of fascistic Europe, and the Nazis made no secret of the fact that the system would have been maintained, in fact, extended and perfected, if the Axis had won. It would have been the full realization of fascism: the consecration of privilege, of non-equality and of non-freedom.

Even inside the Lagers, a system of typically Fascist authority was established, or, rather, was deliberately installed: a rigid hierarchy among the prisoners, in which the greatest power belonged to those who worked less. All the responsibilities, even the most petty (street sweeper, dishwasher, night watchman), were assigned from above; the subject, namely the prisoner without rank, was completely deprived of rights. Further, there was a sinister offshoot of the secret police, consisting of myriad informers and spies. In short, the camp microcosm faithfully mirrored the social fabric of the totalitarian state, where (at least in theory) Order reigned supreme: there was no more orderly place than the Lager. I certainly don't intend to say that this past of ours leads us to detest order per se—rather, we detest *that* order, because it was an order without rights.

Today, with all this behind us, talk of new orders, of black orders, is strange to us: it's as if the things that happened had never happened, as if they meant nothing and served no purpose. And yet the atmosphere of the Weimar Republic wasn't very different from ours; and yet, from the first rudimentary Lagers of the SA to the ruin of Germany, the disintegration of Europe, and the sixty million dead of the Second World War, only twelve years had passed. Fascism is a cancer that spreads rapidly, and its return is threatening us: is it too much to ask that we oppose it from the start?

La Stampa, *February 9, 1975*

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1. Branded like cattle, and like cattle to the butcher.

2. Sturmabteilung, or storm troopers: the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party.

More Reality than Literature

In the years 1946–48, when my literary activity began, I had no intention, or perhaps even consciousness of the fact, that the writing and publication of my first book (*If This Is a Man*) would coincide, in the long run, with my conversion to literary activity. At the time, my attention was focused elsewhere: the suffering and privations of two years of imprisonment still weighed on me, there was the house to rebuild, a job as a chemist to find. Literature, both in the passive sense (that of reading) and, even more, in the active sense, was for me an altogether secondary factor.

For these reasons I didn't read much; through *Men and Not Men* I had come to know the forceful personality of Elio Vittorini, but I did not yet know his other books. I had known Cesare Pavese both through reading him and in person, but we remained apart because we are both shy, though with different motivations.

I realize that I had at that point read a greater number of foreign books than Italian ones, and more willingly. It was probably a reaction to the regimen of isolation or at least of censorship that fascism and the war had imposed on Italy.

Thinking back on those times, I think I can claim that not only my attention but that of the entire country was far from the "pure" literary event. Fundamental, urgent, and even exciting problems were hanging in the air: the constitution, the institutional referendum, the acceptance or rejection of political blocs. Many years had to go by before all these developments could become the subject of literature, perhaps through transfigurations or symbolic representations.

Tuttolibri *2, no. 24 (June 19, 1976)*

Primo Levi to the Author

Dear Roberto,

When, in the summer of ’74, you mentioned to me that you intended to write a “thriller,” I was perplexed. You probably noticed—although I tried to hide it, because I am well aware that the things one ends up writing generally go beyond the writer’s intentions. You noticed because I’m not a good actor. Now that *Greggio e pericoloso* (*Crude and Dangerous*) has been written, I’ll make amends: you did well to write it, as in general you do well to do the things you do or intend to do.

I was afraid that your idea (your plot, to stay with the terminology), which you had explained to me, would produce a Pitigrilli-like book, updated and modernized, with jets in place of trains and techies in place of indolent *viveurs*, but, in short, with the same backdrop of anarchic and accommodating skepticism. Instead, I found much more. It’s true that your characters, even the supermen and superwomen, have something Pitigrillian: their insistent snobbery, their convoluted talk, their drinks, the landscapes that surround them—in fact, something (if we want to go back to the roots) D’Annunzian, not in the sense of D’Annunzio’s characters but with traces of D’Annunzio himself. Nevertheless, and, unlike what was notable in your novel *The Robot and the Minotaur*, the histrionics and the exhibitionism of the characters here have a light but perceptible ironic detachment that lifts the whole book far above the 007 level, and makes it rather a parody than an emulation of its vulgar and violent commercial prototypes.

That said, and these objections dismissed, I would like to add that this book of yours brought to mind some basic considerations about the job of

writing: that is, about how one writes, why one writes, and what one writes about. In the case of *Crude and Dangerous*, I found myself allied with you in a common tendency we have, which could be defined as respect and courtesy for the reader. I think that one has to write for the reader, to provide him with joy or even just pleasure, and to make him a better person —not for oneself, not to shock or show off, not to make money.

Well, I don't know what your motivations are, but, judging from the results, I think that, in writing this book, and the previous ones, you started from the assumption that the reader needs to be respected and not cheated, in terms of either quality or quantity, which is a good standard for any kind of supply operation or commercial or industrial transaction. Now, no reader could complain about your book: it is among the most generous that I have ever read, the mechanism is well lubricated and never slows down, and it guides you through twists and turns with coherence and courtesy, and with an acceptable balance of the plausible and the implausible, until the final somersault.

I have only one modest reservation, regarding the Heusler alloys, on page 327: obtaining them like that (aside from the fact that there is copper in chalcopyrite but not in pyrite) can't be proposed even as a "slightly fantastic scientific idea"; energy is needed to reduce oxides and sulfides! But that's the only reservation. The care in all the other details abundantly reveals a writer who has lived, not for long (lucky for him) but not in vain, and who has accumulated on the way such a wealth of colorful experiences, technological and linguistic, geographical and petrographical, sentimental and airportual, to be able "*in jedem Wasser zu schwimmen*," to swim in every water (the translation is not for you, it's for the less polyglot reader).

This very sum of experiences has equipped you with—and given you the ability to transmit to the reader—an energetic morality that is not popular today (and that, in my view, is necessary but not sufficient), the same that in another form you advocated in the *Manual for an Improbable Salvation*: that it is the duty of each of us, since it's for the common good, to improve and correct ourself; that the defense of inefficiency is stupid; that it is better to know than to have. It's true that your Philip Quartara proves to be rather hungry for dollars, but, precisely, he acquires them "knowingly," and then puts them to good use.

As for your eclecticism, which allows you to jump from texts on electronics to thrillers and sci-fi, I find that there is nothing to criticize.

Rather, I envy you: I think it’s good to have many talents, and I have never believed in literary genres.

Letter to Roberto Vacca, in Tuttolibri *2, no. 27 (July 10, 1976)*

From Stalin's Lagers[1]

One can't but harbor respect for someone who has served, whatever the reason, seventeen years of deportation: even greater respect is due if, as is the case with Shalamov, the deportation was altogether gratuitous, or at least insanely disproportionate to the "crime" committed. Seventeen years of hunger, humiliation, illness, frost, close living, exhausting exertion, solitude: but, dominant over all other suffering, as the author himself asserts, anger. The anger of an innocent man who feels he has been trapped, for almost a lifetime, in a system at once barbaric and absurd. The limitless trap is Kolyma, a mining district in northeastern Siberia, four times as big as France, from which the book takes its title.

Thirty stories, organized in approximately chronological order (from 1937 to 1954), and not all centered on the person of the author: some, and perhaps they are the best ones, deliver in a few intense pages a tale worthy of Pirandello (excellent among them is the story entitled "Alias Berdy") or the daily tragedy of work in the mines, or, again, a depiction of the harsh nature of the extreme north, crushed between a merciless sky and earth saturated with fossilized ice, and yet alive with a tragic beauty of its own.

Clinging to this hostile land are the deported, classified almost zoologically in a complex hierarchy with a meticulous and eloquent terminology. Terms that define the many categories of prisoners, or semi-prisoners, seem to be part of a spoken language, of a dark living language, because the prisoners constitute a true nation within the nation, with its own administration, economy, customs, laws, traditions. It is a nation whose history goes far back in Russian history, much further than Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, the memory of which is constant in Shalamov: a nation

of convicts, founded on fierce exploitation and on an atavistic indifference toward time and suffering.

It is evident on every page how forced labor, arbitrary sentencing to decades of exile, the tearing apart of families are not marginal events, not a numerically small fringe in Stalin's Russia. They can't be disregarded, they defined an era and disabled a generation, they have been a model (perfectible like all models) for all subsequent concentration-camp regimes, and cast their shadow, unfortunately, on all the deficiencies, uncertainties, inertia, and silence of today's Soviet Union.

It is painful to say, and it is not news: Stalinist terror and isolationism also transmit their paralyzing infection to their witnesses and their opponents. As I mentioned, men like Shalamov merit our respect anyway, but their stature is inferior to that of their peers who battled Hitler's terror, or who today denounce the crimes committed by Western civilization in Asia and Africa. Their political development appears limited and crude: the label of "political prisoners" is affixed to them more or less at random, with the dual purpose of disseminating terror and recruiting free labor, and they bear it with Russian resignation (Tyutchev's "infinite patience") but without pride.

Shalamov's pages rouse emotion and sympathy for the things they say, not for the manner in which they are said, and even less for the author's posturing. In some way, Shalamov testifies to more than he would like, more than he knows, precisely because of his inadequacies and frustrations, the fact that he is a victim gratuitously. He hopes for nothing more than the end of his suffering; he has no star to aspire to. His despair, otherwise dignified and contained, does not end with liberation; it is the mute despair of someone who feels annihilated and no longer believes in anything, of someone who during decades of useless suffering has exhausted every political reason, indeed, every reason, to live. Paradoxically, the weakness of these stories (their confusion, stylistic uncertainty, imprecision, the deliberate omissions and those due to negligence) strengthens their documentary value. They seem to say: "Here, read and see what the Lager reduced me to." Beyond the author's intentions, this weakness (and the parallel weakness of certain assertions of a courageous man like Sakharov[2]) proves how half a century of forced disinformation can wear down the opposition more effectively than the much fiercer and more efficient Hitlerian terror, which did not have the time or the means to sever the age-

old cultural bonds that tied Germany to the rest of Europe. The same political asphyxiation that debased socialism in the Soviet Union has debased its very opponents.

A further degradation can be perceived in the translation of these "Kolyma Tales," which often adds obscurity to the (perhaps intentional) obscurities already present in the text. What does "a large circular petal similar to fingerprints" mean? Why is "a bucket of water equivalent to 100 grams of fat"? What is "the vaporization of lice in small pots"? And what to say of the "resin noose" and of the "poisonous bacilli"?

Tuttolibri *2, no. 37 (September 25, 1976)*

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1. Review of the Italian edition of *Kolyma Tales*, by Varlam Shalamov, published in English in 1980.
2. Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989), a Russian physicist, was a dissident and a human-rights activist.

The Non-Writer Writer

I don’t mean to say that to write a book one must be a “non-writer,” but simply that I ended up with this designation without choosing it. I am a chemist. I arrived at the designation of writer because, captured as a partisan, I ended up in the Lager as a Jew.

My first book is the story of my year in Auschwitz, and the story of the book is long and strange. I had tried to write, despite the fear, from the time of my imprisonment: a few lines, annotations, notes for my relatives scribbled with a pencil stub and immediately destroyed, because there was no way to preserve them, except in my memory—to be found with them on your person was equal to an “act of espionage” and could therefore mean death. But such was the need to transmit my experience, to make others share it, in short to narrate, that I had already begun to do it there. I hoped, we all hoped, to live “in order to” tell what we had seen. This desire was not only mine; it belonged to all of us, and it appeared in the form of a dream, the same for many—I also happened to read it recently in the book of a Frenchwoman who was deported. It was a two-part dream. In the first part, one dreamed of rich, succulent, fragrant food, but the moment you brought it to your mouth something always happened: it disappeared, or it was taken away by someone, or between the starving person and the food a kind of barrier descended that made the act of eating impossible. The other dream was that of narrating, usually to a dear one; but here, too, the act was not completed. The interlocutor was indifferent, didn’t listen, and at a certain point would turn his back, walk away, disappear.

The symbolism of the double dream was very simple. I say this to emphasize that the need to eat and the need to tell were on the same level of

primordial necessity. The food that vanishes and the story that can't be finished conceal the same anguish of the unfulfilled need.

I brought with me this primordial and violent impulse to narrate when I returned, and I wrote right away, constructing the story around those lost notes, for two reasons. First, because what I had seen and experienced weighed inside me and I felt an urgency to free myself. Second, to satisfy a moral, civic, and political duty to bear witness. We Italian Jews who ended up in the Lager along with millions of other Jews, from all over Europe, for the sole crime of having been born, but, by luck, survived were a few dozen out of eight thousand deported: of my convoy, fifteen out of six hundred and fifty. People knew little, or knew dimly. I myself at the time didn't know the full scale of the extermination being carried out on the basis of an insane ideology that was determined to kill those who were different simply because they were different.

But, in writing *If This Is a Man*, I had no literary ambitions; I did not plan to write a book, even less to become a writer. Indeed, I wrote the chapters not in chronological order but in order of urgency, beginning with the last, and I didn't even bother to structure the book or to fix its fragmented nature. Once this was done, I began, or rather began again, to work as a chemist. For ten years. Only in 1958, when *If This Is a Man* was reissued, did the desire to write return. As for the book, 2500 copies were printed at the end of 1947 by a small publishing house, after others had rejected it. It was very well received by the critics, but, within a year or so, it was forgotten—even though, especially here in Turin, it was still talked about in some small circles, in particular among people affected by the facts narrated in the book. It's understandable, if one thinks about it, that it was not found to be readable and that it got little attention. Times were hard. It was difficult to make a living, the wounds of war were vast and deep, people were preoccupied only with rebuilding on the ruins, they wanted nothing more than to forget and move on. But already by 1955–56 the climate had changed: people had read Vercors, Lord Russell of Liverpool, Poliakov, and many others, and had seen the documentaries filmed at the liberation of the camps; the Lager phenomenon was beginning to rouse a broader interest.

A prestigious publisher agreed to reprint *If This Is a Man* in '58. It was immediately translated; young people read it, and they were interested. They invited me to talk about it, to explain, they asked questions. My third

profession was beginning. Had I accepted all the requests that came to me from schools, all other activity would have become impossible. This fact put me in contact with a new reality, with the generation that is starting out in life. In the end, I collected these questions from young people, at least the ones with answers, in another school edition of *If This Is a Man*, which will be published soon.

Faced with a book that was moving along its own path, I realized that I had a new instrument in my hands, intended to weigh, to divide, to verify—like the ones in my laboratory, but flexible, quick, gratifying. I had told a story, why not do it again? The seed of writing had entered my blood. Thus *The Truce* was born, in which I narrated my return from Auschwitz. In the first book I had paid attention to "things"; I wrote the second with the awareness that I was capable of transmitting experiences, but with a purpose—to write clearly in order to find a connection with the public. It's not very productive, or very useful, to write and not communicate. This was the gift that I received from my first book, with its limited audience: the realization that while speaking obscurely can mean speaking for posterity, what's important in order to be understood by one's intended audience is to be clear. Writing can communicate, can transmit information or even feelings. If it's not comprehensible, it's useless, it's a cry in the wilderness, and the cry can be useful for the writer, but not for the reader. So maximum clarity and, the second rule, minimum clutter: that is, be compact, concentrated. The superfluous is damaging to communication as well, because it tires and bores the reader.

Contact with readers has enriched my life and brings me joy. But readers are an extremely blurred and vague phantom. I have created for myself a "perfect" reader, who is to the real reader as the "perfect gas" defined by physicists—that is, guided by simple laws—is to real gas. I write for him and to him, not for the critics, who are forced to be readers, or for myself. I can feel him next to me as I write, this model reader; he meets me willingly, he follows me, and I follow him. I want him to receive what I transmit without its fading or getting lost along the way. While I was writing *The Truce*, and much earlier as well, I was also writing short stories, each one based on a technical idea originating in the laboratory or in the factory. The world that surrounds us is extraordinarily fruitful, and because of this I decided to create a "crossing,"* a sort of intersection between writing and my experience as a chemist. With regard to the stories, many

have asked if in giving narrative form to the flaws, small or large, of our world and of our civilization I intended to allude again to the Lager. I can answer: certainly not deliberately, in the sense that writing deliberately about reality in symbolic terms is not part of my intention. Then, whether or not there is a connection between the Lager and these intuitions—maybe, it's possible, but I don't know for sure. It doesn't depend on me. "I," as Palazzeschi[1] used to say, "am only the author."

Writing stories was also a writing about "things." But I felt indebted to my daily job; I felt I had wasted an opportunity by not talking about an experience and a profession that many think of as arid, mysterious, and suspicious. I felt I had detected a certain partiality in the books I read. It was an impression that I'd had in the pit of my stomach for a long time and that was always finding new confirmation. Everyone knows how a pirate, an adventurer, a doctor, a prostitute lives. Of us chemists, transformers of matter, members of a profession with an illustrious ancestry, there isn't much trace, and I thought it right to "fill the gap." Thus *The Periodic Table* had its origin. Undoubtedly, the title was a provocation, as was giving each chapter, as a title, the name of an element. But it seemed to me opportune to make use of the chemist's relationship with matter, with the elements, just as the Romantics of the nineteenth century used the "landscape": chemical element = mood, as landscape = mood. Because for those who work with matter it is alive: mother and enemy, slothful and allied, stupid, inert, dangerous at times, but alive, as the founders well knew, working alone, unrecognized, unsupported, with mind and imagination. We are no longer alchemists, but anyone who has had anything to do with matter knows these things. Why not then create a drama where the characters are the elements that make up matter? Young people write to me: "If chemistry were the way you describe it, I would become a chemist." It's one of the compliments I'm fondest of. Entering the literary field as a chemist, I even fulfilled a vow. I owe my life to my profession. I would not have survived Auschwitz, had I not, after ten months of hard manual labor, entered a laboratory—where I continued to work as a manual laborer, but indoors. The designation of chemist, the fact that I was inserted—with my name at the time, that is, with my number—into the staff of the Buna factory, which belonged to I.G. Farbenindustrie, also may have protected me from the "selections," because, as chemists, we were considered "formally useful." And chemistry has provided me with the subject for a book and two short stories. I can feel

it in my hand like a repository of metaphors: the more distant the other field, the further the metaphor is stretched. Yet this isn't just me. Huxley and Proust did it. Anyone who knows what it means to reduce, concentrate, distill, crystallize also knows that laboratory operations have a long symbolic shadow.

There, I have given a glimpse of my workshop. I'd like to add that my model for writing is the "report" that is written in the factory at the end of the week. Clear, essential, comprehensible to everyone. It would seem to me an extreme discourtesy to the reader to offer him a "treatise" that he cannot understand. That is not to say that the language of my subconscious is the same as that of the reader's. But I believe that it is right to give him the largest quantity of information and emotion possible.

I am also indebted to my profession for what makes a man mature, that is, achievement and failure, to succeed and not to succeed, the two experiences of adult life—the expression isn't mine, it's Pavese's—that are necessary in order to grow. For the chemist who works in a laboratory, both are necessary, and the committed chemist knows them both: to make mistakes and to correct them, to take blows and to return them, to confront a problem and resolve it or to emerge defeated and immediately resume the battle.

Thus my chemist, too, has a long symbolic shadow: measuring himself against matter, through success and failure, he is like Conrad's sailor, who measures himself against the sea. He is also like a primitive hunter. In the evening, when he draws the structural formula of the molecule that he has to build tomorrow, he celebrates the same propitiatory rite as the hunter of Altamira who fifty thousand years ago drew on the walls of the caves the moose or bison that he would kill the next day: to take possession and make his antagonist his own. Both are sacral gestures. I am almost certain that the experience of the chemist is the same as the remote history of man, guided by the same intention that led him to start off on the long road that would lead to civilization. That's all. Here is why—I have said it more than once but I repeat it again today—to anyone who asks, "Why are you a chemist and write?" I answer, "I write because I am a chemist." I need my profession to communicate experiences.

Transcript of lecture at the Italian Cultural Association, Turin, November 19, 1976; published in G. Poli and G. Calcagno, Echi di una

voce perduta (Echoes of a Lost Voice) *(Milan: Mursia, 1992)*

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* In English in the original.
1. Aldo Palazzeschi (1885–1974) was an Italian novelist.

Foreword to *The Night of the Girondists* by Jacques Presser[1]

I came across this story by accident, many years ago; I read it and reread it many times, and it stayed with me. Perhaps it's worth investigating why: there are many reasons that one becomes attached to a book, some rational and easy to decipher, others obscure and deep.

I don't think it's a matter of *how* this story is told. It's told unevenly, on some pages skillfully, on others with a show of intellectualism, with a literary expertise a little too loaded with cunning and artifice. It is, however, manifestly truthful, point by point, episode by episode (it is confirmed by many other sources, and those who were at Auschwitz found in it the surviving "passengers" of the Westerbork train[2]), so that, in spite of its novelistic pace, it takes on the character of a document; but its importance doesn't derive from that alone.

This brief work is among the few that portray with literary dignity Western European Judaism. While there is an abundant and glorious literature of Eastern, Ashkenazi, and Yiddish Judaism, the Western branch, which is deeply integrated into German, French, Dutch, Italian bourgeois cultures and has contributed generously to them, has rarely represented itself. It is a Judaism conditioned by dispersion and is therefore not very uniform; it is so intertwined with the culture of the host country that it famously does not possess a language of its own. It was enlightened during the Enlightenment, romantic during Romanticism, liberal, socialist, bourgeois, nationalist; nevertheless, through all the metamorphoses of time and place, it preserved some characteristic traits, and this book reflects them.

The Western Jew, straining and struggling between the two poles of loyalty and assimilation, is constantly having an identity crisis; equally constant are his neuroses, his adaptability, and his acuity. The figure of the Jew content with his Judaism, for whom his Judaism is enough (the immortal Tevye the dairyman, by Sholem Aleichem), is rare or missing in the West.

This is the story of an identity crisis: the protagonist suffers it with such intensity that he finds himself split in two. In him live the "I" Jacques, assimilated, bound to the land of Holland but not to the Dutch people, a versatile and decadent intellectual, emotionally immature, politically suspect, morally void; and the "I" Jacob, retrieved from the past by the efforts and the example of "Rabbi" Hirsch, who draws strength from his Jewish roots—until then ignored or denied—and sacrifices himself to save from the void that Book which Jacques does not believe in. How many European Jews did not experience this? How many did not find, in a time of need, support and a moral framework precisely in the Jewish culture that in the years of truce had appeared dated and old-fashioned? Hirsch says this to Jacques: barbed wire is wire that binds, and binds solidly. I don't mean to say that the return to one's origins is the only path to salvation; but it is certainly one of them.

Another element that adds weight to this story is its lack of restraint. On a few ruthless pages, it almost seems as if the author shared the "Jewish self-hatred" (another aspect of the identity crisis) that the father, Henriques, attributes to his son and his wife, and which gave rise to the many anti-Semitic Jews in Western Europe—for example, [Otto] Weininger, cited in the book and admired by Georg Cohn. To be reminded that a man like Cohn lived and worked in Westerbork stings like a burn and deserves a comment. Similar individuals have existed, and certainly still exist among us in a virtual state. In normal conditions they are not recognizable (Cohn wanted to be a banker), but merciless persecution develops them and brings them to light and to power. It's naïve, absurd, and historically false to claim that a demonic system like National Socialism sanctifies its victims; on the contrary, it degrades them and dirties them, assimilates them, and all the more willing they are, clean, lacking political or moral backbone. Cohn is detestable, monstrous, and should be punished, but his wrong is the reflection of another, much more serious and general fault.

It’s not a coincidence that precisely in these past years, in Italy and abroad, books have been published like *Menschen in Auschwitz*, by Hermann Langbein (not yet translated into Italian), and *Into That Darkness*, by Gitta Sereny.[3] There are many signs that the time has come to explore the space that separates the victims from the executioners, and to do so with a lighter hand, with a less murky spirit, than has been the case, for example, in some recent popular films. Only a Manichean rhetoric can assert that that space is empty; it is not, it is scattered with vile, miserable, or pathetic characters (who occasionally possess all three qualities at once) and it is indispensable that we know them if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar trial returns.

There exists a contagion of evil: the non-man dehumanizes others, every crime radiates outward, proliferates, corrupts consciences and surrounds itself with accomplices won over, through fear or seduction (like Suasso), from the opposing camp. It’s typical of a criminal regime, like Nazism, to weaken and confuse our capacity for judgment. Is he who denounces under torture guilty? Or he who kills in order not to be killed? Or the soldier on the Russian front who dares not desert? Where will we draw the line that cuts in two the empty space I spoke of, and that separates the weak from the wicked? Should Cohn be judged?

Well, the opinion of this book is that Cohn should be judged. His speech on the “sinking ship” is specious, and so is his claim (how many times have we heard it!): “If I didn’t do it, someone worse than me would.” One *must* refuse; one always can, in any case, perhaps following the path of Miss Wolfson. He who does not refuse (but one must refuse from the beginning, not put one’s hand in the machine) ends up yielding to the temptation of passing to the other side, where he will find, at best, an illusory gratification and a destructive salvation.

Cohn is guilty, but there is an extenuating circumstance. The general consciousness that we should not give in when confronted by violence but resist is a current notion, not of that time but of the period that followed. The imperative of resistance developed with the resistance and with the global tragedy of the Second World War; before that, it was the precious patrimony of a few. Nor is it something that everyone feels even today, but today those who want to understand can understand, and I think that this book can help.

It is not necessarily true that once you feel affection for a book or a person you no longer see its defects. This book has some, and maybe serious ones. The style is uneven, oscillating between emotion and banter; one often has the impression that the author, Presser, is not immune to the literary baroque of his alter ego Henriques and to his frenzy for coming up with quotations, even on his deathbed. At times, in the face of the tragic nature of certain situations, we find complacency where modesty and silence should be expected. In other words, the book is open to debate, and perhaps even scandalous, but it is good that scandals occur, because they provoke discussion and clear consciences.

Foreword to La notte dei Girondini (The Night of the Girondists),
by Jacques Presser (Milan: Adelphi, 1976)

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1. Originally published in Dutch in 1957; first published in English the following year as *Breaking Point*.
2. Westerbork was a large transit camp in the Netherlands; every week trains carrying Dutch Jews departed for Auschwitz and other concentration camps.
3. *Menschen in Auschwitz* was published in Germany in 1972; an English translation, *People in Auschwitz*, came out in 2004. *Into That Darkness* was originally published in English in 1974.

Buffet Dinner

Immediately upon entering through the front door, Innaminka felt uneasy and regretted having accepted the invitation. There was a butler of sorts, with a green sash around his belly, who took people's coats. Innaminka, whose coat was part of his body, shivered and felt dizzy at the thought that someone might take it from him. But there was more: behind the butler rose a great spiral staircase of beautiful polished black wood, broad and majestic but unmanageable. Unmanageable for him, that is. The other guests mounted it with ease, while he didn't dare even try. He kept turning in circles, embarrassed, waiting until no one was looking. On level ground he was good, but the length of his hindquarters alone was an obstacle—his feet were more or less twice as long as the stairs were deep. He waited a little more, sniffing at the walls and trying to appear indifferent, and once everyone else was upstairs he endeavored to go up as well.

He tried different methods: grabbing the banister with his front legs, or bending over and trying to climb on all fours, even employing his tail—but actually it was the tail, more than anything else, that got in the way. He ended up climbing clumsily sideways, placing his feet lengthwise on each step, his tail folded ignobly over his back. It took him a full ten minutes.

Upstairs there was a long, narrow room, with a table placed crosswise; there were paintings on the walls, some depicting human or animal forms, others depicting nothing. Along the walls, and scattered around the floor, were bronze or marble figures that Innaminka found pleasing and vaguely familiar. The room was already crowded, but more people kept arriving: the men were in evening attire, the women wore long black dresses and were bedecked with jewels, their eyelids painted green or blue. Innaminka

hesitated for a moment and then, sidling along the wall and avoiding abrupt movements, took refuge in a corner. The other guests looked at him with mild curiosity. In passing, he overheard a few casual comments: “He’s pretty, isn’t he?” “. . . no, he doesn’t have one, dear. Can’t you see he’s a male?” “I heard on TV that they are almost extinct. . . . No, not for the fur, which isn’t worth much anyway. It’s because they destroy the crops.”

After a while, the young hostess emerged from a group of guests and came toward him. She was very thin, with large, wide-set gray eyes and an expression between annoyance and surprise, as if someone had brusquely woken her up at that very moment. She told him that she had heard a lot about him, and this Innaminka found hard to believe: maybe it was just a form of greeting, and she said it to all her guests. She asked him if he’d like something to eat or drink: she didn’t seem very intelligent, but she probably had a kind heart, and it was precisely because of her kindness rather than her intelligence that she realized that Innaminka understood her fairly well but could not answer her, and she moved on.

Actually, Innaminka was hungry and thirsty: not to an unbearable degree, but enough to make him uncomfortable. Now, the dinner was one of those melancholy buffet affairs, where you have to choose what you want from a distance, craning between heads and shoulders, find the plates, find the silverware and the paper napkins, get in line, reach the table, serve yourself, and then back away, making sure not to spill anything, either on yourself or on anyone else. Besides, he could see neither grass nor hay on the table: there was a rather appetizing-looking salad, and peas in a brown sauce, but as Innaminka hesitated, debating whether or not to get in line, the one dish and then the other were finished. Innaminka gave up. He turned his back on the table and, proceeding with care through the crowd, tried to return to his corner. He thought with loving nostalgia of his wife, and of his youngest, who was growing up: he was a good jumper and went out to pasture by himself, but now and then he still demanded to return to his mother’s pouch—indeed, he was a little spoiled, and liked to spend the night in that warm darkness.

During his laborious retreat, he encountered several waiters who carried trays and offered glasses of wine and orangeade and canapés that looked

tempting. He didn’t even think about taking a glass in the middle of the crowd, while everyone was bumping into him. He gathered up his courage, grabbed a canapé, and brought it to his mouth, but it instantly fell apart in his fingers, so that he had to lick them one by one and then lick his lips and whiskers for a long time. He looked around, suspicious, but no, no one was paying any attention. He crouched in his corner, and to pass the time he began to observe the guests closely, trying to imagine how they would behave, men and women, if they were being chased by a dog. No mistaking it—in those long wide skirts, the women would never get off the ground, and even the swiftest among the men, even with a good running start, wouldn’t be able to jump a third of the distance that he could jump from a standstill. But you can never tell, maybe they were good at other things.

He was hot and thirsty, and at some point he realized with dismay that an increasingly urgent need was growing in him. He thought that it surely must happen to others, too, and for a few minutes he looked around to see how they dealt with it, but it seemed that no one else had his problem. So very slowly he approached a large pot in which a ficus tree grew, and pretending to sniff the leaves he sat astride the pot and relieved himself. The leaves were fresh and shiny and had a nice smell. Innaminka ate a couple and found them tasty but had to stop because he noticed a woman staring at him.

She stared at him and came closer. Innaminka realized that it was too late to pretend that nothing had happened and move away. She was young and had broad shoulders, massive bones, strong hands, a pale face, and clear eyes. To Innaminka, of course, her feet were of primary importance, but the woman’s skirt was so long and her shoes so complicated that he couldn’t get even an idea of their shape and length. For a moment he feared that the woman had noticed the business with the ficus tree and had come to reprimand him or punish him, but he soon realized that it wasn’t so. She sat down on a small armchair beside him and started talking to him sweetly. Innaminka understood hardly anything she said, but at once he felt calmer; he lowered his ears and made himself more comfortable. The woman came even closer and began to caress him, first on the neck and back, then, seeing that he was closing his eyes, under his chin and on his chest, between his

front paws, where there is that triangle of white fur that kangaroos are so proud of.

The woman talked and talked, in a subdued tone, as if she were afraid the others would hear. Innaminka understood that she was unhappy, that someone had behaved badly toward her, that this someone was, or had been, her man, that this event had occurred a short time ago, perhaps that very evening: but nothing more than that. Since he, too, was unhappy, he felt sympathetic toward the woman, and for the first time that evening he stopped wishing that the reception would soon be over; instead he hoped that the woman would continue to caress him and, in particular, that her hands would go lower and run lightly and knowingly along the mighty muscles of his tail and his thighs, of which he was even prouder than of his white triangle.

This, however, was not to be. The woman continued to caress him, but with increasing distraction, paying no attention to his shivers of pleasure, and continuing all the while to complain about certain human troubles of hers that seemed to Innaminka not to amount to much—to one man instead of another man whom she would have preferred. Innaminka thought that, if this was how things stood, the woman would do better to caress this second man instead of him; and that maybe that was exactly what she was doing; and furthermore that she was beginning to bore him, given that for at least a quarter of an hour she had been repeating the same caresses and the same words. In short, it was clear that she was thinking of herself and not of him.

Suddenly a man sprang out of the seething crowd, grabbed the woman’s wrist, jerked her to her feet, and said something very unpleasant and brutal to her. He then dragged her away and she followed, without giving Innaminka so much as a farewell glance.

Innaminka had had enough. From his observation post he stretched up as high as he could, straightening his back and raising himself on his hind legs and tail as on a tripod, to see if anyone was starting to leave. He didn’t want to attract attention by being the first. But as soon as he caught sight of an elegant elderly couple making the rounds to say their goodbyes and heading toward the cloakroom, Innaminka took off.

He negotiated the first few meters slinking between the legs of the guests, below the level of breasts and stomachs; he stayed low, supported alternately on his hind legs and on his front legs with the help of his tail. But when he was near the table, which by now had been cleared, he noticed

that the floor on either side of the table was clear, too, and so he jumped right over it, feeling his lungs fill effortlessly with air and with joy. With a second leap he was at the head of the stairs: rushing, he miscalculated the distance and landed off balance on the top steps. There was nothing for it but to descend that way, like a sack, half crawling and half rolling. But as soon as he reached the ground floor he hopped to his feet. Under the expressionless gaze of the doorman, he took a deep, voluptuous breath of the damp, grimy night air and immediately set off along Via Borgospesso, no longer in a rush, with long, happy, elastic leaps.

La Stampa, *January 22, 1977*

Movies and Swastikas

Do we really have to watch them all, before we can take a position? Meaning, all the movies on whose posters a naked woman appears against the background of a swastika? I don't think so, and, besides, the phenomenon shows no sign of diminishing. It's a classic path: you begin with a clever cultural forgery, an artifact of average quality such as *The Night Porter*, go down a couple of steps to the questionable craft of *Salon Kitty*, and then the doors are flung wide open to the cheap brands, to the phalanx of Nazi-porn movies.

From movie producers, of course, we can't expect much. For the most part they're nothing but myopic wheeler-dealers: they're happy if they get a hit every three or four years and pay their bills (if it goes well), and they don't care about anything else. Many of them actually live off porn movies; it's sad, but there's nothing much to do about it. Porn movies are a sure deal: easy to make, cheap, and profitable, because they have a faithful audience, made up of the shy, the inhibited, and the frustrated, young and old.

In the short term, there is nothing to do about it: to invoke censorship means relying on inept and corrupt judges, and giving new life to a dangerous mechanism. Censorship already exists, but it confiscates only intelligent movies, even though they're controversial at times; obscene movies, as long as they're idiotic, pass muster.

What to do? The best thing would be a boycott by the audience: sensible sex education in the schools should lead to some results, but it will take a generation. For the moment there's nothing to do but resign oneself.

But please, Mr. Producers, leave the women's Lagers alone. They are not a subject for you, or even for your most faithful customers, who don't need much to be satisfied; they want images of women-objects, since they can't have them in flesh and blood, but they don't care about the context. The most demanding of them may wish to witness, free or almost, the spectacle of the tortured virgin, but that the villain is a Nazi, rather than a Saracen, or a Philistine, or a Carthaginian, is, for them, a minor detail: one is the same as the other, as long as the substance is there.

No, the women's Lagers are not indispensable; you can leave them alone with no loss to yourselves. Besides, the subject is not congenial to your boorish directors. Giuliana Tedeschi, who was there, said it well: they weren't second-rate sex theaters; there was suffering, yes, but in silence, and the women weren't beautiful and didn't arouse desire. Rather, they aroused infinite compassion, like defenseless animals.

As for the SS, most of them weren't monsters, idiotic lechers, or perverted dandies: they were functionaries of the State, more pedantic than brutal, effectively indifferent to the daily horror in which they lived, and which they appeared to get used to quickly, partly because, in agreeing to oversee the Lagers, they avoided being sent to "cover themselves with glory" on the Russian front. In short, they weren't elegant, stylized beasts but vulgar, cowardly little men. If they had accepted that grim job they must have been mentally crippled, inhibited, and crude—like your customers. I have often thought that they would have liked your porno swastikas.

La Stampa, *February 12, 1977*

Letter to Lattanzio:[1] “Resign”

Dear Mr. Minister,

I am an Auschwitz survivor, and so I am well acquainted with Nazism: I know it from the inside, and for its men, alive and dead, I feel a profound revulsion. Including Kappler: in the face of what he did (especially the macabre trick of the gold of Rome), all excuses, it seems to me, become futile. He “only” carried out orders: it’s true, but he carried them out willingly, and, after all, by the sole fact of requesting to enlist in the SS, he consciously put himself in the position of obeying without question. Others were more guilty than he, as Giorgio Bocca has pointed out: it’s true, like him they should have served a life sentence; only a distracted or distorted justice could absolve them or condemn them to lesser punishment. Kappler is ill: he should have been treated, and in fact he was, but no judicial order absolves the sick; faced with the list of his victims, did Colonel Kappler take care to make sure that none of them were sick? He was repentant: but to be satisfied with verbal declarations of repentance from a man like that is so ingenuous that not even an ingenuous person like me would believe it, and in fact I didn’t believe it, and the facts confirmed that I was right.

I therefore feel revulsion for Kappler, I would not be disposed to forgive him, if I had the power to do so, and I believe that prison was the right place for him. That said, I’d like to note that his escape doesn’t add anything to his guilt: it’s natural for a prisoner to attempt to flee, and anyone who has been a prisoner (justly or unjustly) knows that. On the other hand, his escape adds a heavy burden to your responsibility, Mr. Minister. The Kappler case was discussed just recently: it hadn’t been forgotten. You had certainly given or confirmed orders for his custody, but you can’t not know

that even a corporal, when his orders are not carried out, can't get away with saying "But I gave them." A corporal or a general is punished; not a minister—a minister resigns.

Resign, Mr. Minister: even if you feel innocent. Resign out of mercy, decency, charity to the country, to your party, to yourself. The most serious disease, among the many that afflict us, is the rejection of responsibility: show, or pretend to, that you know it, and that you know that in any hierarchy the responsibility of the subordinate doesn't absorb that of his superior. Resign, soon and discreetly; don't miss this opportunity to restore your own dignity and that of the State.

La Stampa, *September 8, 1977*

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1. Vito Lattanzio, the minister of defense, had to resign in 1977 after the war criminal Herbert Kappler, who had been the head of the Gestapo in Rome, escaped from a prison hospital.

The Germans and Kappler

With Herbert Kappler safely hidden in the heart of the Federal Republic of Germany, and with Lattanzio just as safely glued to a seat, any seat, it doesn't matter which, it is legitimate to think that the *bocce* are now still, and that the cloud of dust that arose, or was deliberately kicked up, is bound to settle. At this point, to the many considerations that were made about the escape from the Celio prison, I would like to add one, and connect it to a memory of mine.

In the Auschwitz Lager, the Jews were the great majority: between 90 and 95 percent, depending on the period. Next to the Jews, and nominally subjected to the same discipline and the same regimen, there were also some "Aryans" labeled as common criminals (their badge was a green triangle) or political prisoners (red triangles); the latter were almost all German or Austrian. All the German-speaking greens and reds held a position, however low; in reality, none of them followed the fate of the Jews and the non-German-speaking prisoners. I remember only one red German who had no position: he was a Social Democrat, a small, puny man and frankly not very bright. I'm not sure what post he was offered, but he had the courage and the dignity to refuse it; yet he was the only one. It's likely that this wasn't an order from Berlin. It must have been a local, discretionary initiative, undertaken instinctively by the officials of the Lagers, but substantially in accord with the spirit of the country as it was then: German blood, which manifested itself in the language, had to be favored. This instinct was so strong that even the Jewish prisoners, if they were German speakers, sometimes had an easier life, that is to say they had a slightly lower probability of dying. Compared with belonging to the

German nation, as attested by the language, all else became secondary, including the category of criminal, or even political adversary.

Such was the spirit of Germany at the time. It would be foolish to refuse to admit that in both Germanys of today many things have changed: but the first reactions of public opinion and of the German press (of the Federal Republic of Germany; of the German Democratic Republic we know nothing) lead one to think that that spirit has not changed. The lost war, millions of dead, the country divided, the occupation, the hunger and cold of ’45 and ’46 taught the Germans quite well that an adventure with the radical right doesn’t pay, and in fact there is no German equivalent of the Italian Fascist Party. But all this does not seem to have taught them, or at least not all of them, that a German is a human being worth neither more nor less than any other human being.

The indignation at the refusal to pardon Kappler last November and the unseemly rejoicing at his “repatriation” on August 15 were too widespread to refer to Kappler the Nazi, Kappler the sick man, Kappler the SS officer: they referred clearly to Kappler the German. It was not his sojourn in prison that wounded public opinion but, rather, his sojourn in an Italian prison. There are a certain number of German war criminals who are to this day held in German prisons: I don’t think I am wrong in predicting that if one of them escaped (but it’s unlikely that this would occur: they are better jailers than we are), the fact would be judged by German public opinion with much less indulgence, and the local Lattanzio would fall within hours.

It is not a neo-Nazi Germany that applauded the initiative of Ms. Anneliese Kappler[1]; it is the self-righteous and legalistic Germany, the same one that wasn’t National Socialist but offered Nazism a warm womb, fertile and welcoming. Like a reagent, and beyond the cautious official responses, the Kappler case revealed how deep the bond of blood and soil is among the German people, to this day.

Ha Keillah *3, no. 1 (October 1977)*

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1. Kappler’s wife, a nurse, helped him escape from the Italian military hospital where he was being treated for cancer.

Exported Words

A stimulating and curious book was published recently, more valuable than the title seems to promise (Giacomo Elliot,[1] *Let's Speak Itanglian*, Rizzoli). Itanglian, as defined by the author, is the Italian-English, or rather Italian-American, jargon that is rapidly spreading in various circles, and especially in the circle in which the author seems to be at home, that of "management," of company management, and, even more specifically, in companies active in the more advanced technological fields. In fact, an entire chapter of the book, presented in the form of a well-thought-out glossary, is devoted to "words that come from EDP," where EDP is an Itanglian abbreviation that means "electronic data processing."

Let it be clear that the author's intentions are very far from those of a purist, and in my view there is absolutely nothing to object to on this point. To demand that a "kit" be called, instead, a *scatola di montaggio* or a *cassetta degli attrezzi* would be foolish as well as useless: linguistic economy has its laws, and where a single syllable says more and better than seven, the purist can merely raise the white flag. Not so, the author correctly notes, when the foreign term is used for other reasons, for example to make oneself seem important, or to deliberately obscure one's thought: in these cases, its use is to be deplored, and its linguistic vitality is questionable.

The battle of the purist is a desperate battle of defense: it is so today, with the advance of Itanglian, and always has been, in every century and every country, when it has sought to oppose the irruption of new words that were necessary supports to new cultures, concepts, or objects. In most European languages, terms of obvious Italian origin are still in use to this

day—“bank” (*banca*), “discount” (*sconto*), “reduction” (*ribasso*), “net” (*netto*), “percent” (*percento*), “dividend” (*dividendo*), and so on—and this is an enduring homage to the entrepreneurship (and the linguistic creativity) of Tuscan and Lombard bankers of the seventeenth century, who were so well-known that at the time, in London, “Lombard” was a synonym for banker.

In the same manner, the prestige that the arts in Italy, and especially music, enjoyed in the sixteenth century has to this day an echo in words that, not translated, have become part of all languages, like “cupola,” “chiaroscuro,” “adagio,” “crescendo,” etc. The irruption of Itanglian into our technological language is a strictly analogous phenomenon. It is not, in itself, an illness; it’s only a symptom. It is, however, the symptom of a grave illness: today’s technology originates and develops elsewhere; the meager creativity of our language signals the low level of creativity in our technology. It signals that, in this field, Italy is “acculturated,” and not just linguistically.

We know little about the author of this singular book, at least so far—in fact, nothing, except for the note on the back flap, which is suspect, and which (if I may employ here an Itanglian term that escaped the author himself) has the air of being “forged.” But judging from the things he says, and the way he says them, he is certainly an amiable man, witty and civilized, and has a long and varied experience. Some of his observations—for example, his disapproval of the “humanistic” contempt in which administrative and bookkeeping techniques are held here in Italy—in times like these refresh the blood like a breath of oxygen; it’s so rare now to be reminded that to create well-being it’s necessary to create wealth, and that to create wealth it’s necessary to work and administer well!

Equally useful is the diagnosis of certain corporate illnesses that one reads as a comment on and clarification of the term “controller.” It bears witness to the author’s long and intelligent militancy in industry and its compatibility with his varied and lively cultural background, which resonates in a prose that is always consummately clear and often elegant.

The single Itanglian words that are presented are defined, clarified, and commented on in different keys. Some with purely didactic intent, so that the term can be understood, used appropriately, and not flaunted for exhibitionist purposes (e.g., “real time”); others with more or less evident ironic intent. In fact, it’s exactly this subtle, at times scarcely noticeable

modulation of irony that confers on the text a peculiar taste, bringing it closer to classics like Swift and Butler. To what extent must we take seriously the recurring statement, repeated also on the jacket, that Itanglian "is useful for your career"? The naïve or hurried reader runs the risk of convincing himself that knowledge and public and frequent use of this jargon truly are necessary, even sufficient, in order to become a great manager, whereas in reality, of course, things are different. But precisely: it is typical of the best irony to be ironic about itself, canceling out or imperceptibly blurring its own borders, in order to provoke in the reader a persistent and healthy doubt.

But even apart from this subtle derisive intent, the book could and should remain within reach of many people, laymen or specialists, purely for its qualities as a glossary and a guide. Unless there are unpredictable changes, for still more decades advanced technology will continue to flow in the direction in which, unfortunately, it is flowing today, and will enrich our language with new terms—terms that will immediately become necessary, and which, nonetheless, official dictionaries will never accept, or will accept only belatedly. As a consequence, there will yet again blossom that vital linguistic phenomenon by means of which metaphors emerge from the arts, so apt that they find an immediate welcome and become part of the lexicon. At one time, the arts were few, and they were fertile matrices—for instance, the mill and the stable, which, in addition to countless proverbs, have given us, respectively, "to sift" (*vagliare*, winnow) and "brake" (*freno*, bit).

Today the "arts" are more numerous and even a person who doesn't have a driver's license understands when someone laments that his "battery is low." No one should therefore be surprised if a term like "disposal," in the sense (the exact and concise equivalent of which doesn't exist in Italian) of "elimination, destruction of garbage, rubbish, harmful or troublesome by-products," not only enters, Italianized or not, our daily language but reappears in derivatives and permanent and vital metaphors. In conclusion, for anyone interested in seeing the wall that separates the so-called two cultures pierced—and which atrophies them both, and in Italy is higher and more solid than elsewhere—reading this book will be useful and agreeable: he will find a gift and a surprise on every page.

La Stampa, *February 17, 1978*

1. Giacomo Elliot is the pseudonym of Roberto Vacca.

Women for Slaughter

When David Rousset coined the now famous term “concentration-camp universe” (*univers concentrationnaire*), he knew what he was doing—it was in fact a universe, infinite and diverse, still not fully explored. This book[1] fills (at least in Italy) a gap, the gap of female deportation, and, together with *Il mondo dei vinti* (*The World of the Vanquished*), by Nuto Revelli, and *Compagne* (*Companions*), by Bianca Guidetti Serra—both made up of testimony that wasn’t tampered with—constitutes an important trilogy. In all three books one discerns the muted and solemn voices of those who acted and endured with incredible strength, of those who were demurely silent for decades, of those who could not speak.

The book’s structure is complex: there are two authors, Lidia Beccaria Rolfi and Anna Maria Bruzzone; the first testimony is that of Lidia, who was herself deported, and it is also the longest and most organic. The testimony of four female Italian political deportees follows. Bruzzone edited the book and wrote the dense and terse introduction.

All these witnesses were deported to Ravensbrück, as were the majority of the female “politicals” from all the countries occupied by the Nazis: in fact, it was for this purpose that Ravensbrück was built. Built out of nothing, an artificial city that can’t be found, and couldn’t be found at the time, in any atlas, it was the product of a monstrous plan, the only Lager populated exclusively by women, who were, from the beginning, “rented out” by the SS to the war industries and the neighboring farms, as if they were farm animals. On page 16 an appalling calculation is reported in detail: how much a human being can yield when made to work until death by exhaustion. On average, the yield (according to SS sources) is 1631

marks, to which should be added the “proceeds from the use of the bones and ashes.”

The comparison with farm animals isn’t coincidental, nor is it coincidental that the deported women were deliberately treated worse than the men. In Nazi ideology, equality between men and women was ridiculed as decadent and bourgeois. A short book that I think is impossible to find today, *Education for Death*, by Gregor Ziemer, published in London (but in Italian) in 1941, is enlightening in this regard; the subtitle is *The Making of the Nazi*, and the book contains a lucid summary of how young men and women were brought up and educated in Hitler’s Germany.

The first duty of the German man was to fight and die for the homeland and that of the German woman to sweeten the warrior’s repose and give birth to new generations of fighters. The foreign woman, especially if she is assumed to be an enemy or “of inferior race,” has no other purpose than, precisely, to be used as a draft animal; when her productivity declines or ceases, there is the crematorium, and her ashes, mixed with the contents of the Lager’s cesspools, are distributed to farms.

The long silence was helpful for all the witnesses. Lidia speaks of it explicitly on the last page of her deposition: she hesitated to tell her story, her experience was too inhuman to be accepted by a normal listener, she was afraid she wouldn’t be believed, she felt around her a “wall” of incomprehension or of easy pity. An eighteen-year-old teacher in a valley of Cuneo, nourished on Fascist rhetoric in school, she quickly understands the tragedy of the Albanian and Russian fronts and, after the armistice, naturally becomes a partisan.

After the trauma of her arrest, of prison in Turin, and the sealed freight car, this provincial girl, without political experience, sympathetic companions, or linguistic knowledge, is thrust into the fortress of Ravensbrück, where she seems “to have fallen onto another planet.” She hasn’t had the time or the means to realize that it is precisely this horrendous alienation that is the ultimate goal of the concentration-camp city, “conceived, planned, and structured deliberately to rape the person, humiliate her, destroy her, reduce her to a beast.”

But she’s young, intelligent, gifted with a miraculous will to resist, to understand, to figure out the whys. She learns a little French, orients herself, and manages to take the great step: from subproletarian, from *Schmizstück* (“piece of trash” is what, in the crude language of the camp,

women at their limits, destined to rapid collapse owing to hunger, humiliation, and mistreatment, are called), to “proletarian,” that is, worker in the Siemens factory.

It’s the first step toward salvation. The second, definitive one is the encounter with Monique, a remarkable character: a lucid, hard, and experienced French “political” prisoner, who takes on the “social and political education” of the young Italian woman, *constructs* her, forces her to study, to exercise her brain, explaining “why washing yourself . . . is part of the Resistance in the camp.” Monique transforms the victim into a fighter, attentive and aware, capable of registering internally the horrors amid which she lives, of identifying a logic, the paranoid logic of profit above all else, of exploitation without restraint, of man reduced to instrument. I believe that, on this subject, no reader will ever be able to forget the atrocious pages on the children born in Ravensbrück. The teacher from Val Varaita, in Cuneo, became the historian of Ravensbrück. *R.* was her university.

The testimony of the other witnesses is briefer and more personal. As is true of all survivors, each one experienced the Lager in a different way. Bianca Paganini, a young anti-Fascist from La Spezia, with Catholic roots, although she strenuously refused any compromise, identifies (significantly) the signs of compassion in the desperate women who surround her, and she herself feels compassion for the German political prisoners. Her faith, which sustained her at first, for the most part crumbles before the piles of cadavers: “It was difficult to start believing again: a little at a time, though, I succeeded.”

Livia Borsi, born in 1902, a socialist “by birth” (she’s the daughter of a dockworker in Genoa, illiterate but evolved), is sustained not only during her imprisonment but before and after by a native, almost savage energy that allows her to insert herself into the savage life of the Lager and to survive. She endures everything, almost naturally: there isn’t a trace of self-pity in her words, as if she had drawn strength from an atavistic experience of combat. She is generous and extroverted, she cries and sings, suffers and helps those who suffer more than she does, she “invents” the sabotage of the Germans’ work, and at no point does she approach breakdown and surrender.

The final testimony, given in the two voices of the Baroncini sisters, is perhaps the most moving: the entire family is deported, father, mother, and

three daughters, and in the innocent and courageous words of the two survivors the most atrocious pain emerges, the pain of seeing family members die in front of you, day by day, beyond any possible aid.

This book arrives just in time to corroborate the unscrupulous, fraudulent nature of the commercial operation that is flooding all the screens with Nazi-sex movies, and how inadequately these, even the less vulgar, reflect the true condition of women in the Lager. No, the deportees were not sexual objects: they were, in the best of cases, exhausted draft animals, and, in the worst, ephemeral "pieces of trash," precisely. This is confirmed by the very few whom strength, intelligence, and luck allowed to bear witness.

La Stampa, *March 10, 1978*

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1. The book referred to is Le donne di Ravensbrück (The Women of Ravensbrück) (Turin: Einaudi, 1978).

Close Encounters with Astuteness

Dear Soldati[1]

I have not forgotten our only encounter under a timid Venetian sun, or our unspoken pride in continuing to address each other formally in an environment where everyone else was using first names: like a secret sign of recognition between two specimens of a race on its way to extinction, reserved, dignified, and a little strange—curious and objects of curiosity.

I'm writing to you regarding your observations of Sunday, March 26, on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I, too, have seen the movie; I enjoyed it, admired its spectacular tricks, and regretted that I have never had (or sought) access to this amazing gymnasium of games, science-fiction movies; but I didn't believe in the encounters, not for an instant did I feel transported, not for an instant was I unaware of the fact that I was watching a very carefully prepared circus show, in which nothing is left to the imagination or to the impulse of the moment. Everything was studied, practiced, and tested infinite times, in fact, constructed by a patient and methodical group effort—the sociologist, the psychologist, the folklorist, the moralist, the theologian (not the astronomer or, alas, the biologist), all sitting around a table. Not poets but good artisans, all intent on telling a story best suited to surprise, excite, and satisfy the maximum number of spectators.

In sum, the movie seemed to me more a work of astuteness and market research than of profound inspiration; the type of viewer it is aimed at, or rather, on whom it is modeled, is more American than European, is generous and inexperienced (like the electrician), solid and tender (like the mother), naïve and clean (like the child).

2001: A Space Odyssey, which you cite, was aimed at a sophisticated viewer; this *Encounters*, instead, is aimed at an eager and simple viewer, who is devoted to a religiosity so innate that it borders on heresy, who is perplexed and tired but not desperate, who turns to the sky because he is tired of terrestrial vices and sins and because he confuses the sky of Our Father with the sky of the galaxies and spaceships. He waits for an outstretched hand and an eager and naïve smile like his own to emerge from this sky: the movie has the cynical astuteness to give them to him, the viewer, who, in his simplicity, is not surprised if the hand is threadlike and the smile is green.

It is exactly in this final revelation of the alien that the cold, didactic-moralistic intent of the movie is revealed. These space-fetuses are different beings, ugly by necessity, because the different are always ugly, but they, too, are your brothers; and you must not withdraw from the one who is different, even if it is green, even if it knows how to build missiles embroidered like cathedrals, even if it rains down from the abysses of outer space. Sacred words, but of little use: it's not outer space that makes us acrimonious but this flower bed of ours. It's easy to love the alien, harder to love your neighbor.

Thus, your statement "the greatest results, in art and life, are always, more or less, involuntary and unconscious" seemed vaguely improper. In fact, I don't believe in the unconsciousness of Spielberg and Truffaut, nor do I see great results in these encounters, if not, precisely, as a spectacle and as a (not to be underestimated) cleverly calculated commercial success. Nevertheless, this axiom of yours is memorable, and debatable in the best sense of the word, that is, worthy of being debated.

Personally, I think that it would be serious and sad if it were always like this, if the greatest results were *always* and completely involuntary: there would be nothing to do but sit down, or lie down, and wait for the results to arrive, gracious gift of the unconscious—ours or the collective. No, I don't think that your *Capri Letters* are involuntary or unconscious.

Please accept my most cordial greetings.

YOURS,
Primo Levi

La Stampa, *March 29, 1978*

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1. Levi is responding to an article in *La Stampa* by the novelist Mario Soldati.

Letter to Euge

Dear Euge,[1]

Communicating with you in this unusual way, in an open letter in a newspaper, “after everything that has passed between us,” seems odd and fun: let’s hope it’s fun for those who read it as well. I’d like to add to and correct something regarding the episode that you recounted in the February issue of this paper (“The Resistance Began in Via Roma”).[2]

First of all, I wasn’t there, rather, “I wasn’t there” (“Oh forever pained is he who / . . . Telling his children one day [about those times] / Will have to say with a sigh: ‘I wasn’t there’ ”)[3]: at the time, I was working outside the city and also my father was dying, so Franco Momigliano, who I believe was the promoter of the enterprise, had excused me; but I nevertheless remember several details that I think are worthy of description. On the part of the Fascists, putting up those posters wasn’t an isolated initiative: a little earlier there had been a clumsy attempt to set fire to the portal of the temple, and anti-Semitic phrases appeared in tar on many neighborhood walls. As a result, in the classrooms of the Jewish school we had organized surveillance shifts, in at least one of which I participated. The posters—vulgar, fanatical, and full of inaccuracies—presumably came from the German consulate: Emanuele Artom mentions them in his diary (*Three Lives*, brought out by the publisher Israel, 1954), and adds that he saw “agents of the authorities” removing some of them. This episode should probably be set in the context of the profound disagreement that existed between the Fascists and the Nazis on the question of race.

The removal of Fascist posters, seen in the light of those times, was a rather audacious enterprise, and the spectators in Via Roma did not fail to

kindly point out to the youths at work on this unusual task, “Watch out, it’s dangerous: if they catch you you’ll end up in jail.” Apparently, reactions of outrage or of open solidarity were rare: to Italians at the time, dazed by propaganda, opposing fascism seemed strange rather than heroic or criminal. You remembered correctly that you worked in pairs, and I’d like to add that these were pairs made up of a boy and a girl, which, given the times, I think, is significant, almost a preview of the role that women later had in the Resistance; and that not all the participants were Jews. Certainly Bianca Guidetti Serra and Juanita Pautasso were there, in addition to other “Aryans,” whose names I don’t recall. This was not coincidental, either; the question of race was so obviously unjust, stupid, and copied from the other side of the Alps that it functioned as a detonator for many consciences, and not only of the young. Nuto Revelli shook off his Fascist loyalty precisely when he saw, from the troop train taking him to the Russian front, the treatment that the Germans reserved for the Jews.

It seems to me that the removal of the posters continued for several evenings without provoking more than fearful curiosity on the part of the public. The police intervened only on the last evening, but not very severely: they scattered the crowds, asked a few people for their documents in a pro forma fashion, and basically tried to send everyone home, demonstrating (perhaps on that occasion for the first time) a revelatory weakness and a noticeable fear of possible complications. I think that Guido Foa’s inspiration contributed to this fear: Guido, blond and almost six feet tall, didn’t look very Jewish, nor did he share the fatal Jewish tendency toward intellectualism—he would have liked to be a comic actor, and in fact I think he had already appeared onstage in some sketches he had made up. Towering above the crowd, he started to ask people, mimicking a southern accent, for their “dogumends,” including the policemen themselves, who were in plainclothes, and to call out nonsensical orders, adding to the confusion. It’s unbearably sad now to recall this imaginative and happy entrance of his, because a few years later Guido, like many others among our companions at the time, ended up at Auschwitz.

The Community Council issued a protest to police headquarters, and it all ended there. The harsh ordeal of the French front had already passed, and the disaster of the earlier intervention on the Greek front. This modest undertaking, which may well have been the first public manifestation of

antifascism in Turin, after the Matteotti crime,[4] must have convinced the zealots that the time for a Kristallnacht in Turin was still far away.

YOURS,
Primo

Ha Keillah *4, April 1978*

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1. Eugenio Gentili Tedeschi, a friend from Levi's youth.
2. A group of young people tore down posters against Jews that had been put up along Turin's Via Roma; this was the first act of resistance in the city.
3. The lines are from "March 1821" by Alessandro Manzoni.
4. The Italian Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti was assassinated by Fascists on June 10, 1924.

So That the SS Don’t Return

The violence we breathe around us today mustn’t allow us to forget the violence of a recent past, the one that under the sinister insignia of the death’s head and the runic double S devastated Europe: because violence begets violence and there is not a good violence that can be opposed to a bad one. I don’t believe that the events in Germany (and in Italy!) in recent months can be fully understood if one ignores the fact that, in 1977 alone, there were at least thirty meetings of former SS members: not only in every corner of West Germany but in France, in the very places where they shed blood; and also in Italy, on May 28, in Varna, near Bressanone.

This news is disseminated via a publication of the group HIAG, the Mutual Help Association of Former Waffen-SS Members, a pious screen behind which ex-SS soldiers hide, duly organized into veterans associations. Because a HIAG does exist, in the Germany of the *Berufsverbot*, the occupational purge, in the Germany of well-being, and it seems that no one, or very few, has found anything to object to: even though it is, precisely, with the HIAG that the profanation of Jewish cemeteries, the threatening swastikas on walls, the attacks on democratic institutions originate, and not just in Germany.

The German government doesn’t seem to realize the subversive potential represented by this renewed presence of the Nazi poison in the body of the country, both because of the contagion directed at terrorist groups recruited from the new generation, and because of the radicalization of groups that declare themselves nominally to be left wing.

Confronted with this intolerable situation, the anti-Fascist organizations of Europe have launched an appeal from Brussels, supported by eighty-four

associations of ex-deportees, partisans, resistance fighters, and victims of the SS from twenty-one countries (including Israel and the countries of the Eastern bloc), to request the dissolution of the SS veterans associations, according to the terms of the constitution of West Germany.

An exclusive international committee, on which Italy is represented by the National Association of Former Deportees (ANED), has in addition decided to call for a big protest march, on Saturday, April 22, in Cologne, at which, naturally, thousands of German anti-Fascists will also be present: in fact, this initiative (the first to gather all the European anti-Fascists on German soil) is not intended to assume an antagonistic character; rather, it is intended to recognize the merits of those among the German people who were able to maintain faith in the democratic ideal through the Nazi darkness, paying a heavy tribute in blood for their conviction.

But there is also a proposal to remind the current German government of the promises formulated time and again by all the chancellors and all the presidents of West Germany, namely, that never again, and in no form, would Nazism be reborn on German soil, inviting those responsible to concrete political and legislative action.

The anti-Fascists don’t ask for sanctions against individual SS veterans, but demand that their associations be eliminated from the life of the country, that they no longer have a voice, can no longer pollute the new generations with their “messages.” No European has forgotten that the massacres of Marzabotto, Boves, Lidice, Oradour, the Ardeatine Caves were the work of the SS, or that the SS were assigned to the management of the labor camps, from which they gained fantastic advantages, and of the extermination camps, with their abominable equipment and their millions of dead. SS survivors must stop boasting about these exploits.

La Stampa, *April 2, 1978*

Everyone Must Understand Who the Red Brigades Are

Amid the proliferation of hypotheses, and at the end of almost two months of anguish, the tragedy that began on March 16 has reached its conclusion.[1] It's too early to predict the consequences of what happened: we all share a deep distress, which nevertheless shouldn't be confused with despair. We are distressed because of the unprecedented cruelty and the impunity with which the kidnapping came to an end, and because of the darkness that surrounded it. Let's not forget: our country has been groping in this same darkness since 1969, and we have been unwlling or unable to shed light on it. Behind all this, one catches a glimpse of a cynical and merciless game that started in Dallas and that we may never be able to understand. We are also distressed because of the inefficiency of the response and the incompetence displayed in confronting the mad yet lucid arrogance of the Red Brigades.

But it's not too early to try to draw some lessons from what happened. It was a mistake to let our many wounds fester without responding with timely and organic measures; to forgo justice by relying on oblivion; to set the arrogance of power against the urge to clean house. These are faults and mistakes not just of our institutions but of all of us citizens, in that we didn't exercise, or we didn't exercise well, our right to control from below; in that we often shrugged our shoulders in the face of transgressions; in that, when patience ran out, we believed that it was easier to destroy than to heal.

Now we have to confront a very different arrogance. It is to be hoped that the Red Brigades, because of the same inhuman coldness with which they continue in their crimes, have revealed their true nature to the few who

had perceived them as comrades in arms. They are not the heirs of the workers' movement; they have nothing to do with it, not in the way they operate and even less so in their language.

The content of their messages elicits surprise more than revulsion. Instead of the quiet self-assurance of someone who follows an idea, we find the exaltation of the megalomaniac and the monomaniac, encouraged by bloody exploits and unconcerned with any civilized discussion of different opinions, which they ridicule. In the absurd hypothesis that they prevailed, there is no doubt that the country would be submerged by a tide of barbarianism without precedent in modern history, even more odious, perhaps, than that of the "not yet forgotten Nazi SS," to which they dare compare the police force.

La Stampa, *May 10, 1978*

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1. On March 16, 1978, Aldo Moro, the president of the Christian Democratic Party, a former prime minister, and a promoter of a political "compromise" with the Communist Party, was kidnapped by the left-wing terrorist group the Red Brigades. His body was found in the trunk of a parked car on a Roman street on May 9, 1978.

Remembrance of Azelia Arici

It would be difficult to say how many people, not only in Turin, will be saddened by the death of Azelia Arici.[1] Her former students can be counted in the thousands, and to these should be added the many others she taught, until a few months ago, at gatherings that were more like nimble conversations than like lessons, in which she sought to continue, beyond her official teaching, to be a guide to anyone who wished to update and refresh his knowledge of Italian and other literatures.

It couldn't have been easy for her to succeed Augusto Monti in his position at the D'Azeglio High School, at a time when every teacher had to submit to the bitter humiliation of obedience to fascism: Professor Arici fulfilled her task with unforgettable dignity, never yielding to the prevailing rhetoric but, rather, cultivating and promoting a repulsion toward rhetoric, a diligent critical vigilance, which permeated her teaching and was, in essence, a "resistance" ahead of its time. Many recall her as severe in putting down nonsense or an empty theme, but they also recall her distress and her anger when a student she respected was given a bad grade by the commission for graduation exams.

Up until the moment when illness took away the faculty of expressing herself, and despite her advanced age, she preserved an astonishing youthfulness of spirit, an eager desire for new things to see and to learn, a never satisfied curiosity, which drove her to long and uncomfortable journeys in the years in which many tend to give in to weariness. In recent times she had finished the revision of her celebrated translation of the complete works of Tacitus, an undertaking that would dismay a far younger person. To us, her former students, her memory remains near above all for

her lively and agile conception of culture, and for her capacity to transmit and enrich it, with a sensitivity and a human warmth that over the years became increasingly refined.

La Stampa, *July 7, 1978*

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1. This was preceded by a paragraph in italics: “Azelia Arici died last Tuesday. She was eighty-three. She had been hospitalized since April. She left precise wishes. Among others that the announcement of her death should be made after the funeral.” [Editor’s note in the Italian edition.]

A World That Hitler Canceled

The news that Isaac Bashevis Singer has won the Nobel Prize must please even those who have read just one of his many books. As usual, and in keeping with its nature, the prize acknowledges someone who has devoted his life to writing, and who has been able to write for everyone: two qualities that are clearly recognizable in Singer.

In almost all of his writings, Singer sticks to his mother tongue, Yiddish, and to his roots in Galicia, both of which are remote and practically unknown to the average Italian reader. Nevertheless, his stories and novels are printed by the tens of thousands in Italy and are read by young and old, by the cultured and by the unsophisticated.

The reason for this enduring success is to be found in the honesty of Singer's writing, which is never pretentious, never cluttered with preciousness or mannerisms, and in the nineteenth-century richness of his imagination, which absorbs and transfigures everything: the great political and social movements that shake Central Europe at the beginning of our century; popular fairy tales that are ingenuous, witty, and strange, and seem to float up from the contained community of a Polish village toward the low, gloomy skies painted by Chagall; the wind of the Enlightenment, blowing in decades late to revive (and threaten) the age-old stability of the shtetl; the holy and cheerful eccentricity of Hasidic preaching; and a completely earthy sensuality that erodes and overflows the banks of a strict code.

But one cannot read Singer's books without heartache, because the varied, gay, and sorrowful world that he describes doesn't exist anymore. It was destroyed by Hitler's barbarity, which, in a few years, wiped out a

whole culture and a civilization, an event unique in modern history. Reading again the saga *The Family Moskat*, or the unforgettable story (in *Gimpel the Fool*) of the widow who lies with the devil, grows fond of him, nurses him when he is sick, always refusing to recognize him as the village tramp, we cannot escape the oppressive feeling of someone who digs with apprehensive compassion among the ruins of a buried city.

La Stampa, *October 6, 1978*

It Started with Kristallnacht

It's not likely that many young people have read or heard about what happened in Germany exactly forty years ago. Hitler, who had come to power in January 1933, wasted no time in distinguishing himself and his regime. After two months, he had established Dachau, the first Lager, which was to be followed by many others, intended to eliminate and terrorize the political adversaries of Nazism; eight months later, he began to exclude Jews from government jobs and the cultural life of the country.

Nazism, like all absolute powers, needed an anti-power, an anti-state on which to unload the blame for all the troubles, present and past, real or presumed, that afflicted the German people. The Jews, defenseless and perceived by many as "other," were the ideal anti-state, the focus for the nationalistic and Manichean excitement promoted by Nazi propaganda.

In September 1935, the regime promulgates the Nuremberg Laws, which define in maniacal detail who is to be considered a Jew, a half-Jew, or a quarter-Jew, and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor. This is followed by a hail of legal abuses, some cruel, others intended to humiliate, which reflect the official thesis of Nazism: the Jews are a shadowy universal power, Satan's incarnation, but here in Germany, in our hands, they are ridiculous and powerless.

From the age of six they have to wear the yellow star on their chests. They can sit only on public benches marked "*nur für Juden*"; all men must be called Israel and all women Sarah; their cows are not permitted to be mounted by the communal bull. In April 1938, the Jews' property is assessed, in June businesses belonging to them; this is the prologue to their total exclusion from economic life.

Young Germans are injected with a visceral hatred, a physical repugnance toward the Jew, destroyer of the world and its order, guilty of all crimes. The majority of German Jews feel deeply German and react to this massive propaganda by withdrawing into a dignified forbearance: they are reduced to a marginal life, of misery, sadness, and fear. Already many terrorist acts have been carried out, an obvious consequence and interpretation of the hate propaganda. These are, however, isolated events; the Nazis now need a pretext to move from individual initiatives to organized terror, and the pretext is soon found.

In October 1938, some ten thousand Jews of Polish nationality are brutally expelled from Germany. Men, women, and children are obliged to camp in a no-man's-land, in wretched conditions, while they wait for Poland to let them in. The son of one of the refugees, Herschel Grynszpan, some time ago found refuge in Paris. Just seventeen years old, he is a mystic and a fanatic: he feels that he has been appointed to take revenge, and on November 7 he kills the first German he meets, a counselor at the German embassy in Paris. It's the trigger that the Nazis were waiting for, the confirmation of their thesis of the "*international Jewish conspiracy*" against Germany, and the response is immediate. The scenario and the script have been ready for a long time; the show can start immediately.

In the night of November 9–10 the pogrom is unleashed throughout Germany. Some 7500 Jewish shops and warehouses are laid waste and looted, 815 of them completely destroyed; 195 synagogues suffer the same fate; thirty-six Jews are killed, and twenty thousand, chosen from among the most affluent, are arrested. Initially the aggressors wear uniforms, but then they are hastily sent home to change into civilian clothes: they misunderstood their orders, the indignation must spring from the people, it must be "*spontaneous*."

Everywhere, the police look on: the firemen intervene only when fires threaten "Aryan" buildings or property. Individual officials concoct local variations on the theme. In Krumbach, near Augsburg, Jewish women are dragged to the synagogue and forced to take from the Ark the scrolls of the Law and trample on them. While committing this sacrilege they must sing; those who refuse are killed.

In Saarbrücken, the Jews are ordered to carry straw into the temple, sprinkle it with gasoline, and set it ablaze. Some "indignant" demonstrators go beyond the program and indulge in personal looting; the police intervene

but the judges will send everybody home with laughable sanctions. This is not the case for the zealots (or brutes) who have raped Jewish women: they are expelled from the Party and severely punished, not because of the violence inflicted on their victims but for having contaminated themselves by violating the sacred law of blood.

The destruction rages for several more days; at the end of the "*crystal week*" the streets of all the cities are covered with the shards of shattered shopwindows. This damage alone amounts to five million marks, and it is covered by insurance. Will it be paid? Göring's solution is simple: the insurance companies will pay the Jews, but the state will intervene and confiscate everything.

In conclusion, the Union of Israelite Communities is ordered to pay a fine of one billion marks. It's the same repulsive mixture of violence, mockery, and fraud that we find five years later, in Rome, with the macabre hoax of the fifty kilograms of gold that the Jews are to hand over to Kappler to avoid deportation. A few days later, the hunt for men (and women, the ill, and children) is set off and more than a thousand Roman Jews are deported to the death camps.

Shirer, who witnessed this outburst of barbarity, may be right in recognizing in it "the warning signs of a fatal weakening that ultimately would cause the catastrophic downfall of the dictator, his regime and his country," and seeing it as the first indication of Hitler's megalomania, a disease that never fails to strike those who, on a large or small scale, exercise power without control.

Kristallnacht opened the eyes of many, notably those of the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, who at last, but too late, was persuaded that Hitler was not a gentleman you could make deals with. Unfortunately, this event did not open everybody's eyes, either in Germany or in Italy: had it done so, the world would have been spared the horrors of the Second World War, and maybe today we would live in a better society.

La Stampa, *November 9, 1978*

Jean Améry, the Philosopher-Suicide

The dreadful episode of the People's Temple, the collective suicide of nine hundred followers of a mystic-satanic sect, is incomprehensible. It may remain so forever, if "to comprehend" means to look for motives. After all, every human action contains a hard core of incomprehensibility: if it weren't so, we would be able to foresee what our neighbor will do. This doesn't happen, and maybe it's for the better. Understanding the reasons for a suicide is particularly difficult, since, in general, the victim himself isn't conscious of them, or provides himself and others with explanations that are intentionally or unintentionally distorted.

News of the massacre at Jonestown was reported by the papers at the same time as another, much less sensational event: the suicide of Jean Améry, a bad-tempered and solitary philosopher, which is, on the other hand, easy to understand and can teach us a lot. Jean Améry was not his original name: it's a pseudonym, or, rather, a new name, that the young Austrian scholar Hans Mayer chose, to show that he was forced to give up his native identity. Hans has Christian and Jewish forebears, but he is Jewish enough to be defined as such by the Nuremberg Laws. Still, he is totally assimilated: in his home they celebrated Christmas, and his recollection of his father, who died in the First World War, is not of a wise bearded Jew but of an officer of the Imperial Royal Army, in the uniform of a Tyrolean Kaiserjäger.

When the Nazis descend on Austria, Hans flees to Belgium and becomes Jean. But in 1940 Hitler's tide submerges Belgium, too, and Jean, a shy and introverted intellectual who is conscious of his dignity, joins the Belgian resistance. He does not serve in it for long. He soon falls into the

hands of the Gestapo, and is asked to reveal the names of his comrades and commanders; otherwise he will be tortured. He is no hero: if he knew names he would speak, but he doesn't know them. His hands are tied behind his back and he is suspended by his wrists with a pulley. After a few seconds his arms are dislocated and turn upward, straight behind his back. His torturers persist, lashing his hanging body mercilessly, but Jean knows nothing, he can't take refuge even in betrayal. He recovers but, as he is "legally" Jewish, he is sent to Auschwitz-Monowitz, where he lives through eighteen more months of terror.

Freed in 1945, Jean returns to Belgium and settles there, but he no longer has a homeland and he is oppressed by his past. He writes bitter and chilling essays entitled "How Much Home Does a Person Need," "The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," "Torture," "At the Mind's Limits." This last essay is a mournful and desperate meditation on "*how useful was it*" to be an intellectual in the Lager. According to Améry, it wasn't very useful at all; on the contrary, it was damaging. The intellectual found it difficult to adjust, to accept that impossible reality, and, at the same time, he didn't possess the strength, which people of faith had, to oppose it openly or within himself. One reads these pages with almost physical pain, the testimony of a shipwreck protracted over decades, until its stoical conclusion.

Elsewhere, Améry wrote: "'Listen, Israel' doesn't interest me: only 'Listen world,' only this warning could I utter with passionate anger." But also: "As a Jew, I go through life like a sick person with one of those ailments that cause no great hardships but are certain to end fatally." And finally, with lapidary precision: "Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, and in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained."

No, Jean Améry's end is not surprising, and it's sad to think that torture, which disappeared centuries ago from Europe, has returned in this century and is gaining ground in many countries; maybe "to a good end," as if anything good could come from pain deliberately inflicted. It's unbearable to think that, while the torture Améry suffered burdened him until his death —in fact, was for him an endless death—in all likelihood his torturers are sitting in an office or enjoying their pensions. If questioned (but who is

going to question them?), they would answer as usual, and with a clean conscience, that they were just following orders.

La Stampa, *December 7, 1978*

But We Were There

Well, the operation has finally succeeded. Darquier de Pellepoix's nonsense[1] in the November edition of *L'Express* wasn't enough, it wasn't enough to give space and a voice in respectable magazines to the murderers of that time so that they could preach their truth with impunity: that the millions of dead in the Lagers never died, that the Holocaust is a fairy tale, that at Auschwitz only lice were killed with gas. All this wasn't enough. Evidently the time is favorable, and from his university lectern Professor Robert Faurisson reassures the world: No, fascism and Nazism have been disparaged, poisoned, defamed. We mustn't talk about Auschwitz anymore; it was all a mise-en-scène—we must talk about the big lie of Auschwitz. Jews are cunning, they have always been cunning, so cunning that, in order to slander the innocent Nazis, they made up a slaughter that never was, and they themselves built, after the event, the gas chambers of the Lagers and the crematoriums.

I don't know Professor Faurisson. Maybe he is simply insane; there are a few such people even in academia. However, another hypothesis is more likely. Either Faurisson is, like Darquier, one of those responsible for what happened or he is the son, friend, or supporter of those responsible and he is trying to exorcise a past that, in spite of today's laxity, burdens him. We are well acquainted with certain mental mechanisms: guilt is troublesome, or at least inconvenient; in times long past, in Italy and France, it was also dangerous. One begins by denying it in court; it is denied for decades in public, then in private, then to oneself. Finally it's done: the spell has worked, black has become white, wrong right, the dead aren't dead, there is

no murderer, there's no more guilt, or, rather, there never was any. It's not just that I haven't committed a crime; the crime itself doesn't exist.

No, professor, this is not the way. There were dead men, and women, and children, too. Tens of thousands in Italy and in France, millions in Poland and in the Soviet Union: it's not so easy to get rid of them. Gathering the evidence wouldn't be hard, if it's evidence you want. Ask the survivors, there are survivors in France, too, let them tell you what it was like to see their companions die around them, one by one, to feel themselves dying day by day for one, two years, to live without hope in the shadow of the chimneys of the crematoriums, to return (those who returned) to find their family destroyed. This is no way to cleanse oneself of guilt, professor: even for those who speak from the lectern, facts are stubborn adversaries. If you deny the slaughter committed by your old friends, you must explain to us why 17 million Jews in 1939 were reduced to 11 million in 1945. You must contradict hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans. You must contradict each of us survivors. Come, professor, talk to each one of us: you'll find it more difficult than feeding nonsense to your naïve pupils. Naïve to the point of believing you? None of them raised a hand in protest? And what did the French school authorities and the judiciary do? Did they allow you, by denying the dead, to kill them a second time?

Corriere della Sera, *January 3, 1979*

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1. Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, commissioner for Jewish affairs during the Vichy regime, had been interviewed by the French magazine *L'Express*.

A Lager at Italy's Gates

Mondadori is about to publish a book filled with shame and suffering. Its author, Ferruccio Fölkel, is from Trieste, and the book is entitled *La risiera di San Sabba: Trieste e il litorale Adriatico durante l'occupazione nazista* (*The Rice Mill of San Sabba: Trieste and the Adriatic Littoral During the Nazi Occupation).* In the fall of 1943, a detachment of highly specialized SS officers and noncommissioned officers was quartered in this rice mill, an old plant formerly used to husk and dry rice. They were trained in the craft of collective and secret murder, first in the German centers where the mentally disabled were euthanized, and later in the Polish total extermination camps.

For instance, among them was Franz Stangl, who was personally (and avowedly) responsible for the deaths of 600,000 people, and whose chilling deposition can be read in Gitta Sereny's book *Into That Darkness*. They had successfully accomplished their mission in Eastern Europe, but on the recently occupied Adriatic coast there was a good job waiting for them: a growing number of partisans from Istria, Slovenia, and Croatia and a few thousand Jews. Besides, their presence in the German motherland was not welcome, because they were a band of corrupt and treacherous schemers, but most of all because they knew a secret that, in the ever more likely possibility of a military defeat, could become inconvenient for many Nazi leaders who were ready to offer themselves to the English and the Americans as anti-Soviet mercenaries, in a hoped-for reversal of alliances. This was the secret of the gas chambers and crematoriums of Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz.

However, if they operated in a peripheral region like the Adriatisches Kustenland, the Adriatic coastland belonging to the Reich, and used the well-tested technique of spreading terror while keeping secret the most sinister details, their work could still prove valuable. Thus, with the help of Ukrainian and Italian auxiliaries, a storage room of the rice mill was turned into a gas chamber, and the drying room into a crematorium. This small Italian extermination camp, rudimentary but merciless, was active for more than a year and killed an undetermined number of victims: probably around five thousand.

It's not the first time we've heard about this rice mill, but in the past the talk was timid. Thanks to a prosecutor's diligence, those responsible were brought to trial in Trieste in 1976, but this legal action, including an appeal in early 1978, proved inconclusive (and how could it have been otherwise, since the events to be judged had occurred thirty years earlier?), and it took place in almost total silence: the same silence that had shrouded the slaughter.

Why this silence, then and now? There are several, interconnected reasons. In San Sabba, as elsewhere, the Nazis, before they fled, destroyed the mass death apparatus, trying hard to make it unrecognizable. The victims of the rice mill were mostly Slav partisans, and Tito's fighters were not liked by the temporary English and American administrators of Trieste, and for many years, after the Tito-Stalin split, they weren't popular with the Soviets or the Italian Communists, either. Also, local Fascist officials had been involved in running the rice mill.

Yet unifying all these reasons for silence is another, more general one: the feeling of guilt of an entire generation. Guilt is troublesome, and it rarely leads to atonement. Those burdened by guilt tend to get rid of it by various means: by forgetting, by denying, by falsifying, by lying to others and to themselves. It is fitting that this book, the result of a personal investigation by the author, should be read now; it can act as an antidote. Just in the past few months, and with surprising simultaneity, quite different "testimony" has been published. David Irving, a British historian, proposes the insane thesis that Hitler didn't order the holocaust of European Jews, and didn't

even learn about it until 1943. As if Hitler had never read the *Stürmer*, which in every issue incited readers to the purifying massacre.

Other voices, from France, also expound a strange new thesis. In all the trials held so far (the Nuremberg trial; the Auschwitz trial, held in 1965 in Frankfurt; the Eichmann trial, held in Jerusalem), the few perpetrators dragged to judgment justified themselves with the usual arguments. They did not personally commit the crime; they were acting under duress; they were bound by their oath of allegiance, their duty as soldiers, and their loyalty to their superiors. However, they never dared to deny the reality of the mass exterminations. It is two Frenchmen who have demonstrated this audacity: maybe they counted on memories fading after thirty-five years, maybe they hoped that in the meantime the survivors and the few but inconvenient witnesses would have disappeared from the scene.

Not much needs to be said about the first man. Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, formerly in charge of the Jewish question in the Vichy government and, as such, directly responsible for the deportation of seventy thousand Jews, is now eighty-five and visibly growing senile. Interviewed (but why? why do you, my French journalist colleagues, lend yourselves to these ambiguous efforts?) by *L'Express*, he denies everything. The pictures of heaps of dead bodies are photomontages; the statistics of millions of dead were made up by the Jews, always eager for publicity and pity; deportations did take place, but he didn't know their destination or outcome; Auschwitz did have gas chambers, but they were meant only for killing lice—anyway (note the consistency!), they were built after the war. It's not difficult, and it's charitable, to recognize in Darquier the typical case of someone who, accustomed to lying in public, ends up lying in private as well, and to himself, and constructing a convenient truth that allows him to live in peace.

Faurisson's case is less clear. Robert Faurisson is fifty years old and teaches French literature at the Second University of Lyon. For eighteen years, he has been cultivating an innocent obsession: he wants to prove that gas chambers never existed in the Nazi Lagers. This is the goal of his life, and in order to achieve it he has compromised (or is compromising) his academic career. Indeed, the chancellor, worried about Faurisson's extravagant assertions and the reactions that they were causing among the students, has, after some hesitation, temporarily suspended him from teaching, and, further, barred him from the university.

But Faurisson is not giving up. He is flooding *Le Monde* with letters, he complains because they aren't published, he accuses the chancellor of having started a campaign against him and denying him a long overdue promotion. Last December 12, he wrote again to *Le Monde* in a tone of arrogance and ultimatum: he expects "a *public* debate on a topic that is obviously being avoided: the 'gas chambers.' I am asking *Le Monde*, as I have been doing for the past four years, to publish at long last my two pages on '*La rumeur d'Auschwitz.*' The moment has come. The time is ripe."

At this point it should be clear to anyone that this individual is frustrated, affected by a monomania bordering on paranoia. However, on December 29, *Le Monde* does publish the two pages, promising a rebuttal (which in fact appears the next day), and prefacing them with this curious comment: "However aberrant, M. Faurisson's thesis has provoked some uneasiness, especially among the young, who are disinclined to accept established views without questioning them." Faurisson's arguments are as follows: there were no gas chambers in Oranienburg, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, etc., *therefore*, there weren't any anywhere. The chambers described by Höss, the Auschwitz commander, are not credible because Höss testified before "the Polish and Soviet judiciary" (this isn't true: Höss had earlier testified before an Anglo-American commission). The chambers in Auschwitz were 210 square meters: how could two thousand or more individuals fit inside? They could, savagely packed in; rather, we could: I didn't go inside the gas chambers (those who entered didn't come out to tell their story), but, waiting for a selection, to decide who of us were to be gassed, I was crammed, with 250 companions, into a room measuring 7 meters by 4. I described this episode in *If This Is a Man*.

The poison used in the chambers couldn't be eliminated so quickly, and it would have killed the "Germans" (thus Faurisson, interviewed by Lugano Radio) in charge of the removal of the corpses. In the eighteen years he has devoted to studying the problem, Faurisson never realized that these individuals were not Germans but other prisoners, whose well-being was of little concern to the Germans. Anyway, the poison, which was hydrogen cyanide, in those conditions was extremely volatile (it boils at 26 degrees centigrade; in the chambers, packed with human beings, the temperature

was about 37 degrees centigrade); besides, there were efficient fans, as documented not only by witnesses but by purchase orders and invoices.

Faurisson has no personal guilt: who is behind him and encourages his obsessions? Why does *Le Monde* publish him after the chancellor of his university suspended him, expressing doubts about his mental health? Maybe precisely to spread "uneasiness" among young people? If this is the case, it is surely successful: the enormity of the genocide induces incredulity, repression, and denial. Maybe what is hiding behind these attempts at "reassessment" is not just the pursuit of a journalistic fracas but the other soul of France, the one that sent Dreyfus to Guyana, accepted Hitler, and followed Pétain.

La Stampa, *January 19, 1979*

A Monstrous Crime

I am not a jurist and I have never given much thought to the origins and justification of laws, whether ours or somebody else's. However, the concept of justice, of the necessity to punish those who break the law, of the proportionality between crime and punishment, seems intuitive to me. I also find self-evident the concept of a statute of limitations. When, for whatever reason, a lot of time elapses between the crime and the judgment, the exemplary value of punishment is reduced. Furthermore, it's likely, or at least possible, that the offender has changed, that he has in some way become a different person. It seems to me that all this is relevant, and admissible, when we are talking about crimes that belong in the current, so to speak historical, image of guilt: an image constructed through the age-old experience of the many ways in which the law can be broken and, indeed, has been broken innumerable times. Well, the case of the Nazi crimes goes beyond this image, surpasses it to an unimaginable and monstrous extent, so that the new term "genocide" had to be coined. The crimes committed by Nazi Germany were such as to shatter the legal system constructed by all civilized countries through the centuries to classify and rank "normal" crimes; for this reason, it would be a grave injustice to rely on normal judicial standards. Whether today or in the conceivable future, to abstain from judging those responsible for thousands, hundreds of thousands, of executions goes against the idea of justice that we all treasure. All the more so when one considers that, in most cases, the enormous delay of German (and not only German) justice was not, so to speak, natural but, rather, the consequence of connivance, acquiescence, complicity, and deceit, which are themselves offenses and crimes. It would be absurd and unjust if an offense

could wash away another offense, which remains extremely serious even if it is increasingly remote in time.

Triangolo Rosso*, no. 2–3 (February–March 1979)*

Who Is Promoting Anti-Semitic Hatred

Within a few months several events have occurred that are alarming to everyone who remembers the holocaust of European Jewry, which began forty years ago. In November, the French collaborator Darquier de Pellepoix, surprisingly interviewed by *L'Express*, declared that no one was gassed at Auschwitz but lice.

In December, the authoritative *Le Monde* agreed to publish a short "study" by the university professor Robert Faurisson, claiming that gas chambers never existed; a few days ago, the Israeli basketball team was booed by a crowd of young people in Varese, who chanted slogans too elaborate to be improvised on the spot and waved a banner that was evidently made in advance. Is there a connection among the three episodes? Apart from sorrow and indignation, what attitude should Italian Jews adopt?

To answer these questions, the Italian Federation of Jewish Youth organized a meeting in Rome last Sunday, in the Sala Borromini. In an opening statement, Senator Umberto Terracini recalled fondly the years of his early childhood and youth in Turin, when, although the echo of the Dreyfus case was still strong, he never witnessed anti-Semitic episodes in spite of his "double fault," of being both Jewish and Communist. In 1943 he escaped capture by the Germans thanks to a warning from the secretary of the local Fascist Party. However, he stressed that in the current circumstances a return of anti-Semitism is possible, mostly because of the identification of Zionism with Judaism—out of ignorance or bad faith.

Lidia Rolfi isn't Jewish, but as a woman and as a political prisoner she, too, was "twice guilty." She shared her experience as a deportee, which was already known to many, through her recent book *Le donne di Ravensbrück*

(*The Women of Ravensbrück*). Edith Bruck, a Hungarian Jew, has for many years been a full-fledged Italian and sees herself as such. She has written all her books in Italian, and in them, as she herself says, she always tells the same story in different ways: the wound of a twelve-year-old girl suddenly plunged into the nightmare of the Lager. After her, the survivors Mario Spizzichino, from Rome, and Regina Lichter, from Kraków, spoke about the difficulties of reintegration and the wounds that are still open.

In the afternoon, a round table was held that included Lidia Rolfi, Professor Silvestri, the young journalist Accardi, and me. Against the background of our shared indignation, fairly similar assessments emerged: according to Silvestri, the above episodes must be seen in the much wider framework of a denial of history and a rejection of reality, so that labeling them anti-Semitic would be simplistic. Similarly, the TV show *Holocaust* has been successful in Germany because it turns reality into myth. Accardi, too, emphasizes this dangerous rejection of testimony, especially in written form: what will happen in a few decades when there are no longer any eyewitnesses?

Lidia Rolfi and I, in agreement because our paths have been parallel, said that substantially pessimistic opinions can and must be accompanied by optimistic actions, that is, in one's daily conduct. We maintained that to wish the Israeli athletes "ten, a hundred, a thousand Mauthausens" (as occurred in Varese) is in itself comforting evidence of the fact that today's neo-Nazism, or neo-anti-Semitism, for reasons difficult to fathom, seems inclined to seek its new recruits among the ignorant. Finally, we said that we feel reaffirmed in the duty we have chosen for ourselves: to repeat our testimony over the decades and the generations, as long as our voices last.

La Stampa, *March 13, 1979*

A Secret Defense Committee in Auschwitz

Many years ago, when I was a prisoner in Auschwitz, I witnessed an event that, at the time, I didn't understand. Around May 1944, a new Kapo was assigned to our work team. A Polish Jew of about thirty, he was frowning, taciturn, patently neurotic. He would beat us for no reason. To tell the truth, everybody beat us, for in that Babel beatings were the easiest way of communicating, the "language" understood by everybody, including the new arrivals. But this Kapo would beat people deliberately, in cold blood, to cause pain, and with a subtle cruelty intended to provoke suffering and humiliation. I commented on this behavior to a fellow prisoner from Yugoslavia, and he told me with a strange smile: "You're right, but you'll see—he won't last long." Indeed, a few days later the thug had disappeared; nobody knew what had happened to him, he had ceased to exist, or, rather, everything continued as if he had never existed. But in the Lager many things happened that couldn't be understood, the very fabric of the Lager was incomprehensible, and I soon forgot the episode.

The following December, when the thunder of the Soviet artillery could be heard nearby, I ran into a friend, the engineer Aldo Levi, from Milan, whom I hadn't seen in a long time. He was in a hurry, I don't remember why, and I was in a hurry, too. He greeted me and said, "Something may happen soon; if it does, look for me."

This encounter was also forgotten in the dramatic events of the liberation of the camp. I remembered it much later, along with the previous one, on the "civilian," in fact festive, occasion of a reunion of former deportees in Rome. There was a lunch, and I was sitting across from a French survivor. He had been in my camp, but neither he nor I remembered

having met. We exchanged the usual jokes about the fact that getting food is easy today, while it was so difficult back then. We both had been drinking a bit, and this made us inclined to open up. H. told me that at Auschwitz-Monowitz he had been a member of a secret defense committee, that many critical elements in the life of the Lager derived from its deliberations, and that, as a member of the French Communist Party, he had been assigned by the committee to work as a copyist in the Political Department, that is, the Gestapo department that dealt with political matters within the Lager. I asked him whether Engineer Levi's hurried words might have indicated that he also was a member of this clandestine organization, and H. answered that that was probably the case, but that, for the sake of secrecy, each member knew only a very few of the others.

I also asked if he could explain the story of the Kapo who disappeared, and H. gave me a smile that closely resembled the smile of my fellow prisoner from Yugoslavia. He answered that yes, in some particularly serious cases, and at great risk, they could delete a name from the list of those to be sent to the gas chamber at Birkenau and replace it with another name. No, he didn't remember the case of our Kapo, but the possibility sounded credible: on other occasions they had caused a spy or someone who stole bread to disappear in this way, or had saved a member of the committee. I knew that the laws of conspiracy are harsh, but it had never occurred to me that any random name, for instance mine, might be used to preserve a life more politically valuable than mine. I asked H. if, indeed, among the many risks that I knew I had run, there was also this unknown risk. H. answered, "*Évidemment*."

Ha Keillah, *April 1979*

A Holocaust That Still Weighs on the World's Conscience

Holocaust, by Gerald Green, is a book that has been overwhelmingly successful. Written in the United States,[1] it has been translated, or is to be translated, in about twenty other countries, to accompany the TV series that bears that name, and for which the book is basically the script. It's therefore destined to commercial success "by hereditary right," just as, once upon a time, a king's son was destined to the crown.

The book consists of the counterpoint, or, rather, the constant alternation, between two diaries and two human journeys. One is that of the young German Jew Rudi Weiss, driven (and at the end saved) by a longing for freedom and a determination to redeem, through a reckless and individualistic struggle, the inertia of his people in the face of the Nazi slaughter. The other character is Erik Dorf, an ambitious German lawyer almost the same age as Weiss, who is goaded by his even more ambitious wife, Marta.

Having joined the SS as one of Heydrich's henchmen, Erik, first as a lieutenant, then a captain, and finally a major, becomes in the novel, step by step, one of the evil geniuses who guide Hitler's Germany from the secrecy of their offices. He rarely takes initiatives, but he is a loyal and hardworking functionary. Until the end, he has no doubts: to him, the ultimate and essential purpose of the war that is being fought is not so much German victory, which is expected and certain, but the extermination of the Jews, whom he doesn't hate as individuals but whom he considers intrinsically harmful, noxious insects. Any humanitarian hesitation over their elimination would be out of place.

Erik is both a character and a symbol, and his symbolism, as is always the case, doesn't help the character's concreteness and credibility. He is omnipresent, he is wherever the Holocaust plot is being planned: he is the diabolical advisor when it comes to Kristallnacht; it's to him, somewhat arbitrarily, that the invention of the well-known euphemistic periphrases —"resettlement" for deportation, "final solution" for extermination, "special treatment" for gassing—is attributed; his is the suggestion to use hydrogen cyanide rather than carbon monoxide in the gas chambers. Rudi, after hundreds of escapes, ambushes, desperate and daring fights, will end up, at last, in Palestine, and there he will learn, and talk, about the martyrdom of his brother, Karl, in the Lager, the death of his sister, Anna, who was raped and then executed as mentally handicapped, the heroic participation of his parents and his uncle Moses in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Erik, overwhelmed by the collapse of Germany and the desertion of his superiors, will kill himself.

Holocaust is a curious book, because it's both naïve and clever: more precisely, it's clever because it's deliberately naïve. It has the tone, and the size, of a popular saga and uses the language of Western movies. It's very easy to read, accessible, taut, without pauses. It depicts stock characters with simplistic mental functioning. It describes love and hatred, cowardice and courage, generosity and abjection. It feeds on the most heartbreaking episodes—the euthanasia program, the ghetto children, the naked women waiting to be gassed, the mass graves, the butchery of Babi Yar—and each episode is seen from the two perspectives: through Erik's icy eyes and through the eyes of Rudi, in whom compassion merges with the desire for revenge. However, the retrospective compassion that the author, too, must have felt, seems to compete on every page with the aim of writing a best seller and supporting a thesis, albeit a noble one.

It's really like reading a novel, and so an observation is necessary. The monstrous events described in the book are all true: the author didn't need to use his imagination; the history of that decade provided him with a dreadful abundance of material. Not just the facts; a good part of the dialogue, the secret orders, the public declarations, and the biographical details is taken from historical documents. Surprisingly, some of the details that appear to be most natural and humane are the ones that are less truthful, and it's here that the author displays an authentic, unintended naïveté.

That Inga, Karl's "Aryan" wife, decides to request, and is granted, deportation to Theresienstadt to be reunited with her Jewish husband is naïve; the episode of the infirmary that Rudi's father, a doctor, opens illegally on the station square in the ghetto is naïve; to write that the latter, deported to Auschwitz, and, visiting his gassed wife's bunk, "went through her valise, touched her meager belongings, and took from it a folder of piano music—her old, yellowed, fraying music," is naïve, and grimly humorous. No, one entered Auschwitz naked, without a valise, and without musical scores. And the insistence on the theme of the Jews "who wouldn't revolt" is annoying, and ahistorical: Jews revolted when they could, physically and psychologically, and not just in the Warsaw Ghetto. They didn't revolt when hunger, exhaustion, and demoralization exceeded all limits, but under those conditions no one revolts. Did the millions of Soviet war prisoners, or the six hundred thousand Italian military internees, or the political detainees of Buchenwald and Mauthausen revolt?

But it would be pointless to hunt for oversights, inaccuracies, and anachronisms. As I said, the basic facts are true. If at times they don't seem true, this is not the author's fault; it's the fault of the facts themselves, or, rather, of those responsible for them. It's the fault of the enormity of the facts, which makes them unbelievable, and, to this day, there are ignorant and cynical individuals who try to take advantage of this unbelievability. This observation is attributed to Rudi at the end of the book: "The crime is so enormous, they won't believe it. That's what the Germans are counting on." This is exactly what happened, and still happens: we believe in the lesser crimes, but, confronted with millions of dead, we defend ourselves, saying, "It can't be, it couldn't have happened." All of us: the perpetrators, lying to avoid punishment; the victims, to regain a livable world, without ghosts; and those who are indifferent, to safeguard their right to indifference.

But the millions of dead are real and they still haunt the world, as shown by the resonance the TV series had in Germany, and by the fact that some countries—countries that have something to hide—refused to broadcast it. So it's useful to tell the younger generations about the Holocaust, and to do so in simple and understandable terms. It's a terrible task to recall that, in Europe only forty years ago, a people and a civilization were killed, but it happened, and the fact that it did places the horrible event among possible events, events that are *still* possible.

This book, together with the television series that it introduces, is intended to fulfill this purpose. It may help, as it did in Germany, to rouse the curiosity of those who don’t know and have a clear conscience, and maybe also (but this is less likely) to persuade those who don’t have a clear conscience. In other words, this book is an ally. We might have preferred one less loquacious, of greater historical accuracy, better suited to the purpose, but, even in this form, it is still an ally.

Tuttolibri *5, no. 16 (April 28, 1979)*

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1. It was originally published there in 1978 by Bantam.

So That Yesterday's Holocausts Will Never Return (The Nazi Slaughters, the Masses, and TV)

I wasn't able to see the entire TV series *Holocaust*; I saw only a few episodes, and that was before it was dubbed. I watched it with suspicion, the same suspicion roused in all witnesses of that time by the many attempts, recent and less recent, to "use" their experience. That experience was unique, beyond any human measure, and so constitutes a dangerous enticement for authors seeking raw material for literature or the theater, or, worse, to turn into a horror show. These are our own, intimate memories and it troubles us to see them misused.

I also found it difficult to overcome my specific reactions to several naïvetés and inaccuracies. It wasn't like this *down there*: the striped outfits were not clean but filthy, the crowding was always frightening, at every moment of the day and night, and left little space for feelings and reflection; the prisoners' cheeks weren't shaved so well, nor were the women lining up for the gas chamber so well nourished.

Anyway, these observations aren't important. The series, even if it was conceived as a business, with a dizzying budget, shows a basic good faith, a decency of intentions and results, a reasonable respect for history, and a simple (or simplifying, if you wish) approach that at times recalls Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and guarantees popular success. One shouldn't expect subtlety of feelings or psychological nuances; the show didn't intend to dwell on them and didn't.

As we know, *Holocaust* has had extraordinary success in the countries where it has been broadcast, first of all the United States, West Germany, France, and Israel, and is already a topic of discussion among sociologists.

In part, this success can be attributed, in an obvious and general way, to the unique and ruthless nature of the persecution of the Jews, its vast extent, its brutish stupidity, its unnecessary fanaticism; and in part to the specific way that each country experienced, at the time, the events described by the series.

Today the United States is the cultural center of Judaism. Moreover, Operation *Holocaust* was conceived and realized according to traditional American models and using a television language that is perhaps too American. Israel is the direct heir of the Eastern European Judaism that survived the slaughter; it came into being to redeem the exile and long enslavement of the Jewish people, and its younger generations harbor a deep sense of shame and disbelief at how easily the slaughter was perpetrated. France is a separate case, a country divided today as it was divided then: divided between the hurt of the lost war and submission to the occupying Germans, pride in the freedoms won by the Revolution, and the persistent stirring of a petty and xenophobic nationalism, of the sort that produced the Dreyfus case. It's no accident that, today, the most alarming signs of a new wave of anti-Semitism come from France.

As for Germany, the impact of the series should be obvious in a country where, to this day, thousands of the former bureaucrat-murderers live, unpunished and protected by a widespread complicity, along with hundreds of thousands of law-abiding citizens (abiding by the laws of today as they did by the laws of that time!) who saved their souls by stubbornly refusing to know and understand what was happening around them, and by just as stubbornly remaining silent, even with their children, about what they might accidentally have learned or understood. Had this film been broadcast in Germany fifteen years ago instead of today, it would probably have bounced off the thick wall of deliberate deafness that shelters the generation of the guilty, and its success would have been much smaller.

It's hard to predict how our country will react to *Holocaust*. Although the Fascist intention to hunt for Jews here was supposed to be no less determined than it was for our German allies, this expectation was largely undermined by the humane sensitivity of the Italians, by the political indifference of the time, and by the disrepute that fascism had fallen into by then.

Two observations should be made concerning the varied, at times polemical, but always profound interest stirred up by *Holocaust*. First: anti-

Semitism is an old and complex phenomenon, with barbarian or even pre-human roots (there is a well-known zoological racism, peculiar to social animals). However, it is periodically revived for cynical purposes when, in times of instability and political difficulty, it is useful to find or invent a scapegoat that is responsible for all past, present, and future troubles, and on which to unload the aggression and vindictiveness of the people. Scattered and defenseless after the Diaspora, the Jews were ideal victims and were treated as such in many countries and throughout the centuries. Weimar Germany was unstable and tormented, and needed a scapegoat; today's Italy is unstable and tormented, too.

Second: in all countries, the series was seen by tens of millions of people, not *in spite of* being a *story*, a fictionalized tale, but *because* it is a *story*. Hundreds of books have been published and hundreds of documentaries have been shown on the topic of Hitler's genocide. Yet none of them have reached an audience equivalent to 1 percent of those who watched *Holocaust* on TV. The two factors combined—the form of the novel and the medium of television—fully demonstrated their extraordinary power of penetration.

In this case, the phenomenon is positive, because it helped expose facts that have been passed over in silence deliberately and for too long. It also exposed a tragedy that so far—and, let us hope, forever—is unique in the bloody history of mankind. Thus, *Holocaust* has lent further weight to the argument of those who, in Germany and elsewhere, consider it unjust that the crimes of the Nazis should be invalidated by a statute of limitations. This is reason to rejoice. But one can't avoid a shudder of alarm at the thought of what might happen if a different or opposite topic were to be chosen, in a country where television is a state monopoly that has no democratic controls and is impervious to public criticism.

La Stampa, *May 20, 1979*

Images from *Holocaust*

In the beginning, there is “show business”—in other words, the gigantic machine of the American culture industry. It’s an industry subject to the same requirements, laws, and practices that apply to all other industries. It involves forecasts, market analyses, budgets, amortizations, risks, and carefully planned publicity campaigns, and its aim is profit. Like all other industries, it relies on its own past experience and that of others, and experience shows that the highest profits are obtained through a careful balance of creativity and conservatism. These are the practical and logical premises on which Operation *Holocaust* was based, *Roots*, a little earlier, was planned, and colossal Biblical productions have been conceived since the dawn of moviemaking. These enterprises are simultaneously cynical and pious, and the contradiction shouldn’t surprise us, since there is no single author: the authors are many and among them some are cynical and some pious. I don’t think that serious objections can be raised; since the time of Aeschylus, public shows have drawn on the sources that are most appealing to the public, and these are crime, fate, human suffering, oppression, destruction, and redemption.

The TV series *Holocaust* originated this way, as a marriage of convenience, but not all marriages of convenience end in failure. I admit without hesitation to my suspicion and irritation at the initial, triumphal news coverage. I was afraid that the cynicism would be enormous and the compassion marginal; it’s well-known that, since immediately after the Second World War, Hitler’s massacres and the concentration camps have proved to be an excellent topic for literary endeavors and more. It was predictable and obvious that the blood, the slaughter, the intrinsic horror of

what happened in Europe in those years would attract myriad second-rate writers looking for easy subjects, and that that vast tragedy would be tampered with, chopped into pieces, arbitrarily sorted through in order to obtain fragments suitable for satisfying the turbid thirst for the macabre and the obscene that is supposed to dwell in the depths of every reader and consumer. This desecrating "use" did punctually occur, and not just at the hands of second-rate writers: it's enough to remember, among many other books, *Der Funke Leben* (*Spark of Life*), by Erich Maria Remarque, an eloquent example of how a substantially false novel can be constructed on true events, such as to undermine the credibility of the very events it intends to describe. One can say the same, or almost the same, of the sadistic-pornographic genre, whose progenitor was probably the abominable *Casa di bambola* (*House of Dolls*).[1] The book was written by a former deportee, but, unfortunately, no law of the human soul prescribes that everyone who lived an experience, no matter how terrible and defining, possesses the spiritual tools necessary to understand it, judge it, grasp its limits, and convey it to others. *House of Dolls* describes a brothel in a Lager. Brothels existed as a marginal, and not particularly tragic, accessory in some Lagers: but flocks of ravens have fed on them, filling screens around the world with an avalanche of indecent movies, and giving the impression that all the women's Lagers, rather than places of suffering, death, and political development, were nothing but theaters for refined (and not always refined) sadism.

My distrust diminished when I had the opportunity to see the audience ratings for *Holocaust* in the United States, France, Israel, Germany, and Austria. In itself, a large audience doesn't prove much: at most, it's evidence of the fact that TV viewers were interested in the show, but it doesn't say anything about the show's quality. It turns out, however, that at the end of each episode the broadcast stations were inundated by tens of thousands of phone calls; that the series was the starting point for lengthy debates (Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of Germany took part in one that lasted several hours); that in the United States, although it is geographically and ideologically far from the events, a guide and commentary was published for use in schools, accompanied by a thorough bibliography. So the story must be something more than mere entertainment; somehow, at some level, the spectators must have been drawn in.

I then tried to watch *Holocaust* with the eyes of a neutral spectator, neither involved nor prejudiced, "protecting myself" to the extent possible from my reactions as a former deportee, and I believe I succeeded. Having thus discounted my personal emotions, which existed, and filtered out and canceled the moments of violent identification with some of the characters, I can say that the story is dignified and almost entirely of a high standard, and that, most of all, it doesn't abuse the white-hot material it was based on. The authors had a sense of balance and didn't give in to the temptations of the macabre, the base, the shocking, although it's well-known that what's shocking "pays." A visible effort has been made not to lapse into stereotypes, to provide the characters with individuality. On the other hand, the historical depth of the story is insufficient, or inadequate, and here the question becomes more complicated.

The roots of Nazism, of Nazi anti-Semitism, and of the parallel yet different popular anti-Semitism of the Russians and Poles (which is often referred to in the story) are remote and complex. They can't be understood without referring to the views of the nineteenth-century German philosophers, to the tormented history of the Jews in Europe since the destruction of the Second Temple, to the theological doctrines propagated by Catholics, both orthodox and reformed.

Hitler cannot be understood without knowing anything of the wound inflicted on German pride by the 1918 defeat, of the successive revolutionary efforts, of the catastrophic inflation of 1923, of the violence of the "Free Corps," of the dizzying political instability of the Weimar Republic. I am not saying that all this would be sufficient to understand Hitlerism, but certainly it is necessary, and *Holocaust* doesn't mention it. The viewer gets the impression that Nazism sprang out of nowhere, the diabolical work of cold-blooded fanatics like Heydrich or sinister cutthroats with a swastika on their sleeve, or that it was the product of some intrinsic and unexplained German wickedness. A corresponding lack of political context, and a similar simplification, can be found in the episode of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. This momentous and desperate fight, which will never be forgotten and which in the show achieves an extremely high level of tension, was not just a heroic attempt to reaffirm the dignity of a victimized people. It was also the continued development of an old and many-sided effort, reviving the stoic virtue of the defenders of Masada against Titus' powerful army, the millenarian and messianic zeal of early

Zionism, and the interpretation of the Marxist vision by the Jewish proletariat of Warsaw, doubly oppressed, as proletarian and as Jewish.

On the other hand, it's only fair not to demand too much. The savagery and the excess of the Nazi Holocaust, represented with shocking realism in many scenes, harbored within themselves an enigma that no historian has yet solved. This explains the reason for the innumerable phone calls that flooded the TV stations in the countries where the serial has been shown so far. Most of the callers were asking "why," and this "why" is gigantic and as old as humankind. It's the "why" of evil in the world, Job's vain question to God, and there are many, partial answers; however, the global, universal answer that might soothe the spirit is not known, and maybe it doesn't exist. It's possible to explain, and sociologists, politicians, and ethnologists have done so, why minorities are hated and persecuted, and why in particular the Jewish minority was persecuted in Germany. But it can't be explained why the Nazis took the trouble to hunt down the elderly and the dying and transport them halfway across Europe to Auschwitz to be burned to ashes. It can't be explained why, in the tragedy and chaos of a war that was by then lost, the convoys of deportees had precedence over troop and ammunition transports. Most of all, and apart from any example of bestiality, no one so far has understood why the determination to destroy the "enemy" should be accompanied by an even stronger determination to impose on him the most atrocious sufferings imaginable, to humiliate him, to vilify him, to treat him like a filthy beast, or, worse, like an inanimate object. This really is the unique characteristic of Nazi persecution; it seems to me that the series intended to show this, and that it succeeded.

Much could be said about the general structure of *Holocaust* and its adherence to historic truth. It has recognizable features that seem "quoted" from illustrious precedents, whether introduced unconsciously, thanks to the marvelous vitality of the classics, or deliberately. The revolt in the ghetto is a page from *Les Misérables*: it has barricades, Gavroche, and the escape through the sewers. When young Peter, the son of Erik Dorf, sees his father in an SS uniform for the first time, he shrinks back in tears, "frightened by his father's fierce weapons, " just as in the *Iliad* Astyanax shrinks from Hector returning armed from camp. Erik's wife, Marta, is, like Lady Macbeth, implacable in spurring her ambivalent husband's ambition, and in urging him on, from crime to crime, until the end.

Erik Dorf is the main character in the story, or at least the most problematic and articulate, and embodies a double ambition: his own, first as a ruthless careerist, then as a cunning and cruel advisor, and, finally, as a member, subject to blackmail but dangerous, of a Nazi élite torn apart by intrigue and jealousy. And there is also the authors' ambition to make Erik into a concrete representation, a reverse example, emblematic, of the German who, blinded by the Nazi myth, loses his human nature. A young lawyer from Berlin, frustrated, poor, and insecure, Erik follows the all-powerful Heydrich: he is bewitched by the person and, even more, by the power he emanates, which Erik wants to share. A "confused and indecisive" bureaucrat, Erik is torn between his moralistic upbringing and his fascination with authority, active and passive, but the latter quickly prevails and Erik becomes a fraudulent counselor, or rather "the" counselor to the Nazi court. After Kristallnacht, it's Erik who, mindful of his legal studies, advises Heydrich to let the insurance companies pay the Jews the damages; afterward, the government "will confiscate the payments, on the grounds that the Jews incited the rioting and hence are not entitled to reimbursement." It's Erik who proposes that Jewish property should be burned and destroyed by Nazis in civilian clothes and not in uniform, so that the event appears to be spontaneous. It's Erik again who later invents the well-known periphrases that concealed the slaughter: "resettlement" meaning deportation, "final solution" meaning massacre, "special treatment" meaning gassing. It's Erik who suggests the use of Zyklon B, that is, hydrogen cyanide, instead of carbon monoxide in the gas chambers. He is even credited with the hope of persuading future public opinion, through cunning propaganda, that the Jews never suffered any abuse. Overwhelmed by the German military collapse and by his superiors' defection, Erik kills himself by swallowing a poison pill during his interrogation by an American officer. Throughout this career of sleazy power and interior servitude, Erik, excellently played by Michael Moriarty, has occasional jolts of humanity that culminate precisely in his suicide. Erik's character is acceptable as fiction, but it is spoiled by its historical impossibility. It seems to me that this character perpetuates the mistake of concentrating the blame for Nazism in one or a few persons, or even in the Devil, ignoring its historical roots and the broad support of the German people. It's clear that this character is meant to symbolize the very many Eriks who made up the backbone of that Germany, but unfortunately many

viewers, seeing him on the screen next to unique historical individuals like Himmler and Eichmann, may believe that Erik, too, is a unique historical figure.

A parallel symbolic burden weighs on the Weiss family: they are the assimilated Jews par excellence. Dr. Weiss, a Jew of Polish origin, feels deeply integrated into German society; he tends to underestimate the first signs of racism, saying that “it will all go away.” His wife agrees: isn’t Germany the homeland of Schiller and Beethoven? An accomplished pianist, she seeks illusory refuge in music, while around them, from 1935 to 1939, the Nazi barbarity rages. They don’t try to emigrate: step by step, after participating heroically in the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, where the doctor, being of Polish extraction, had been banished, they die in the Auschwitz gas chambers. Karl, their firstborn, also dies in Auschwitz: he has been sent there as punishment because he tried to leave testimony, “for the record,” of the horrors that took place in the Theresienstadt ghetto. Anna, the younger daughter, is raped and loses her mind. She disappears into Hadamar, one of the sinister “hospitals” where the mentally handicapped were secretly killed with toxic gasses.

Rudi is the family’s only survivor; he is an athlete, inclined by nature and upbringing to give blow for blow. Rudi won’t tolerate being suffocated by the web of persecution. He flees to Czechoslovakia, then to Ukraine; he joins a group of Jewish partisans and reluctantly learns to kill. Captured, Rudi is taken to the Sobibór Lager, where, with a group of Soviet soldiers, he blows up the fence and returns to freedom, in which he, alone in the family, had never given up hope. He gladly agrees to accompany a dozen Jewish children, Lager survivors from Salonika, to Palestine, as illegal immigrants, in violation of the British blockade.

The truthfulness of the events shown in *Holocaust* has been much debated, and will continue to be debated. These debates are unwarranted: the basic facts are rigorously true, documented by extensive historical evidence, including, prominently, the confessions of the guilty who were captured by the Allies and brought to justice after the end of the hostilities. Besides, a good part of the dialogue, the more or less secret meetings of the Nazi bosses, the secret or public orders, the proclamations, and the biographical details are taken from German documents, or have been faithfully reconstructed from them. The authors didn’t need to resort to imagination: Kristallnacht, the elimination of the handicapped,

Buchenwald, Theresienstadt, the horrendous mass grave of Babi Yar, women lined up, unaware (and at times not unaware!), waiting for death by gas, the hopeless insurrection of the Warsaw Jews, the bloody and victorious rebellion of Sobibór—they all happened, and happened as they are presented here. They are historical truths questioned only by the perpetrators who still feel burdened by them, or by fools who are incapable of facing reality; and since perpetrators and fools do exist, these truths are occasionally and laughably questioned. It's not worth devoting too much time to this issue: let them explain where the six million Jews missing after 1945 are, and the question will be settled. Not much remains to be said about the unavoidable inaccuracies and naïvetés of the production, such as insurgents who are too neatly shaved, Auschwitz jackets that are too clean, ghetto rooms that are surprisingly spacious: these result from the writers' residual trust in the humanity of those times and places rather than from negligence.

It's predictable that in Italy, too, there will be a debate over the propriety of broadcasting "such horrors" to a wide TV audience. It will be fitting to remind those who don't know, and those who would rather forget, that the Holocaust reached Italy, too, although the war was nearing its end and most Italians proved immune to the racist poison. There were between thirty-two and thirty-five thousand Jews in Italy at the time, and of these some eight thousand were deported; only three or four hundred returned. Roundups were ordered by the occupying Germans, but were often carried out by the Fascist police and militias, and not always unwillingly, since a monetary reward was paid for each captured Jew. Why remain silent?

I have spoken about this TV series, occasionally disagreeing, and trying to point out its merits and its shortcomings, without hiding the tangle of emotion, uneasiness, and respect that it provoked in me. I would like to add an observation. The Weimar Republic, in which Nazism originated, was characterized by political instability, rampant violence, and a widespread hope for a messianic and irrational solution—the intervention of the necessary Hero, Germany's savior, predicted by Nietzsche. At the same time, Nazi doctrine instilled in people's minds an equally irrational and much more pernicious conviction: that all the ills of Germany and of the world came from a single source, from an evil-incarnate Super-enemy, the Jewish people. Once this scapegoat was destroyed, Germany would triumph. Now, the scapegoat was exterminated in the European Holocaust,

but, next to the six million Jews killed, at least fifty million other men, women, and children died in a ruthless war. More than ten million of them were German.

Speciale del Radiocorriere TV, *May 1979*

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1. The author used the pseudonym Ka-tzetnik 135633.

In the Women's Lager

Il fumo di Birkenau,[1] by the Pisan Liana Millu, first printed in a very limited edition in 1947, is among the most intense European testimonies about the women's Lager of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and certainly the most touching of the Italian ones. It comprises six stories that unfold around the more specifically female aspects of the prisoners' miserable and desperate lives. The condition of women prisoners was much worse than that of the men, for several reasons: their lower physical resistance in the face of tasks that were heavier and more humiliating than the men's; the torments of family love; the obsessive presence of the crematoriums, whose unavoidable, undeniable chimneys rose right in the middle of the women's camp, corroding with their ungodly smoke the days and the nights, moments of truce and of illusion, dreams and timid hopes.

The author rarely appears in the foreground. She is an eye that penetrates, an admirably alert mind that, in language that is always dignified and measured, registers and transcribes events that are nevertheless beyond human measure. Each story closes on a muted note, on a death knell, a life that dies out, and it's striking how these individual, personal deaths, all tragic but all different, affect our sensibility much more than the millions of anonymous deaths reported by the statistics.

Lily, sent to death by a cold wave of the hand of her Kapo, who suspects she is her rival in love. Maria, who enters the Lager without revealing her pregnancy, binding her abdomen to hide it, because she wants the baby to come into the world. And, indeed, the baby is born, in the nocturnal bedlam of the filthy, crowded barracks, with no light, no water, not a clean cloth, amid the collective madness and the reawakened compassion of the most

hardened prisoners; this may be the most memorable page of the book. However, the roll call is sacred, no one can miss it, the woman giving birth and the baby are losing blood, and by the end of the roll call they are dead.

Bruna rediscovers Pinin, her adolescent son, in an adjoining Lager; they embrace across the electrified wire fence and are electrocuted. The Russian Zina loses her life to help Ivan escape. She doesn't know him, but she perceives an imaginary likeness between Ivan and her husband, Grigori, killed by the Nazis. Two Dutch sisters, one of whom chooses the path to the brothel, while the other rejects it, stoically refusing her sister's gifts. The loving wife, torn apart by two possible destinies: to remain faithful to her husband, and starve to death, or to give in, dishonoring herself but surviving for him.

From each of these human journeys through an inhuman world comes an aura of lyrical sadness, uncontaminated by anger or unseemly lamentation, and a painful knowledge of the world, demonstrating that the author did not suffer in vain.

La Stampa, *June 29, 1979*

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1. The English translation is *Smoke Over Birkenau* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991).

That Train to Auschwitz

Dear Rosanna,[1]

Although I haven't (so far) had the pleasure of meeting you, I feel I am a friend of yours and in many ways close to you. You are asking, for *Gli Altri*, for testimony about the time when I, too, like all the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, was defined as "other," that is, was condemned to the condition of an outsider—more than that, of an enemy. I think that this punishment, which implies expulsion from the society of those who are "normal," always comes from the outside, as no one, or almost no one, feels or becomes "other" spontaneously; therefore it is always painful. For the Italian Jews that punishment was very painful, although initially less tragic than elsewhere, precisely because they neither were nor felt "other": they had been integrated into the rest of the nation for hundreds or thousands of years, they had the same customs, language, flaws, and strengths of other Italians. In particular, they had reacted to fascism, like everyone else, which means that they accepted it with resignation or skepticism and, in a few cases, enthusiasm. In 1938, when the racial laws were promulgated in Italy, I was a nineteen-year-old student: the separation from those of my age and my friends who weren't Jews was painful, but not (at least for me) humiliating. The accusations made in the papers against all Italian Jews were too grotesque to be believed and in fact were given little credence by the public, including die-hard Fascists. From this point of view, the Italian people proved disinclined to accept the certification of superiority over Jews that was freely granted to them by the racial laws. Like many in my position, I reacted to the silly allegations of the propaganda by building,

more or less consciously, a minority awareness, or, rather, a sense of pride that I hadn't possessed before.

Things got suddenly worse in September 1943, when northern Italy was occupied by German troops. A real manhunt was unleashed in every Italian city: German and, unfortunately, also Italian police squads searched the refuges where Jews who couldn't or wouldn't emigrate were hiding, often relying on reports by paid informers. Of the approximately 35,000 Jews who lived in Italy, they found 8,000, and those were precisely the most defenseless and incautious, the poor, the sick, the old people without assistance. In this, the Nazi persecution was truly of an unprecedented cruelty: in the absurd inclusiveness of the slaughter, which didn't stop even at the dying or at children.

I was arrested as a partisan, in Valle d'Aosta, but was immediately recognized as a Jew. I was taken first to the transit camp of Fòssoli, near Modena, and from there, in late February 1944, to Auschwitz: but this name, dreadful as it is today, wasn't known to anyone at the time. Our train, made up of freight cars, carried 650 people, 50 in each car; the journey lasted five days, during which food was distributed, but no water. At our destination, we were made to get off; in a rapid selection three groups were formed: the men and, respectively, the women fit for work (96 men and 29 women) and everybody else, that is, the elderly, the sick, children, and women with children. Everyone in that group, numbering 525, was sent directly to the gas chambers and the crematoriums, without even being registered in the camp. As I learned later in the Lager, this ratio of about one to four was nearly the same for all the trains: one Jew to work versus four to death. The slaughter was therefore more important than economic exploitation.

My personal fate, which I described in my book *If This Is a Man*, was quite different from that of a typical Auschwitz prisoner: the typical prisoner died of exhaustion, or of diseases due to hunger or vitamin deficiencies, within a few weeks or months. It's enough to say that the official food ration was about 1600 calories daily, which is barely enough for a man at absolute rest, while prisoners were forced to work hard, in a cold climate, and with insufficient and inadequate clothes. I repeat: each of us survivors was favored by fortune. My fortune was manifold: during a year of captivity I was never ill, and on the other hand I became ill at the right time, when the Lager was abandoned by the Germans, who for

obscure reasons failed or forgot to exterminate the sick prisoners unable to follow them in their flight before the advancing Red Army. I met a “free” Italian mason who for many months secretly brought me soup and bread. Finally, in the last, and coldest, months of 1944, I was able to make use of my training as a chemist to be assigned to a less demanding and uncomfortable job in a testing laboratory.

Of the 96 men who entered the camp with me 15 survived, and of the 29 women 8 survived. Thus, among the 650 deportees on our train there were 23 survivors, that is, 3.5 percent. But that was a lucky train because it left Italy a little less than a year before the liberation: almost no one survived two or three years of prison. The overall total, which I learned only upon my return to Italy, but which matches what I lived and saw personally, stands at around six million victims: a figure given by the Nazi perpetrators themselves who couldn’t escape justice. About three and a half million of those victims were killed in Auschwitz.

This is my experience, and it marked me deeply. Its symbol is the tattoo that I still carry on my arm: my name when I had no name, the number 174517. It marked me, but it didn’t take away my wish to live. On the contrary, it strengthened it, because it gave a purpose to my life: to bear witness so that nothing like this will ever happen again. This is the purpose of my books.

Gli Altri, *Second Quarter, 1979*

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1. Rosanna Benzi (1948–1991) was an Italian writer who contracted polio as a teenager and lived her entire adult life in an iron lung. An advocate for the rights of the disabled, in 1976 she launched the magazine Gli Altri (The Others).

Europe in Hell

From the distance of forty years that separates us from August 1939, our state of mind and behavior of that time can't help rousing astonishment, even in us. By "us" I mean the Jewish minority in Italy, which was artificially cut out of the rest of the country through the racial laws, and which for two years had been the target of an incessant propaganda campaign, insulted, banished to the margins of society, slandered, humiliated. Of course, this is an antihistorical astonishment, the kind of optical illusion whereby, when the future has become the past, we pretend that *already at that time*—when it was still an authentic future—it could be deciphered and deduced like the past itself. It is, precisely, hindsight, and the phenomenon whereby, after the facts, everybody feels retrospectively farsighted and accuses everyone else of having not been.

When I think of the deliberate blindness that kept (and still keeps) the Germans from probing the depths of the dark abyss of Nazism, I notice a paradoxical analogy with the parallel blindness of many European Jewish communities: both the perpetrators and the victims rejected the truth.

The reasons for this rejection were certainly not the same. The Germans preferred to close their eyes to the bitter end in order to avoid feeling like accomplices in Nazi crimes: they stubbornly denied the evidence until the end of the war, and some of them still deny it. The Jews threatened by the Nazi invasion often refused to acknowledge this danger for a variety of reasons, different from country to country. If we limit ourselves to the Italian situation at the time, we can observe that the lack of zeal with which the Fascist government applied the racial laws was disastrous for many. The winks, the leniency easily bought, the complicity, the corruption made most

Italian Jews believe that it would continue indefinitely that way—asserting and denying, prohibiting and permitting, in a lax atmosphere reinforced by fascism's gradual loss of credibility. This way of seeing and foreseeing events was not without logic; it was not illogical to expect that Fascist Italy, obviously unprepared for war, would behave with ambiguous prudence, as, in fact, Franco's Spain did later.

There were additional reasons for this deliberate lack of acknowledgment. Most Italian Jews had neither the means nor the courage necessary to emigrate and, as often happens, the sense of impotence that derived from this condition was repressed, or, rather, distorted: "I can't" became "I don't want," as with Phaedrus' fox, which couldn't reach the grapes. Also: integration with the Catholic majority was deep and centuries old, and had led to a mutual acceptance probably unique in the modern world. Finally: Italian Jews censored and repressed the news about the atrocities already taking place in Germany (we had learned of Kristallnacht in the Fascist press) precisely because of the intrinsic horror, as many people do when confronted with incurable diseases.

At the time, I was just twenty years old, and was morally and politically unprepared: I was not equipped to fight this dangerous blindness either in myself or in others, friends and relatives. News of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, and, immediately afterward, of England and France entering the war and of the swift German advance into Poland, caused a brutal and painful awakening. Only then did we realize that we could soon turn from spectators to protagonists—as members of the Resistance or as victims—which in fact is what happened immediately after the armistice of September 8, 1943. I remember very clearly my reaction, irrational and symbolic, to the news of the war broadcast on the radio. My family, with my father gravely ill, was vacationing in the upper Lanzo Valley. We decided to return to Turin, but I, instead of waiting for the very slow bus, grabbed my bike and hurtled down along the sharp bends of the steep descent, like someone who is trying to run away from his destiny.

La Stampa, *August 27, 1979*

One Night

It was very cold and still. The sun had set a few minutes earlier, sinking obliquely behind a horizon that, in the clarity of the air, appeared close, and leaving a luminous yellow-green trail that extended almost to the zenith. Meanwhile in the east the sky was opaque, purplish, obscured by large gray cumuli that seemed to weigh on the frozen land like deflated balloons. The air was dry and smelled like ice.

There was no human trace on the whole plateau except for the train tracks that stretched straight as far as the eye could see and appeared to converge at the point where the sun had just vanished; in the opposite direction they disappeared into the farthest edge of the woods. The land was slightly rolling and covered with small oaks and beeches that the prevailing wind had tilted to the south, bending some of the treetops all the way to the ground. But that day was completely calm. Calcareous rocks whittled by rain and encrusted with fossilized shells appeared on the surface of the ground: rough and white, they looked like the bones of buried animals. From the cracks protruded sticks carbonized by a recent fire. There was no grass, just yellow and red stains of lichen stuck to the rock.

The roar could be heard before the train was visible: in the silence of the plateau, the sound was transmitted through the rock and the ice like underground thunder. The train was fast, and soon one could discern that it was made up of only three boxcars in addition to the engine. When it got closer, the high-pitched drone of the racing diesels could be heard, along with the whistle of air lacerated by its forward motion. The train overtook the observation point in a flash, and both drone and whistle decreased by a tone; it hurtled on between birch trees and the occasional beech on the edge

of the woods. Here the tracks were covered by a thick layer of dry, fragile brown leaves. The wave of rushing air collided with the leaves before the train even touched them, lifting them in a scattered cloud—higher than the highest trees, stirred by the gusts of wind like a swarm of bees—that accompanied the train on its course and made it visible from afar. The leaves were light but their mass was large: in spite of its momentum, the train was obliged to slow down.

A shapeless pile of leaves formed in front of the locomotive, which it split in two like a prow: some of the leaves ended up crushed between the tracks and the wheels, increasing the work of the engine and forcing it to slow down even more. At the same time, the friction between the train and the leaves—both the leaves in the piles and the ones that circled about—electrified the air, the train, and the leaves themselves. Large purple sparks streaked from the train to the ground, creating a tangle of luminous fragments against the dark backdrop of the woods. The air was heavy with ozone and the acrid odor of burned paper.

The mass of leaves in front of the locomotive grew thicker and the wheels' grip on the tracks grew weaker until the train stopped, though the engines continued to churn at their maximum strength. The locomotive's wheels, spinning in vain, grew red hot, and even the section of track beneath each wheel became almost incandescent; waves of fire, originating from these incandescent points, rippled over the leaves on the ground, but were spent after a few meters. There was a click, the engines were turned off, and everything was silent again. The face of the engineer appeared at the window of the locomotive, wide and pale: he stared into space, motionless. All the leaves had fallen to the ground. Nothing happened for a long time, but the light crackling of the leaves in front of the locomotive could be heard as they settled back into their position of repose: the pile slowly increased in volume, like rising dough.

Fascinated by the train, some crows had come to rest, and they pecked spitefully at the rocks and the leaves, croaking softly. Just before nightfall they became silent, then all together they took flight; something must have scared them. In fact, from among the trees came a rhythmic rustling, subdued but widespread: from the woods emerged a group of cautious little people. They were men and women of short stature, slim, in dark clothes; on their feet they wore coarse felt boots. They approached the train hesitantly, consulting one another in whispers. They didn't seem to have a

leader: nevertheless, determination prevailed over doubt. They gathered around the cars, and soon the creaking of their weight was followed by a metallic rustling like that of an anthill that has been disturbed. The little men and women busied themselves around the train; they must have had various implements hidden under their padded jackets, because the indistinct murmur was punctuated by dry crashes and the screech of saws.

Toward sunrise, the steel plates and wood that the cars were made of had been removed, piece by piece, and stacked up beside the tracks, but some of the people, not contented, attacked the stacks furiously in small groups, with hacksaws, shears, and hammers: they tore apart, broke up, and destroyed, as if all order and all structure conflicted with some ideal they shared. A pile of bits of wood had been set ablaze and the demolishers took turns standing near it to warm their hands. Meanwhile, others were occupied with the beams and girders of the framework; a single individual would not have seen the end of it in a year, but they were many and they were resolute, and their numbers grew by the hour. Intent and silent they labored, and the work progressed rapidly: when someone proved unable to destroy a piece, another, more capable or stronger, would push him aside and take his place. Often two would quarrel over a piece, tugging on it from opposite ends. The frames demolished, they busied themselves with the trucks, the shafts, and the wheel discs; it was astonishing how, with such primitive instruments, they managed to get on with their work. They would not abandon a part until it was bent, split, sawed into two unequal parts, splintered, or otherwise rendered unusable.

Demolishing the engine appeared to be more difficult. They worked on it for several hours, taking turns in no apparent order. Many, perhaps to rest, had crammed into the engineer’s cab, where a little of the heat from the engines still lingered, but others pulled them out to continue with the work. Soon they formed a chain, starting inside the cab and beside the piles of already removed fragments, and ending in the woods. The unrecognizable segments of the body, of the framework, of the engines, of the electrical system were passed from hand to hand in the uncertain light of dawn; thus, too, the inert body of the engineer. Once the engine, with all its delicate mechanisms, had been dismantled and destroyed, the little people attacked the rails and demolished about a hundred meters in each direction, while others, with great effort, extracted the ties from the frozen ground and split them with axes.

When the sun rose, nothing remained of the train, but the crowd did not disperse; the most vigorous, with those same axes, attacked the bases of the nearest birch trees, felled them, and stripped them of their branches; others, in pairs or in groups, flung themselves against one another with deliberate blows. Some were seen blindly striking themselves.

Tuttolibri *5, no. 48–49 (December 22, 1979)*

Racial Intolerance

I will start with a declaration of humility.

Ours is a strange time, with an abundance of people who will explain everything to you; it's the age of explainers, of people who will clarify everything, get to the bottom of everything, its causes and its consequences. And no doubt this is a praiseworthy endeavor. But to believe that one has truly explained everything, in the original sense of the word—that is, made clear the necessary trigger of historical events, the causes that necessarily lead to a result, the nexus between cause and effect that is the foundation of science—is a bit rash.

It should be said that this system of explaining things doesn't work very well for the phenomena—racial prejudice and intolerance—addressed by this course. To believe that everything can be explained deterministically is naïve, and to make others believe it, to induce the public and the listeners to believe that there really is a satisfactory and complete explanation, is unquestionably misleading.

For this reason what I say this evening will be merely an attempt to explain—no more than a proposal, a series of proposals.

The fact that the phenomena associated with prejudice and intolerance elicit not one but many explanations doesn't necessarily mean that there are many explanations. Rather, it means that the explanation, the complete and credible motivation, has not been found, or doesn't exist, or is lurking deep inside our brains, or maybe even beyond our brains, in some deeper place.

Intolerance and, in particular, racial intolerance, which is my topic tonight, are multifaceted phenomena, like everything that concerns man, his mind, his history.

These subjects are never exhausted, and it will always be possible to discuss them.

Racial intolerance, as the term itself implies, is intolerance between human races. Now, there is no question that human races exist. There is no doubt that a black man's skin is black, or darker than that of a white man, there is no doubt that the eyes of the Japanese, of the orientals, have a different shape from ours, there is no doubt that there are taller and shorter human races. . . .

But when we try to define the human races, their distinctive traits, the demarcation lines between them, and, above all, to which race, or races, a nation or a single individual belongs, we are immediately in trouble.

The history of mankind is extraordinarily complicated—I refer to written history, the history that is documented, if not by actual writings, at least by ruins, by remains—and it dates back about six thousand years.

There is no doubt, though, that, long before traces, evidence, began to be left behind, there existed not just a single human species but innumerable human races, different from one another and almost certainly in competition with one another.

Man has existed for at least a million years, and every year this date is pushed back by a dizzying magnitude; now it's three million years, but every year there are new archeological finds and our ancestors move further away. In other words, this origin, this Adam and this Eve, nest in an ever more distant past, and there is no reason to doubt that, just as there were different races, so there was also friction among races.

It's sad to observe that most of the skulls that archeologists find in their digs, and are finding currently in East Africa, are smashed in—and someone smashed them.

The story of Neanderthal man is largely known. He was a human being: not *Homo sapiens*, but very similar to *Homo sapiens*, and certainly he possessed our same technical skills, those of our distant ancestors. Neanderthal man lived until ten or twenty thousand years ago and then was exterminated, probably by us, *Homines sapientes*. This shows that aversion, the obscure instinct that pushes men to identify each other as different, has very old roots.

Moreover, if we consider more recent times, times that have left a record, we notice that in Egyptian drawings and paintings the people

performing the humblest tasks are dark—essentially Ethiopians, Nubians, Sudanese.

In the Song of Songs it is written "*Nigra sum sed formosa*," "I am black *but* beautiful," not "I am black *and* beautiful," and this is an important clue. Even more important is the story we read in the first chapters of Genesis, about Noah, the invention of wine, Noah's drunkenness, and his wicked son, Ham. This wicked son who exposes the nakedness of his drunken father has a name, Ham, that in Hebrew means "the burned one," or the tanned one, the one with the dark skin. This is not openly stated, but in the subsequent genealogy the peoples who are said to descend from Ham are the peoples of black Africa. And, remarkably, already at that time a rationalization was resorted to, as this aversion toward the dark-skinned man sought and found a justification in the fact that he had broken a taboo, had violated a sexual taboo. Note that this sounds like one of the accusations that to this day are frequently made against the black man.

The black man is a violator, especially of sexual taboos; he is a transgressor. "I don't hate him because he is black, but because . . ." etc. Thus the Bible story, as far as Ham is concerned.

This deep loathing does not appear to be universal, to infect all civilizations. It should be said that during the Roman Empire it was almost nonexistent; Latin historians talk about enemy peoples, white or black, as having roughly the same features, without making many differentiations. The Nubians are not described as being inferior to, say, the Parthians or the Britons.

On the other hand, other civilizations, other empires have been deeply tainted by this strong drive against those who are different. We need only recall that the myth about Ham recurs in the word "Hamitic"; "Hamitic languages" is still said to this day. It's hardly a scientific term, but it has persisted. It was used, abused yet again, rationalized during the centuries of the black slave trade, which was not marginal but substantial, relying on the British, Portuguese, Spanish, Arab, and Dutch mercantile fleets: one might say that all of Europe was involved.

The number mentioned, though it's hard to confirm, is about fifty million slaves deported across the Atlantic after the discovery of America. In discussing this matter I don't mean to malign only white-skinned men, since blacks were also engaged in the slave trade. Leaving from central Africa, the slaves passed from hand to hand; their black chieftains sold

them to other chieftains who in turn sold them to Arab or European merchants on the coast, and they finally landed, greatly reduced in number, on America's shores. And if today North America has a racial problem, a black problem, this is notoriously due to the fact that the slave trade lasted for centuries and that it was so sizable that it essentially depopulated Africa.

In this case, in the case of racial tension, of the white man's abuse of the black man, it's often difficult to disentangle racial intolerance from many other intersecting and complicating factors. There are economic factors, factors of language, religion, social development, and so on. So I will again appeal to that declaration of humility I made at the outset: it's often not easy to disentangle the causes, and it's almost impossible to find a single cause, the reason for racial intolerance.

The case of South America is both similar and different.

While Europe, that is, the European and Mediterranean peoples, had known of the existence of black Africa from time immemorial (there have always been contacts, since the remotest ages), after Christopher Columbus we had a surprise. We were faced with a new continent, which was not India, and with unknown individuals, peoples, countries, communities. Here again the problem of the encounter between European civilization and this new Central and South American civilization immediately became complicated, for economic reasons, but also for religious reasons. Did the Indios, those Indians who weren't Indians from India, have a soul or not? If they had a soul, they should be converted to Christianity; if they had no soul they could be exterminated or used as domestic animals.

This matter was debated at length, and both solutions were pursued: the Indians were exterminated widely and thoroughly, in an effort that continues to this day, and at the same time there was an attempt to educate them, that is, to win them over to European civilization.

The case of the Australian aborigines is, again, different, because they were, or rather are, as they still exist, tremendously different. They are so different that the question has been raised whether they belong to the same species we do. And this brings to mind the consideration that even when there is the best intention to integrate, to assimilate, objective difficulties arise. Often the population that is not tolerated does not, in turn, tolerate the people and culture that have arrived. This is an explosive situation; from one case of intolerance another is born, the front becomes two-sided, there is a will to nonacceptance, to rejection, rejection is confronted by rejection.

This is a chain reaction, self-catalytic, leading to situations that can no longer be remedied. I mentioned earlier the difficulty of finding, of identifying causes. *Last Monday Norberto Bobbio*[1] *concluded his lecture by saying that prejudice originates in man's brain, and therefore man's brain can also extinguish it.* I don't entirely agree with this—that is, that cultural prejudices, religious prejudice, religious intolerance, and linguistic intolerance are clearly "human" phenomena. I say human in quotes, meaning characteristic of man, in that they belong, for good or for ill, to our civilization.

Rather, I believe that racial prejudice is something that is barely human; I believe that it's pre-human, that it precedes man, that it belongs to the animal world rather than the human world. I believe it is a feral prejudice, typical of wild animals, and this for two reasons: first, because we find it among social animals, which I'll talk about later, and, second, because there is no remedy for it. You can protect yourself from religious prejudice by changing your religion; there is a remedy for linguistic prejudice, for linguistic difference—it may be painful, but by adopting the language of the other you lose your stigma. However, there is no defense against racial prejudice. The black man remains black, his children remain what they are, and there is no defense. Thus, there is no salvation; when intolerance turns into hostility and then slaughter—and, as we will see, this did happen—there is no refuge.

I was saying that in my opinion—I propose this solution to the problem—racial prejudice originates in the animal world; and in effect we find it among most social, gregarious animals, those animals that, like man, can't survive alone and must live in groups. Among these animals we can observe many phenomena that are typically human. There is almost always a division into castes, especially in the Hymenoptera, the ants and the bees, in which the caste system is innate, and individuals are born already stratified into different groups.

We recognize the need for a hierarchy. This is a strange and poorly explained phenomenon, but it is well-known and occurs even among domestic animals. In a herd of cows, there is always a number one cow. Cow-fighting competitions are held in all the valleys of Valle d'Aosta, and the cows accept them willingly. Even among these animals, so deeply modified and distorted by domestication, and subjugated by man for thousands of years, this basic need for a hierarchy is retained.

In chicken coops there is a pecking order among the hens; after a certain number of preliminary pecks, a precise order is established according to which there is a hen that pecks all the others, a second hen that pecks all except one, and so on down to the last hen in the coop, which is pecked by all and pecks no other.

And this phenomenon is chilling, because it's very similar to the one we are talking about.

Next to these phenomena, let's call them animal intolerance, there are others that can only be called the equivalent of racial intolerance.

Konrad Lorenz, the founder of ethology, who won the Nobel Prize, wrote marvelous popular books, and in particular one called, in Italian, *Il cosiddetto male* (*On Aggression*), where he talks about aggression. There is, in this book, a chapter about rats that, in my opinion, serves perfectly as a starting point from which to explain and justify my earlier assertion that racial intolerance has very old origins, not just prehistoric but pre-human, innate in certain primeval instincts of mammals, and not only mammals.

By this I don't mean to say, indeed I would never say, that racism is an incurable evil; if we are humans it's because we have learned to protect ourselves, to deny, to thwart certain instincts that are our animal inheritance.

Lorenz writes that rats divide spontaneously into tribes, that the rats of a certain cellar, of a certain larder, constitute a tribe that is different from and hostile to the rats that inhabit a nearby cellar. If you take a rat from Cellar No. 1 and move it abruptly to Cellar No. 2, it will be torn to pieces. If, on the other hand, the rat is moved to Cellar No. 2 inside a protective cage, after three or four days the other rats learn to recognize it visually, and it is accepted. It's impossible not to think of the human analogies, of the immigrant who, until he has acquired not, let's say, just the smell but also the accent of his new country, is identified as different. Usually, and luckily, he is not torn to pieces—though sometimes this has happened—but at the least he is identified as different and is marginalized, boycotted.

I described a pre-human, prehistoric racial intolerance, and the historical but remote intolerance of the slave trade; I will now speak about modern-day racism.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the great centuries of Europe, the centuries when the great philosophical systems were built, when the awareness of intolerance and the advocacy of tolerance originated.

In spite of all this, there has been, precisely within Enlightenment and, later, positivist thought, a continuous effort to justify, to find a rational motive for racism, this instinct that is anything but rational. It's fascinating today to read books by scientists of absolute good faith, respectable and, to this day, respected people.

I recently reread a book by Camille Flammarion, a famous astronomer and a celebrated popularizer, a writer with a strong humanitarian spirit. In describing the world before man's creation, he writes about the brain, about how it developed, starting with the animals, with the invertebrates even. He finds a continuous chain of cerebral capacities; he finds that there are the mammals, then the monkeys properly so called, then the anthropomorphic monkeys, then blacks, then whites, or, rather, the French. This is quite remarkable; Flammarion was French and finds that the best brain is the French one and that all other brains are a little less valuable, a little less complete, a little lighter than the French brain. On the other hand, when the anthropologist was British, the best brain was undoubtedly British. And time was taken to measure not just the weight of the brain but also its volume, the number of convolutions, the surface of the cerebral cortex, the diameter of the pelvis, and, especially, the facial angle.

The facial angle had become extremely important. Scientists observed that the facial angle of the Negro was just midway between the facial angle of the gorilla and that of the Frenchman, the Briton, or the German, obviously. This was fundamental—they had found what was missing, the missing link in evolution that explained the passage from animal to man. That link was the Negro, or the Australian aborigine, or anyone, but not the European; the European was different. In practice, we can observe that the superior race is always the theorist's, and that no anthropologist ever realized, with terror and shame, that his race was not the superior race but an inferior one.

Even Hegel, the famous founder of idealism, when talking about Negroes says things that today make our hair stand on end. He says that Negroes are outside the civilized world, they are part of nature, they have an uncontaminated, uncorrupted nature, they are, forgive the pun, nature in a natural state, part of the ground, even part of the vegetation. And therefore they are what they are, they will never be acceptable, they are a different race.

At this point it should be said that no serious anthropological study, in spite of all the anthropologists' efforts, has ever been able to reveal a difference in worth among human races once the nonracial factors—that is, the cultural factors—are eliminated. It's clear, there are white people, black people, yellow people, and so on; there are differences in appearance, in height, but when we come to talk about "worth," or the good and the bad, these differences slip away. A colossal number of lies, of scientific lies, maybe even in good faith, have to be accumulated, to demonstrate that one race is worth more than any other race.

For instance, there was a lot of debate about psychological tests after it was maintained in North America that blacks who took tests devised by whites showed a lower IQ.

But when the opposite was done and whites took tests prepared by black scientists, the result was the same, that is, the whites showed a lower IQ.

In spite of everything, it's clear that this measurement of IQ is extremely presumptuous and not as impartial as it's purported to be; it's just another tool for rationalization. Similarly, when it comes to learning languages, for instance, it was claimed, and many still believe, that there is a Negro accent, and that American Negroes, or Negroes who immigrated to Italy, France, or elsewhere, all speak with a different accent. Until a few decades ago, it was said that there was no remedy for this, it was anatomical: the glottis and the larynx of Negroes weren't the same as those of whites. Therefore a black person could never learn to speak with the correct accent a language that was not his.

This is totally false; leaving aside prejudices, because these are prejudices, we find that a black who studies at Oxford, and who has lived in England since childhood, speaks with the best Oxford accent imaginable; blacks who study in Italy, if they were separated from their environment at the age when languages are learned, speak perfect Italian, without the trace of an accent.

Or think of supremacy in sports. Some may remember the scandal at the Berlin Olympics of 1936, in Hitler's racist Germany, when a Negro, an American Negro, Jesse Owens, won the 100-meter race. And how could the National Socialist racists explain it? They had to hush the thing up: it was proof that at least in this test, the test of the 100-meter race, there was a black man who was worth more than a white.

On the other hand, if we look, for instance, at Nobel Prize winners, we find men of all races. I'm talking not about the Nobel literature prize, which is very contrived, but about the prizes in medicine, physics, chemistry, and so on, which are something serious; we find precisely that no one race monopolizes the Nobel prizes, monopolizes scientific knowledge.

The most fallacious notion of racism concerns crossbreeding. An integral part of German racist theories was the belief that the product of crossbreeding was a half-breed, a hybrid, in other words a bastard (those were euphemisms for bastard), and that the product of two races contained the worst of both and was therefore inferior. The consequence was that there could not and should not be mixed marriages, and, indeed, they were forbidden by law.

The reality, which can be easily verified, is this: if anything can be learned from modern genetics it is that crossbreeding between different species—"species" in the exact meaning of the word—is not possible. It's well-known that crossbreeding between a horse and a cow produces no offspring, unless the two species are very close species, but then the product, the mule, isn't fertile. Encounters within a species are always fertile; the best evidence that the differences among human races are not differences of species is that all human races can breed with one another. Moreover, if anything can be learned from this, it is that the farther apart the areas of origin, the more successful the crossbreeding. This is a feature of natural selection, not just among animals but also among plants. All animals and all plants have dispersion mechanisms. For instance, the phenomenon studied by ethologists like Konrad Lorenz, of aggression within a species, whereby packs of wolves fight other packs, dog fights dog (normally not to death), stags compete with stags, birds sing (to chase away competitors), is directed toward dispersion, that is, covering the maximum possible territory in order to facilitate mating between distant members of the species; in other words, to avoid marriages between relatives. Thus, it's nature itself that suggests, prescribes even, by means of natural selection, crossbreeding through dispersion over a very large area. This notion, this myth that crossbreeding is taboo, that it mustn't happen, that it produces bastards, derives from ancient and mysterious archetypes of purity. There is a lot of talk about racial purity, and there was a lot of talk about racial purity, especially in Nazi Germany, as we'll see later. As if it were a confirmed

truth that the Indo-European race—as it was called at the time—was pure and, being pure, was good.

Well, in Nazi Germany it wasn't pure, as there is no evidence of it—that any human race, any people was pure.

Here I must add an aside.

The very term "race," which I am forced to use, was discredited after it became an instrument for one of the biggest massacres of this century. I am forced to use it, I use it, and I use it within quotation marks, so to speak, with the warning that, except for some obvious, crude subdivisions, it's almost impossible to speak of human races in, say, Europe.

Precisely in regard to Europe, and Italy in particular, however little we know about recent history—not to mention ancient history—we do know that for two thousand years, from Rome onward, Italy was the stage of extremely complex historical events. There were invasions, occupations, migrations to and from Italy, and therefore to speak of an Italian or European race is totally meaningless, at least in the meaning intended by racists.

It's obvious, Italians are generally white-skinned; but all other definitions are elusive. If we look for precise criteria on the basis of which to identify racial units in Italy or in Europe we don't find any; or, rather, maybe only today are we finding something.

An extremely interesting and complicated branch of genetics is developing that can trace, with much precision and at a very high cost, a certain genetic characteristic. So far, this research has led to what we might have expected, that is, tremendous confusion, a remote, millenarian confusion. The result is that we see the same characteristic found here, in Ireland, in Finland. . . .

I was saying earlier that the racial myth considers it obvious, self-evident, that the white race is by definition the superior race.

From this assumption, a more restrictive concept arose, and it arose in Germany before Nazism. It was mostly thanks to German philologists who had noticed a striking analogy between the grammar and lexicon of the neo-Latin languages, the German and Slavic languages, and the Sanskrit of old Indian documents, certain variants of which are still spoken in India. From this finding they theorized, for two reasons, one manifest and one hidden, the existence of a very specific race, which they called Indo-Germanic. The manifest reason was that India and Germany were the two poles of a race

that spoke a certain language and that had spread through, or had occupied, an area that went from India all the way to Germany. But, more deeply, this Indo-Germanic definition implied that Germany was India's heir, that it was the heir to an Aryan civilization (improperly called "Aryan") that in ancient times had left India, the cradle of humanity, and had chosen its new seat in Germany. Therefore Germany was a privileged country; it was the heir to a very old civilization.

Incidentally, the swastika, the symbol that sometimes still appears on walls, was a sacred symbol in India, and it was no accident that Hitler and the National Socialists chose it as the new symbol of Germany, heir to this ancient civilization. A civilization that was pure by definition: questioning why, precisely, it was the preeminent civilization was not allowed; that was it and enough said. The swastika emigrated from India to Berlin.

This brings us to the biggest, most terrible ideological mystification connected to the myth of race. It's paradoxical that the deadliest racism of all historical racisms had practically no concrete basis, even less than what led to the destruction of the Brazilian Indians by the Portuguese. In fact, this racism was not generic, directed against one or more non-Indo European races; it was about a specific race, the Jewish race.

Hitler really needed the sort of fascination that he seems to have exercised over his audiences to be able to sell such a load of nonsense—that if a non-race race exists it is the Jewish race.

If we read the documentation that remains, that is, the Bible, the Old Testament, we see that the people called the Jewish people in the Biblical text were a shadowy people, assimilating other peoples, dividing into groups, occupying new land, mixing with other populations, sending offspring in all directions. In historical times there was a community in Egypt, another in Babylon; it's hard to believe that at the time this race could have remained pure.

Certainly it was already a non-race; but three and a half millennia have passed since then, and this non-race race has become ever more contaminated.

There is the surprisingly little known story of the Khazar Empire, in Ukraine. Around the sixth century AD, it happened that a large kingdom within the borders of today's Ukraine was converted to Judaism. The king was converted, and since at the time the principle "*cuius regio, eius religio*"—the religion of the master is the religion of the land—was in

force, the entire Khazar population was converted to Judaism. It's hard to say how big the population was, but undoubtedly several million; and it's almost certain that the biggest nucleus of European Jews, Polish and Russian Jews, is in large measure descended from the Khazars; in other words, these Jews have nothing to do with the Palestinian Jews, not even if one resorts to the myth of blood. In spite of all this, it's against this non-race race that a ferocious racial campaign was unleashed.

Even in this case, reasons are difficult to find. Certainly the ground was prepared, because there existed in Germany before Hitler an intense nationalism tied to German resurgence, and to the difficulties, resulting from the insecurity of the borders, both east and west, of German unification. In short, there existed a nationalism directed against everybody, *erga omnes*, and especially against the Jews, for many reasons, both evident and less evident. Certainly, there was the destiny of the Jewish people. When the Romans occupied Palestine, the Jews vigorously and tenaciously resisted, because the Romans wanted to assimilate them culturally and, especially, religiously, and the Jews didn't like it. They had, and in part still have, an extremely rigid religious and traditional code that forbids the worship of idols; this precept, this taboo, this prohibition is very strict. Therefore they revolted repeatedly against the Romans, and many were killed and many forced into exile. They settled throughout the Mediterranean basin, preserving, however, a deep bond, in origin religious, between one another, between communities, and within each community. This made them truly foreigners. These communities, coherent with one another and within themselves, were connected by a religion—a very detailed, very precise ritual code—and by a tradition that made them completely different. So, continuously over the centuries, they were expelled from one country and thrown into another, where, once again, they were foreigners, even more foreign; what they had assimilated in a certain culture became useless and they had to acquire a new culture.

This is what happened to the Jews expelled from Spain in the sixteenth century, to the Jews expelled from England around the fourteenth century, and so on; and thus, in spite of their geographical dispersion, the Jews became a cohesive people, but nomadic, and at every expulsion newly declared foreign.

This is surely one of the reasons that nationalist and chauvinist Germany considered them foreigners; they were ideal scapegoats for the

sins that the Germans didn't want to bear themselves.

Against this background emerges the character of the furiously anti-Semitic political agitator Adolf Hitler.

Dozens of volumes have been written on the reasons that Hitler was an anti-Semite, and "such" an anti-Semite, which shows that this, too, is difficult to explain. Anti-Semitism was certainly a personal obsession of his; no one really knows why he had such an obsession, though all sorts of guesses have been made. . . .

Some have said that Hitler feared he had Jewish blood in his veins, because one of his grandmothers had become pregnant while working as a servant in a Jewish home. He lived with this fear his whole life, because, obsessed as he was with purity, he was afraid that he himself was not pure.

Other explanations come from the psychoanalysts, precisely those who claim to explain everything. They say, they have said, that Hitler projected his own paranoid, perverted traits onto the Jews to rid himself of them. This is an explanation that I pass on to you as I have read it and as I have understood it, which is not well. I don't know the language of psychoanalysts, maybe someone could convey it better than I can; at any rate, it, too, is a rough draft of an explanation. And there are also economic explanations. There is no denying that at the beginning of this century the Jews belonged to the German bourgeoisie and held fairly influential positions in finance, the press, culture, the arts, cinema, and so on; so there was certainly jealousy.

But let's go back to what I mentioned earlier, that is, to the inextricable confusion between a genuine or presumed racial motivation and other motivations.

It has been said that the racial war is the only war that Hitler won, and it's true, he won it. Unleashed first against German Judaism and later against Judaism in all the countries occupied by Germany, it was a ruthless war, pursued with that talent for thoroughness, for carrying out any undertaking to completion, which characterizes Germans for good or ill. It led to the extermination—to the deaths—of six million Jews out of a world population of seventeen million, more than a third, and practically to the extinction of Jewish culture and civilization in countries like Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. And if this didn't happen elsewhere it's simply because the Germans didn't get that far; the intention was there. It's worth recalling that the will Hitler dictated when the Russians were eighty meters

away, an hour before he committed suicide, concludes by saying: “Most of all, I entrust to you, my successors, the task of carrying to its conclusion the racial campaign, of exterminating the Jewish people, who are the carriers of all the evils of humankind.” This seems proof enough that this urge of Hitler the man to lay all possible blame on a scapegoat was irrational and unreasonable; and the scapegoat was all the Jews of Europe.

It wasn’t just a matter of killing them—and it seems to me that this, too, contributes to defining the feral nature, the beastly nature, of this sort of racial hatred.

Killing may be merciful; a condemned man is usually killed in a compassionate way, with mercy, and is allowed to express his last wishes. On the contrary, the slaughter of the European Jews, those from Eastern Europe in particular, was carried out in the most senselessly cruel way, with children killed before their mothers’ eyes, with unnecessary pain, humiliation, demoralization, deportation inflicted before death—and here I give you a personal testimony.

You have to imagine what it meant to be loaded onto a train, onto freight cars, fifty or sixty people, men, women, and children forced to travel for five, ten, fifteen days even, for the trains coming from Salonika and going to Auschwitz, with no food, no drink, with the indiscriminate mixing that you can imagine, without sleeping, with an intense cold in winter and an atrocious heat in the summer, in cars that were never opened, so that before death, in most cases in the concentration camps, or in the car itself, a process of brutalization would occur; in other words, there was a precise will to demolish humanity in those human beings even before killing them. And this I believe is truly unique in the history, however bloody, of humankind.

Another personal recollection. I was in a concentration camp, in Auschwitz, and worked in a factory that from time to time was bombed; and we were made to clear away the rubble.

We had been imprisoned for several months, almost a year in my case (others had been in prison for two years) and we weren’t a pleasant sight, we were unshaven, our clothes were ragged, our hair was shorn, we were dirty, many couldn’t speak German. Next to this bombed factory there was a camp for Hitler youth; they were fourteen-year-olds, equivalent to the Italian Fascist youth of the time; they belonged to different social classes and were at a sort of pre-military camp, sleeping in tents nearby.

They were taken on a tour to watch us shoveling the rubble; and what the instructors were telling them, with no effort to be discreet, to speak in a low voice, was this: “You see, we keep them in concentration camps and make them work, because they aren’t men, it’s quite obvious; they are unshaven, they don’t wash, they’re dirty and don’t even know how to talk, all they’re good for is handling a pick and shovel. So it’s clear that we are compelled to treat them this way, the way you treat a domestic animal.”

This substitution of cause for effect is very typical, because obviously those were the effects of imprisonment and not the cause; and it occurs in every corner of the world where there is racial prejudice. The “other” is persecuted and then it is said: “Of course we persecute him, don’t you see what he is? He’s a brute, he’s worth less than we are, he doesn’t have our culture; it’s natural to make him do the heavy work, the most unpleasant tasks. . . .”

I don’t want to draw comparisons, because the persecution of European Jews was much more thorough, terrible, far-reaching, and bloodier than all other racial persecutions; but for this reason, in a way, it serves as an example.

At this point, what to say about today?

That was yesterday, thirty, thirty-five years ago; is there still racial discrimination? Yes, obviously.

Italy is in some ways a privileged country, because it’s a country of mixed blood, very mixed blood, even in recent times.

We are so clearly aware here that there is no Italian race that we are not very sensitive to friction with other races; I believe that in this respect Italy is truly a privileged island in Europe. Also, for this and other, related reasons, Jews in Italy have suffered some moderate persecutions and humiliations in all eras, but blood was never, or almost never, shed, except during the German occupation.

I would add that racial intolerance in Italy is so slight because Italy is a skeptical country, in Italy fanaticism is unlikely, it’s unlikely that we’ll believe in a “prophet”; even if another Mussolini-like prophet were to come to Italy today, we are so thoroughly vaccinated that I don’t think he would get much support.

However, Italy is not the only country in the world. Anyone who has seen on TV what has been happening recently in Iran realizes what persecution is like, racial and non-racial (as I said earlier, this confusion is

permanent). There the issue is nominally religious, but the Kurds follow the same religion as the Iranians, yet they are persecuted. There are many Iranian Jews who are of the Jewish race, of Jewish origin, but of Muslim faith, and they are nevertheless persecuted.

Having said this, and having seen just in the past few days what's happening in a country not so far from us, because, today, no country is far, I must say that to be totally optimistic would be, at best, imprudent.

Lecture given on the occasion of meetings organized by the Municipality of Turin with the title "Turin Encyclopedia," November 1979

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1. Bobbio (1909–2004) was a legal and political philsopher best known for his work on the relationship between social equality and individual freedom.

Foreword to *The Two Faces of Chemistry* by Luciano Caglioti

Twenty years ago, around 1960, Italy, Europe, and the world were going along in widespread euphoria, scarcely disturbed by the clouds that seemed to be gathering over some of the countries that had recently become independent. The prevailing view, or, rather, the unquestioned assumption, was that the end of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union, the acceptance of the nuclear balance, and the détente between the two superpowers would overcome and eliminate the sinister inheritance of the Second World War. The world could set out with confidence toward a future of increasing production, consumption, and affluence. With the disappearance or, at least, waning of political threats, no other threats to humanity were perceived except, in a distant future, those connected with overpopulation.

Ten years ago, the scenario changed. Various voices, both timid and authoritative, were raised in warning that it would be difficult to continue to carry on indefinitely like this: ever upward, yes, but on all fronts? and how far? Hadn't the time come for worldwide stocktaking, and for curbing, if not consumption, at least waste, artificially induced needs, and air, water, and soil pollution? In the fall of 1973, the entire world was convinced, suddenly and brutally, that that time had come; it happened within a few days, on the occasion of the "small" Yom Kippur War, between Egypt and Israel. Oil, the main source of energy for all industrialized countries, raw material for thousands of by-products, tacitly considered inexhaustible, might, instead, be lacking for a while, because of someone's arbitrary and autonomous decision. Further, if you looked more closely, oil could even

disappear forever within a few decades; or, more precisely, it would certainly disappear through depletion of the oil fields. This sudden awareness of a deadline, possibly deferrable but unavoidable, was positive from many points of view, because it clarified for everybody the need to resolve, in an intelligent way and on a global scale, many problems that had been piling up. An alarm went off, the oil will run out, it's already running out, and with it will end the epoch of low-cost energy, the belle époque of thoughtless waste, of floods of gasoline barely more expensive than mineral water. And sooner or later, like oil, many metals whose consumption is growing exponentially at the expense of limited resources will also run out. In other words, we realized that we have been wonderfully ingenious in the short term, in resolving maybe complex, but temporary and marginal problems, while we have been incredibly shortsighted in the case of major problems, which extend in space and time and on which depends no less than the survival of our civilization, or even of our species.

Thus, a new blow was inflicted on the Enlightenment concept of progress. Already at the start of this century, with the first worldwide conflict, talk about progress had begun to be wary: progress, yes, but only scientific and technical, certainly not moral, and maybe not even cultural and artistic. Today, even scientific and technological progress is questioned by some thinkers, and many non-thinkers: the Industrial Revolution has caused two worldwide, bloody wars, from chemistry came dynamite, from Einstein and Fermi came Hiroshima, from weed killers came Seveso,[1] from tranquilizers came the thalidomide tragedy, from dyes comes cancer. Enough, let's stop, let's go back.

Well, it's impossible to go back, or it would be possible only at the cost of a massacre of unprecedented proportions. Going back to the beginning would mean reopening the door to epidemics and infant mortality, abandoning the production of chemical fertilizers, and thus reducing agricultural production by a half to two-thirds, and condemning to hunger hundreds of millions of people, in addition to those who go hungry already. Today, humanity finds itself in a critical and new situation, so complex that it would be naïve to propose to resolve it by a single general method. We can't continue to "progress" indiscriminately, but neither can we stop or go back on all fronts. We have to confront individual problems one by one, with honesty, intelligence, and humility: this is the delicate and formidable task of the experts of today and tomorrow, and it is the topic of this book.

More than a chemistry digest, the book is, in my view, a small guide to practical behavior. It's both useful and necessary for the many serious technical problems confronting us to be removed from the sphere of emotions and vested interests and laid out with competence and sincerity. Not always—in fact, rarely—does the book propose a solution. Sometimes, a balanced analysis of the data shows that the problem doesn't exist, or that it does exist but that the solution can be found only through disproportionately expensive research, or, again, that the truth can drown in a sea of contradictory experimental data, as in the case of the "saccharin mess."[2] Of course, that is an extreme case, since saccharin is characterized by limited and poorly defined advantages and disadvantages. Different, and more universal, is the problem of food additives, since we are all consumers of food and by now the majority of human beings eat food that has been in some way tampered with or preserved. Some additives are useful or even indispensable, like those which protect food from going bad, safely and for an extended period of time. Others, like dyes, satisfy purely commercial requirements; in other words they fulfill fake needs created by habit and publicity—it wouldn't be at all impossible to get used to eating gray salami and colorless jams (that is, of a "natural" color). But while such innovations would certainly be logical, "consumer resistance has so far been decisive." If only the same propaganda tools that are used to promote totally futile and sophisticated expectations were mobilized against the use of worthless additives! Indeed, in the light of the careful and intelligent ecological assessment promoted by this book, to say worthless is tantamount to saying harmful; when there is no benefit, the presumption, however small, of harmfulness must be made. By way of example, take the case of the nitrates and nitrites that, for centuries, have been added to brighten up the color of sausages and that recently have been suspected of causing the development of cancer through the complex and unsuspected transformations they undergo inside the body.

Equally sensitive is the subject of drugs. That every drug is potentially a poison was known to Hippocrates, and it is confirmed by the semantic ambivalence of the Greek word. We learn that "between 3 and 5 percent of hospitalizations in the United States are a consequence of a negative reaction to a drug," and that there is great uncertainty about what happens when a patient is given two or more drugs whose compatibility and mutual interaction are basically unknown to the health practitioner (or even the

pharmacologist). And what about the case, extremely frequent these days, of a patient taking drugs without a prescription, based on hearsay or the experience of others? Risks and benefits have to be evaluated with intelligence and competence, outside any emotional consideration. In most cases, however, this evaluation is way beyond the capacity of the layman, and we are all laymen; it's already an achievement that each one of us may become an expert on a single one of the innumerable problems confronting us. But it's difficult to overcome emotional considerations. The press and the mass media are bombarding us with a growing amount of information that is imprecise, distorted, full of gaps, often poorly understood by its disseminators, and almost always contaminated by special interests or prejudiced ideologies.

The subject of tobacco is typical, and is thoroughly addressed by the book. While the general awareness that "smoking is unhealthy" is growing, it's useful to read in no uncertain terms that, for instance in the Federal Republic of Germany, tobacco earns nine billion marks for the state each year, but it also imposes social costs of twenty billion marks, for treating diseases caused directly or indirectly by smoking; or to read that tobacco is responsible for four times as many deaths as road accidents.

It's very hard to judge the toxicity of chemical elements, whose traces are present (and have been forever: the sea contains almost all of them, but now their concentrations have increased and new ones have appeared) in our environment and in our food. We have known for a long time that arsenic and selenium are "toxic," that they are harmful or deadly if absorbed in high quantities; but what does "high" mean? Only the most modern and sophisticated methods of chemical analysis have made it possible to determine that, on the contrary, in very small doses, both substances are necessary or at least useful: arsenic as a growth factor and selenium as an antagonist of mercury. Further, the dosages at which they (and probably also other elements or composites) are useful differ greatly from species to species, and presumably from individual to individual. It would therefore be wise to reduce their presence in the environment, but it would be foolish to eliminate them altogether. Where is the demarcation line between wisdom and ignorance?

The author notes that the pinnacle of uncertainty and confusion is reached with the question of energy. Yet this, intertwined with all the other problems we face today, including political ones, is the problem of

problems, the key to our survival, before which all other questions should pale: *Energy or Extinction* is the menacing title of a book by Fred Hoyle that is cited here. It's also the problem that finds us least well prepared, because what seems to be the most plausible solution, that is, relying on nuclear energy, isn't backed, like the others, by the experience of decades or centuries. It goes beyond the confines of traditional physics and chemistry, and it comes up against entrenched habits and unsettling mental associations: to many people, plutonium is Pluto, and the atom is Hiroshima. The "two faces" alluded to in the title of this book, the risks and the benefits, are both disguised and masked, and are marred by the enormous financial interests in play; even among the experts there is no unanimity on an objective assessment. Yet the problem can't be set aside. An energy shortage would cause a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions, and the solution to the problem can't be left to the next generation, making it pay for our lack of foresight. But to solve the problem we need, once again, intelligence, knowledge, and honesty.

From all the considerations above, and from the many other vital topics addressed in this book, the clear necessity emerges, the moral obligation, not to be gullible, impulsive, and ignorant. Today more than ever we need to be prepared, and never more than today have schools, at least in Italy, been so unprepared to prepare us: we must welcome all those who, like Caglioti, intend to make up for these shortcomings. The obstacles in front of us can't be overcome with cheers or boos, with demonstrations or marches; realism and trust in human reason are needed, as there are no other suitable tools. If we oppose a necessary and urgent decision, we must be able to propose an alternative and better one. If we speak about "new models of development," we must know what this expression means. In a word, we need to know: not to surrender to enthusiasts or catastrophists, and not to satisfy ourselves and others with words.

Beneath the technical information and quantitative data, which are justifiably substantial, a silent current of wisdom, desire to educate, and moral tension flows through this book. It doesn't lay out solutions, but through its approach teaches us the most appropriate mind-set for finding them; everyone can discover here matters to ponder, and it is to be hoped that it will be selected and promoted as a school textbook.

Foreword to Luciano Caglioti, I due volti della chimica (The Two Faces of Chemistry) *(Milan: Mondadori, 1979)*

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1. An industrial accident causing the release into the atmosphere of toxic dioxin occurred in Seveso, near Milan, on July 10, 1976.
2. In the 1970s, studies showed a link between saccharin and bladder cancer in rats.

Afterword to the New German Edition of *If This Is a Man*

Someone wrote long ago that books, like human beings, have a destiny of their own, which is unpredictable, different from what we expected or wished for them. This book, too, has had a strange destiny. Its birth certificate is remote in time: it can be found on a page of the book, where one reads "*Dann nehme ich Bleistift und Heft und schreibe, was ich niemandem zu sagen vermochte*" ("Then I take my pencil and notebook and write what I could never tell anyone"). Our need to tell was so strong that I had begun to write the book, while things were still happening, in that freezing wartime German laboratory, full of prying eyes, although I knew that I could never keep those furtively scribbled notes, that I would have to throw them away immediately, because if they were found on me it would cost me my life.

But I wrote the book as soon as I returned to Italy, in the space of a few months: the memories burned so fiercely inside me. The manuscript was rejected by several of the big publishers, and accepted in 1947 by a small publishing house; 2500 copies were printed, then the publisher closed down and the book fell into oblivion, maybe because, in that harsh postwar period, people had no desire to return in memory to the painful years that had just ended. It took on new life only in 1958, when it was reprinted by Einaudi, and since then the interest of the public has been constant. The book has been translated into seven languages, adapted for the radio and the theater, and in Italy has been reprinted many times, including in a school edition, with footnotes.

In Germany it appeared for the first time in 1961, published by Fischer. The publisher asked me to write a special preface for German readers. The request disconcerted me. I was too little acquainted with the new Germany and my potential readers, I didn't know what language to use, I didn't want to impose myself as preacher or as judge, and it seemed to me that the facts recounted provided their own commentary. I agreed with the publisher to publish as a preface an excerpt from the letter that I had written to the book's translator to thank him for his work. The excerpt includes the following:

> If I think of my own life and the purposes I have set for myself, there is only one among them that I can identify consciously and precisely: to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people, to "talk back." . . .
>
> I am sure that you have not misinterpreted me. I have never harbored any hatred toward the German people. . . . I cannot understand, I cannot bear to see a man judged not for who he is but for the group he happens to belong to. . . .
>
> But I can't say that I understand the Germans. . . . I hope that this book will have some kind of echo in Germany: not only because of my ambitions but also because the nature of this echo will perhaps allow me to understand the Germans better.

This hope of mine was only partly fulfilled. The German edition sold out quickly, but there were no important reviews. On the other hand, I received a large number of letters from German readers, mostly young, and this made me think that my book must have roused a certain interest. I noticed an odd fact: all these letters were inspired by a single sentence in the preface, the one just cited, about wishing to "understand the Germans better." The young people, reflecting, wondered why it was so difficult to understand what happened in the Third Reich; some said that they themselves didn't understand their country, others made a distinction ("I can't understand *those* Germans"), still others claimed to "hate themselves as Germans and what is German in them." Only one (but probably he is not young) attempted a justification, clumsy and conventional: "In every era there have been moments when 'all hell broke loose,' uncontrollably and senselessly."

A confusing picture: but scarcely ten years had passed since the end of the war, and, besides, it was evident that the segment of public opinion represented by these thirty or forty readers was highly selective, far from constituting an "average sample" of the Germany of that time. Now this book, which I wrote thirty-three years ago, heads toward a new incarnation and a new adventure. Yet again I feel reluctance, and almost shame (the

shame of Auschwitz, the shame that every man should feel in the face of the fact that other men conceived and built Auschwitz), in presenting it to the German reader, and at the same time I feel a painful curiosity: this second German edition will be read by a new generation, freed to a great extent from the guilt feelings of their fathers, open to all European influences, more receptive but at the same time more ignorant of their past, perhaps even more indifferent.

Yet again, I hope that a response, or many, perhaps contradictory responses, will come to me from that country, to which I feel paradoxically bound by an unquenchable thirst to understand. It seems to me that I perceive in the criminal tragedy of the Third Reich a unique event that is an example and a symbol, but whose meaning has not yet been made clear. Perhaps one can read in it the warning of a greater catastrophe that looms over all humanity, and that can be averted only if all of us, truly, succeed in understanding the past, thus draining it of its threat.

Afterword to the new German edition of If This Is a Man,
published by Fischer Verlag in 1979

What a Big Mess in Moscow, in 1917

It's unfortunate that good manners prevent the reviewer from revealing to the reader the subject of this unusual book, by Roberto Vacca.[1] Suffice it to say that *pokazuka*, the Russian word that appears in the title, means "monstrous fraud," "masquerade," or some such, and that the fraud in question is no less than the Soviet regime—seen synchronously, in its obscure financial tangles, and diachronically, starting from the October Revolution and the Moscow trials—reinterpreted for the reader in a reckless and mocking way.

In the first episode, the author says that the book "is not intended to insult or defame any individual or any country; rather, it is meant to be, almost exclusively, an entertainment." I allow myself, respectfully, to read that "almost" as if it were written in bold, and to note that while the entertainment is there, acrobatic, on every page, the book has more to offer.

Unfortunately, we are getting used to *pokazuka*, to fraud as a tool of governance, also, and especially, in Italy: we can choose from a vast range of examples. Didn't the blackout campaign of last fall emit a vague odor of *pokazuka*? It's therefore good that someone should put us on the alert, preferably with the gentle prod of political satire. If we have to beware of idols, we must learn to mistrust all idols, our own and those of others, near and far.

To ascribe the political decline of the Soviet Union to the gnomes of Zurich is an elegant paradox that brings to mind G. K. Chesterton. However, there is no paradox in "the thousands, maybe millions of people who were deported, imprisoned, humiliated just because they were sincere

revolutionaries, true democrats . . . all those who never learned the truth and are dead."

But Vacca is not a man to linger in mourning for the gods who failed and in morose contemplation of futures not realized.

His activity as a forward-looking technology specialist, as a pacifist, and as a moralist can take a break, but these breaks are never sterile: we saw that with *Greggio e pericoloso* (*Crude and Dangerous*) (Mondadori, 1976), his previous thriller. Beneath the frantic succession of gunshots, flights, car chases, love affairs, and escapes in that novel, one recognizes, just as in this book, a solid and serious foundation.

Also, the protagonist of both books, Philip Quartara, has two personalities. He is an invincible romantic hero, an invariably (and somewhat ironically) extraordinary cybernetic Roland: he makes millions with a phone call, he is not affected by cold, fear, drugs, exhaustion; he seduces within seconds a young woman who is equally extraordinary; he is a good fighter, speaks innumerable languages, and overcomes all obstacles with cheerful self-assurance. At the same time, and without any irony, he is a solid and serious character, the model for a way of life that Vacca believes in, and urges us to believe in, the only one that can lead to the "improbable salvation" of our ever more complicated world.

This improbable Philip and his improbable adventures give us something more than entertainment. They convey to the lazy and tired reader the youthful joy of a well-functioning brain and muscles, the desire to heal the world and make it anew, according to reason, and an unforeseen, Enlightenment confidence in the future, which appears in the closing pages of the book.

This is the same confidence without which nothing can be undertaken, the confidence that Vacca likes to deny in the titles of his most successful books, to let it surface later, infused and dispersed, in the best pages of those very books.

Tuttolibri *6, no. 23 (June 21, 1980)*

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1. *La suprema pokazuka* (*The Supreme Pokazuka*) (Milan: Sugarco Editore, 1980).

History Spoke Through Anne Frank

The strategy always seems to be the same. Last year “someone” discovered, in France, a gullible little professor, very ambitious and slightly weird, and entrusted him with a noble mission. He was to prove that the gas chambers never existed in Auschwitz, or, rather, that they did exist but were used only to kill lice; that all the vast evidence of the Nazi genocide, papers and objects, testimonies and museums, is a forgery; that, consequently, all accusations are false. The key argument of the little professor was unusual: it had been said that there were gas chambers in Oranienburg and Dachau; in fact, there weren’t; *therefore* there were no gas chambers anywhere, and the slaughter was a Jewish invention.

We read now that a seventy-six-year-old retiree in Hamburg, obviously encouraged by “someone,” has taken the trouble to bring a suit against the publisher of Anne Frank’s diary, questioning its authenticity, because some passages in the famous notebook found in the secret apartment were written with a ballpoint pen, and so were added later, as there were no ballpoint pens in 1944. The strategy, as I said, is the same: to find a crack, slide a blade in, and prize it apart; you never know—even a solid building may collapse. It may very well be that additions were made to the diary: these are common editorial practices, however philologically incorrect. Those responsible may intend to clarify a connection, to fill a gap, to provide the historical background of an episode. It’s certainly regrettable that additions aren’t identified, if for no other reason than that they open the door to actions like that of the Hamburg retiree.

This initiative is disgusting. Anne Frank’s diary moved the entire world because its authenticity is self-evident. A forger capable of creating such a

book from scratch can't exist: he would have to be at the same time a historian of society, extremely knowledgeable about the smallest details of a little-known place and time, a psychologist skilled in the reconstruction of states of mind bordering on the unimaginable, a poet with the candid, fickle soul of a fourteen-year-old.

Plenty of obtuseness or bad faith is necessary to claim that these pages were made up; but, even if the experts of the Hamburg Court of Appeals had declared that the entire diary is a fake, the historical truth wouldn't change. Anne wouldn't come back to life, nor would the millions of other innocent people killed by the Nazis. Maybe it's no accident that this squalid story, which brings to mind the Gospel image of the mote and the beam, came up only after the death of Anne's father, himself a former prisoner, whom I met briefly at Auschwitz immediately after the liberation. He was looking for his two daughters, who had disappeared.

To read about this initiative is doubly alarming today, after "someone" did not hesitate to take unknowing and innocent lives in Bologna, then in Munich, and then in Paris.[1] The scale is different, at least for the moment, but the method and the goals are the same, and so is the monstrous ideology that the world has been unable or unwilling to eradicate.

La Stampa, *October 7, 1980*

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1. Three recent terrorist attacks in Europe: the bombing of the Bologna train station in August 1980; another bombing the following month at Oktoberfest in Munich; and the bombing of a synagogue in Rue Copernic in Paris in early October.

Seekers of Lies to Deny the Holocaust

In Torrance, near Los Angeles, an Institute for Historical Review has been founded for the statutory purpose of reviewing the official history of the Second World War. There would be nothing objectionable in this goal if it weren't evident from the activities of the institute that this is a one-way review intended only to deny or minimize Nazi crimes. It's no surprise to read that a seminar was held in Torrance with the expert participation of that Professor Faurisson who last year tried frantically to draw attention to himself by saying that the gas chambers of Auschwitz didn't kill anyone, or, rather, that they were built after the war to defame the Nazi regime. The Torrance institute recently offered a prize of fifty thousand dollars to anyone who can prove "beyond dispute" that the Nazis were killing Jews in the gas chambers.

It's remarkable that such a prize should be offered at the time of the trial for the events in Varese and the bomb in Rue Copernic in Paris. It's as if someone were crying out: "The slaughter didn't happen, but we wish it had and that it would continue," or, "The slaughter didn't happen, but we are doing our best to have one now," expecting to be believed. A little consistency, for heaven's sake! If you like the massacre, why deny it happened? And if you don't like it, why do you imitate and defend it?

It's safe to predict that this provocative prize will remain in the coffers of the institute. Neither much courage nor much money is needed for such initiatives; boundless arrogance and bad faith are enough. One wouldn't risk anything by offering a prize of even $50 million to anyone who could prove "beyond dispute" that between 1939 and 1945 a bloody war was fought on this planet; if someone were to show up with testimonies,

documents, invitations to on-site investigations, and demanded the prize, it would be sufficient to challenge him with arguments similar to those stubbornly supported by the predecessor Faurisson. The Maginot and Siegfried lines never existed: their ruins were built a few years ago by specialized firms based on plans provided by obliging set designers, and the same can be said of war cemeteries. All pictures of the time are photomontages. All casualty statistics are counterfeit, the work of terrorist or tendentious propaganda: nobody died in the war because there was no war. All the diaries and chronicles published in the countries involved in the so-called conflict are lies, or the work of madmen, or were extorted from their authors by torture or blackmail, or were paid for. The war widows and orphans are salaried extras or paranoids.

What can't an institute deny? Ariosto, who knew about such things, ironically urged the Princes to befriend writers, poets, and historians, because they are the makers of truth. Those who want truth shouldn't trust Homer, who was corrupted by the Greek establishment with donations of palaces and villas:

> *Yet—would'st thou I the secret should expose?—*
> *By contraries throughout the tale explain:*
> *That from the Trojan bands the Grecian ran;*
> *And deem Penelope a courtezan*.[1]

This is the historic truth that the institute in Torrance would have restored had it existed at the time, and the kind of truth that it intends to restore today.

La Stampa, *November 26, 1980*

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1. *Orlando Furioso,* canto 35; translated by William Stewart Rose.

Joseph Needham: A Strong Will to Understand[1]

A few years ago, there was a polemical saying that “China is near.” This is not so in any logical sense; on the contrary, China is far from us, and not just geographically. For centuries, our Eurocentric pride diverted our attention from what was happening at the opposite extreme of our continent. And yet, separate from our civilization, but parallel to and contemporary with it, China was building a gigantic cultural structure, at least as large and complex as our own, to which it contributed much and from which it took hardly anything. In this work, so far unparalleled in the West, the scientist Joseph Needham shows that, not only in the refinements of literature, the arts, and philosophy but also in theoretical and applied sciences, China was not inferior to Europe and the Mediterranean, and often was ahead of them. We recognize on every page a strong and loving will to understand and to explain; this is not a book for specialists but, rather, as the author says, with understandable satisfaction, “a contribution to international understanding.”

Notiziario Einaudi, *1980*

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1. This piece was originally a blurb written for the publisher Einaudi, which was about to publish the Italian edition of Joseph Needham’s 1954 book, *Science and Civilization in China*.

To the Visitor

The history of deportation and of the death camps, the history of this place, cannot be separated from the history of the Fascist tyrannies in Europe. There is an uninterrupted link from the burning down of labor union offices in Italy in 1921 to the bonfires of books in German squares in 1933 and the heinous blaze of the Birkenau crematoriums. This is old wisdom, and Heine, a Jew and a German, had already admonished us: those who burn books end up burning people; violence is a seed that doesn't die.

It's sad but necessary to remind others and ourselves: the first European attempt to smother the workers' movement and to sabotage democracy was conceived in Italy. It was fascism, unleashed by the early postwar crisis, by the myth of the "mutilated victory," and fed by ancient wretchedness and guilt, and it gave birth to a contagious delirium: the cult of the man of destiny, organized, mandatory enthusiasm, every decision entrusted to the discretion of a single individual.

But not all Italians were Fascists: we, the Italians who died here, are witnesses to this. Beside fascism, another unbroken thread arose first in Italy: anti-fascism. Together with our testimony, there is the testimony of all those who fought against, and suffered from, fascism: Turin's worker-martyrs of 1923, the prisoners, the political internees, the exiles, and our brothers of all political beliefs who died while resisting the Fascist regime reinstated by the National Socialist invasion.

And, along with us, other Italians, too, bear witness: those who fell on all fronts of the Second World War, fighting grudgingly and desperately against an enemy that wasn't their enemy, and discovering the deception when it was too late. They, too, are victims of fascism, ignorant victims.

We weren’t ignorant. Some of us were partisans and political combatants: they were captured and deported in the last months of war, and, while the Third Reich floundered, died here, tormented by the thought that liberation was so close.

Most of us were Jews, Jews from all the cities of Italy, and also foreign Jews: Poles, Hungarians, Yugoslavs, Czechs, and Germans who in Fascist Italy, which was forced into anti-Semitism by Mussolini’s racial laws, had encountered the benevolence and civilized hospitality of the Italian people. They were rich and poor, men and women, healthy and sick.

There were many children among us, and there were old people already at death’s door, but we were all loaded like freight into boxcars, and our fate, the fate of those who entered the gates of Auschwitz, was the same for everybody. It was unprecedented, even in the darkest ages, for human beings to be exterminated by the millions, like noxious insects; for children and the dying to be deliberately killed. We, sons and daughters of Christians and Jews (but we don’t like these distinctions), sons and daughters of a civilized country that returned to civilization after the night of fascism, here bear witness.

In this place, where we, the innocent, were killed, barbarity touched bottom. Visitor, look at the remains of this camp and think: no matter where you are from, you are not a stranger. Make sure that your journey was not in vain, that our deaths were not in vain. Let the ashes of Auschwitz be a warning; make sure that the hideous fruit of hatred, whose traces you have seen here, doesn’t produce a new seed, not tomorrow, not ever.

Written for the inauguration of the memorial honoring Italians who fell in the Nazi death camps, and published in a booklet by ANED, the National Association of Former Deportees, April 1980

Lilith and Other Stories

Translated by Ann Goldstein

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PRESENT PERFECT

Capaneus

It was impossible either to love or to hate Valerio: his scarcity, his insufficiency were such as to place him, at first encounter, outside the common relations between men. He had been small and fat; small he remained, and the flaccid folds on his face and body bore melancholy witness to his former plumpness. We had worked together for a long time in the Polish mud. All of us fell down, in the deep, sticky mud of the worksite, but, owing to that trace of animal nobility which survives even in a man without hope, we made an effort to avoid falling, or at least to minimize the effects. In fact a man on the ground, a man prostrate, is in danger: he rouses cruel instincts, and inspires derision rather than pity. But Valerio fell constantly, more than anyone else. The slightest shove was enough, or not even necessary; rather, at times it was clear that he fell down in the mud on purpose, if someone merely was rude to him, or pretended to hit him—from his short stature down into the mire, as if it were his mother's breast, as if for him the upright position were itself provisional, the way it is for stilt-walkers. The mud was his refuge, his putative defense. He was the man of mud, the color of mud was his color. He knew it; with the scant illumination that suffering had left him, he knew that he was laughable.

And he talked about it, because he was loquacious. He endlessly recounted his woes, the falls, the slaps, the ridicule, like a pathetic clown: with no inclination to salvage any particle of himself, to conceal the most abject notes, emphasizing, rather, the clumsiest aspects of his mishaps, with a hint of theatrical flair in which traces of a convivial good nature could be divined. Those who know men like him know that they are flatterers, by nature and without ulterior motive. If we had met in normal life, I don't

know on what ground he would have flattered me; there, every morning, he praised the healthy appearance of my face. Although I was not superior to him by much, I felt pity for him, along with a vague annoyance; but at that time pity, being ineffectual, vanished as soon as it was conceived, like smoke in the wind, leaving an empty taste of hunger in the mouth. Like everyone else, I tried more or less consciously to avoid him: he was in too obvious a state of need, and in those who are needy we always sense a creditor.

One gloomy September day, the air-raid sirens sounded above the mud, rising and falling in tone like a long feral groan. It was nothing new, and I had a secret hiding place: a narrow underground passage where bales of empty sacks were piled. I went down and found Valerio there; he greeted me with verbose cordiality, which I barely returned, and without delay, as I was napping, he began to tell me his woeful adventures. After the tragic cry of the sirens, a threatening silence reigned outside, but suddenly we heard footsteps above our heads, and right afterward we saw, outlined at the top of the stairs, the vast black contours of Rappoport, with a pail in his hand. He noticed us, exclaimed, “Italians!” and let go of the pail, which rolled noisily down the stairs.

The pail had held soup, but it was empty and almost clean. Valerio and I scavenged some remains, by carefully scraping the bottom and sides with our spoons, which at that time we carried with us day and night, like Templars their swords, ready for any improbable emergency. In the meantime Rappoport had solemnly descended: he wasn’t a man to give soup or to ask it as a gift.

Rappoport must then have been about thirty-five. Polish in origin, he had got a degree in medicine at Pisa; this was the source of his fondness for Italians and his lopsided friendship with Valerio, who had been born in Pisa. He was a marvelously well-equipped man. Astute, violent, and cheerful, like the buccaneers of the past, he had easily managed to let go of everything that seemed to him superfluous in a civilized upbringing. He lived in the camp like a tiger in the jungle, attacking and extorting the weaker and avoiding the stronger, ready to corrupt, steal, fight, tighten his belt, lie, or flatter, according to circumstances. He was therefore an enemy,

but neither mean nor unpleasant. He came slowly down the stairs, and when he got close we could see clearly where the contents of the pail had gone. This was among his specialties: in the general commotion at the first blare of the air-raid sirens, he would hurry to the site's kitchen, and escape with his booty before the patrol arrived. Rappoport had done this successfully three times; the fourth, being a prudent outlaw, he remained calmly with his team throughout the entire alarm. Lilienthal, who had tried to imitate him, was caught in the act, and publicly hanged the next day.

"Greetings, Italians," he said. "*Ciao, Pisan*." Then there was silence again; we were lying side by side on the sacks, and soon Valerio and I had slipped into a half-sleep swarming with images. You didn't need to be horizontal for this; in moments of repose you might fall asleep on your feet. Not so Rappoport, who, while he detested the work, had one of those fiery temperaments that can't bear inaction. He took a knife out of his pocket and began to sharpen it on a rock, spitting on it occasionally; but this wasn't enough, either. He addressed Valerio, who was already snoring.

"Wake up, kid. What did you dream about—ravioli, right? And wine from Chianti—at the cafeteria on Via dei Mille, six lire fifty. And the steaks, *psza crew*, steaks from the black market as big as your plate—a great country, Italy. And then Margherita . . ." Here he leered in a jovial fashion and slapped his thigh loudly with one hand. Valerio had awakened, and was curled up, with a curdled smile on his sallow little face. Almost no one ever spoke to him, but I don't think he could have suffered much from it; Rappoport, however, often talked to him, surrendering to a wave of Pisan memories with true abandon. To me it was clear that, for Rappoport, Valerio represented simply a pretext for those moments of mental vacation; for Valerio, on the other hand, they were pledges of friendship, the precious friendship of someone powerful, bestowed on Valerio, with a generous hand from man to man, if not exactly from equal to equal.

"What, you didn't know Margherita? You were never together? Then what sort of Pisan are you? That was a woman who could wake the dead: nice and neat during the day, and at night a true artist. . . ." Here a whistle was heard, and then another. The sound seemed to have arisen at a remote distance but bore down on us like locomotives on a mad course; the ground shook, the cement beams of the ceiling vibrated for a second as if they were made of rubber, and finally the two explosions burst, followed by a roar of devastation and, in us, the voluptuous relief from pain. Valerio had dragged

himself into a corner, hidden his face in the crook of his elbow as if to protect himself from a slap, and was praying under his breath.

A new, monstrous whistle arose. The younger generations of Europe aren't acquainted with that hissing sound; it couldn't have been accidental—someone must have intended it, to give the bombs a voice that expressed their thirst and their threat. I rolled off the sacks and against the wall. The explosion arrived, very close, almost physical, and then the vast breath of the sucking up. Rappoport was roaring with laughter. "You wet your pants, eh, Pisano? Wait, wait, the best is yet to come."

"You've got strong nerves," I said, and out of high school memory surfaced the bold image of Capaneus—faded, as if from a previous incarnation—who from the depths of Hell challenges Jove and mocks his thunderbolts.

"It's not a question of nerves but of theory. Of accounts: it's my secret weapon."

Now, at that time I was weary; it was an ancient, incarnate weariness, which had become part of my flesh, and which I believed irrevocable. It wasn't the sort of weariness we all know—the sort that, superimposed on well-being, veils it like a temporary paralysis—but, rather, a definitive void, an amputation. I felt spent, like a gun that has been shot, and Valerio was like me, maybe less consciously, and all the others were like us. Rappoport's vitality, which under other circumstances I would have admired (and in fact today I do), appeared to me intrusive, insolent: if our skin wasn't worth two cents, his, although Polish and sated, wasn't worth much more, and it was irritating that he refused to recognize it. As for that business of theory and accounts, I had no wish to stay and hear it. I had other things to do: sleep, if the masters of the sky would let me; if not, suck on my fear in peace, like every sensible person.

But it wasn't easy to repress Rappoport, to avoid or ignore him. "What, you're sleeping? I'm about to make my will and you're sleeping. Maybe my bomb is already on the way, and I don't want to miss my chance. If I were free, I'd write a book of my philosophy. For now, I can only tell it to you two wretches. If it's useful to you, so much the better; if not, and if you make it and I don't, which would certainly be odd, you'll be able to circulate it, and maybe it will come at the right moment for someone. Not that I much care about that, though. I don't have the makings of a benefactor.

“So, as long as I could, I drank, ate, made love, and left flat, gray Poland for your Italy; I studied, learned, traveled, and observed. I kept my eyes open, I didn’t waste a crumb; I was diligent, I don’t think anyone could have done more or better. Things went well for me, I accumulated a large quantity of good, and all that good didn’t disappear, but is in me, safe and sound—I won’t let it fade. I’ve kept it. No one can take it away from me.

“Then I ended up here. I’ve been here for twenty months, and for twenty months I’ve kept my accounts. I’m in the black, and quite a few accounts are still active. It would take many more months of the camp, or many days of torture, to use up my balance. Besides”—and he caressed his stomach affectionately—“with a little initiative, even here, every so often, you can find something good. So, in the regrettable case that one of you survives me, you will be able to say that Leon Rappoport got what was owed him, left neither debts nor credits, did not complain and did not ask for pity. If I meet Hitler in the other world, I’ll spit in his face with every right . . .” A bomb fell not far away, followed by a rumbling like a landslide; one of the storehouses must have collapsed. Rappoport had to raise his voice almost to a shout: “. . . because he didn’t get me!”

I saw Rappoport only once again, only for a few seconds, and his image stayed with me in the almost photographic form of this last appearance. I was sick in the camp infirmary in January 1945. From my cot a stretch of the roadway between two barracks was visible, where a trail was marked in the deep snow. The infirmary workers often passed by there, in pairs, carrying the dead or nearly dead on stretchers. One day, I saw two stretcher bearers, one of whom was striking because of his height, and a peremptory, authoritative obesity, unusual in those places. I recognized Rappoport, and, going to the window, rapped on the glass. He stopped, grimaced at me in a gay and suggestive manner, and raised his hand in a broad gesture of greeting, so that his sad burden tilted indecorously to one side.

Two days later the camp was evacuated, in the terrible circumstances that are well-known. I have reason to think that Rappoport did not survive; and so I consider it my duty to carry out the task that was entrusted to me.

The Juggler

We called them *Grüne Spitzen* (“green triangles”), common criminals, *Befauer* (from the abbreviation BV which was their official designation, and which in turn was the abbreviation of something like “prisoners in limited preventive detention”).[1] We lived with them, obeyed them, feared and hated them, but we knew almost nothing about them; in fact, not much is known even now. They were the green triangles, Germans already imprisoned in ordinary jails, who had been offered, on the basis of mysterious criteria, the alternative of serving their sentence in a camp rather than in a prison. Generally they were despicable types; many of them boasted that they lived better in the camp than at home, because, besides the pleasure of giving orders, they had a free hand with the rations intended for us; many were murderers in the strict sense of the word. They made no secret of it and showed it in their behavior.

Eddy (probably a stage name) was a green triangle, but he wasn’t a murderer. He had two careers: he was a juggler and, in his spare time, a thief. In June of 1944 he became our vice Kapo, and immediately stood out for several unusual qualities. He had a dazzling beauty. Fair, of average height but slender, strong, and extremely agile, he had fine features and skin so clear that it seemed transparent; he couldn’t have been more than twenty-three. He didn’t give a damn about anything or anyone, the SS, the work, us; he was distinguished by an air of serenity and, at the same time, self-absorption. He became famous the very day of his arrival: in the bathhouse, after carefully washing himself with a bar of scented soap, he stood, completely naked, and placed the soap on top of his head, which, like ours, was shaved; then he bent forward and, with expert, precise, yet

imperceptible undulations of his back, slid the sumptuous soap slowly from his head to his neck, then down along his spine, to the coccyx, where it dropped into his hand. Two or three of us applauded, but he gave no sign of noticing, and went off slowly, distractedly, to get dressed.

On the job he was unpredictable. Sometimes he did the work of ten, but even in the more tedious jobs he was sure to display his professional gift. He would be shoveling dirt, and all of a sudden you'd see him stop, grab the shovel like a guitar, and improvise a song, beating with a rock, sometimes on the handle, then on the blade. He would be carrying bricks and, returning at his dancing, dreamy pace, would suddenly be whirling in a rapid somersault. Other days, he would huddle in a corner without lifting a finger, but, because he was capable of such extraordinary feats, no one dared to say anything to him. He wasn't an exhibitionist: in his games, he didn't care at all who was standing around; he seemed, rather, preoccupied with perfecting the performance, repeating, improving, like an unsatisfied poet who never stops correcting. Sometimes we'd see him search through the scrap iron scattered around the worksite, pick up a rim, a rod, a remnant of sheet metal, and attentively turn it over in his hands, balance it on a finger, spin it in the air, as if he wished to penetrate its essence and construct a new game out of it.

One day a freight car arrived full of cardboard tubes, like those which hold rolls of fabric, and our squad was sent to unload them. Eddy led me into an underground storeroom, set up a wooden slide under the window, on which my companions would send down the tubes, showed me how I was to pile them in an orderly fashion against the walls, and left. Through the window, I could see my companions, happy because of that unusually light work, but hesitant and clumsy in their movements, commuting between the freight car and the storeroom, carrying twenty or thirty tubes on each trip. Eddy sometimes carried a few and sometimes a lot, but never at random. On every round, he was studying new structures and architectures, as unstable but as symmetrical as castles of cards; on one trip he twirled four or five tubes in the air, as jugglers do with rubber balls.

In that cellar I was alone, and I was anxious to complete an important job. I had obtained a sheet of paper and a stub of pencil, and for days I had

been waiting for an opportunity to write the draft of a letter, in Italian naturally, that I wanted to deliver to an Italian worker so that he could copy it, sign it as his own, and send it to my family in Italy. We were, in fact, strictly forbidden to write, but I was sure that, if I thought about it for a moment, I would find a way to put together a message clear enough for my family and yet so innocent that it wouldn't rouse the attention of the censors. I mustn't be seen by anyone, because the sole fact of writing was intrinsically suspicious (for what reason, and to whom, would one of us be writing?), and the Lager and the site were swarming with informers. After an hour of work on the tubes, I felt safe enough to begin the draft; the tubes came down the slide at infrequent intervals and in the cellar no alarming sounds could be heard.

I hadn't counted on Eddy's silent footsteps; he was already looking at me when I became aware of him. Instinctively, or, rather, stupidly, I unclasped my fingers; the pencil fell, but the paper wafted to the floor like a dead leaf. Eddy grabbed it, then he knocked me down with a violent slap. And yet as I write the word "slap" I realize that I'm lying, or at least conveying to the reader false emotions and information. Eddy was not a brute, and didn't mean to punish me or make me suffer; in the Lager a slap had a meaning very different from what it might have for us today, and here. That is, it had a meaning: it was a mode of expression, which in that context meant, approximately, "Watch out, now you've done it—you're putting yourself in danger, maybe without knowing it, and putting me in danger, too." But between Eddy the German thief and juggler, and me the young inexperienced Italian, bewildered and confused, a conversation like that would have been vain, not understood (if only for linguistic reasons), out of place, tortuous.

For the same reason, punches and slaps passed between us like a daily language, and we had quickly learned to distinguish the "expressive" blows from the others, which were inflicted out of savagery, to cause pain and humiliation, and often led to death. A slap like Eddy's was like the smack you give a dog, or the whack you give a donkey, to convey to them, or reinforce, an order or a prohibition—little more than a nonverbal communication. Among the many sufferings of the camp, blows of this sort were by far the least painful, which is equivalent to saying that our lives were not very different from those of dogs and donkeys.

He waited for me to get up, and asked who I was writing to. I answered in my bad German that I wasn't writing to anyone; I had found a pencil by chance, and was writing on a whim, out of nostalgia, out of a dream. I knew very well that writing was forbidden, but I also knew that it was impossible to send a letter. I assured him that I would never have dared to go against the rules of the camp. Certainly Eddy wouldn't believe me, but I had to say something, if only to arouse pity: I knew that if he reported me to the Political Department, the gallows awaited me, but before the gallows an interrogation (what an interrogation!) to discover who my accomplice was, and perhaps also get from me the address of the person I was writing to in Italy. Eddy gave me a strange look; then he told me not to move, he would be back in an hour.

It was a long hour. Eddy returned to the cellar with three sheets of paper in his hand, one of them mine, and I immediately saw on his face that the worst would not happen. He must not have been inexperienced, this Eddy, or maybe his stormy past had taught him the fundamentals of the grim profession of the cop: he had sought among my companions two (not just one) who knew both German and Italian, and from them, separately, had had my message translated into German, warning that if the two translations did not come out the same he would report to the Political Department not only me but them.

He made me a speech that's hard to relate. He said that, luckily for me, the two translations were the same and the text was not compromising. That I was mad—there was no other explanation, only a madman could have thought of risking in that way not only his life but the life of the Italian accomplice I surely had, of my relatives in Italy, and also his position as Kapo. He told me that I had deserved that slap, that in fact I should thank him, because it had been a good deed, of the sort that lead to Paradise, and he, *Strassenräuber,* street criminal, by profession, had a great need to do good deeds. That, finally, he would not make a report, though not even he knew exactly why: maybe just because I was mad, but then Italians are notoriously loony, all they're good at is singing and getting in trouble.

I don't think I did thank Eddy, but afterward, though I felt no positive fondness for my green triangle "colleagues," I sometimes wondered what human substance was packed in behind their symbol, and was sorry that none of their ambiguous brigade have (as far as I know) told their story. I don't know what happened to Eddy in the end. A few weeks after the

incident I've recounted, he disappeared for a few days; then we saw him again one evening, standing in the alley between the barbed wire and the electrified fence; hanging around his neck was a sign with *Urning* written on it, that is, "Pederast," but he didn't seem distressed or worried. He witnessed our group returning with a distracted, insolent, lazy look, as if what happened around him had nothing to do with him.

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1. In fact, "BV" stands for *Berufsverbrecher*, or "criminals."

Lilith

Within a few minutes the sky had darkened and it had begun to rain. Soon the rain increased, until it became a steady downpour, and the thick earth of the worksite turned into a blanket of mud several inches deep; it became impossible not only to shovel but even to stand up. The Kapo questioned the civilian supervisor, then turned to us: we should find shelter wherever we could. There were several large sections of iron pipe scattered around, five or six meters long and a meter in diameter. I climbed inside one of these, and halfway along the pipe I ran into Tischler, who had had the same idea and had entered from the other end.

Tischler means “carpenter,” and among us Tischler was not known by any other name. There was also the Smith, the Russian, the Fool, two Tailors (the Tailor and the other Tailor, respectively), the Galician, and the Tall Man; I was for a long time the Italian, and then indifferently Primo or Alberto, because I was confused with someone else.

The Tischler was therefore the Tischler and nothing else, but he didn’t look like a carpenter, and we all suspected that he wasn’t one at all. At that time it was common for an engineer to get himself registered as a mechanic, or a journalist as a typesetter: you might thus hope for a better job than laborer, without inciting the Nazi rage against intellectuals. In any case, the Tischler had been assigned to the carpenters’ bench, and he did the job pretty well. He was unusual for a Polish Jew, in that he spoke a little Italian; he had learned it from his father, who was imprisoned by the Italians in 1917 and interned in a camp, yes, a concentration camp, somewhere near Turin. The majority of his fellow prisoners had died of the Spanish flu, and in fact even today you can see their exotic names—Hungarian, Polish,

Croatian, German names—in a vault at the Cimitero Maggiore; the sight, and the thought of those lonely deaths, fills you with pity. His father, too, had got sick, but had recovered.

The Tischler's Italian was amusingly flawed. It consisted mainly of fragments of opera librettos; his father had been a passionate opera lover. Often, during work, I heard him humming bits of arias—"*Sconto col sangue mio*" or "*Libiamo nei lieti calici.*"[1] His mother tongue was Yiddish, but he also spoke German, and we didn't have much trouble understanding each other. I liked the Tischler because he didn't give in to lethargy. He moved briskly, in spite of his wooden shoes; he spoke with care and precision; and his face was lively, both laughing and sad. Sometimes, at night, he performed in Yiddish, telling stories or reciting long strings of verses, and I was sorry that I couldn't understand him. Sometimes he sang, too, and then no one applauded; they all looked at the ground, but when he finished they begged him to begin again.

That almost doglike, four-legged encounter cheered him: maybe it would rain every day! But this was a special day: the rain had come for him, because it was his birthday; he was twenty-five. Now, coincidentally, I, too, turned twenty-five that day—we were twins. The Tischler said that it was a day to celebrate, since it was unlikely that we would celebrate the next birthday. He took half an apple from his pocket, cut off a piece, and gave it to me, and, in a year of prison, that was the only time I tasted fruit.

We chewed in silence, attentive to the precious acidic taste as if to a symphony. Meanwhile, in the pipe opposite ours, a woman had taken shelter: young, bundled up in black, perhaps a Ukrainian from the Todt Organization.[2] She had a broad red face, shiny with rain, and she looked at us and laughed; she scratched with lazy provocation under her jacket, then she loosened her hair, combed it out in a leisurely way, and began to braid it again. In those days we seldom saw a woman close up; it was a sweet, fierce moment, and left me devastated.

The Tischler noticed that I was looking at her and asked if I was married. No, I wasn't; he stared at me with comic severity—it's a pity to be a bachelor at our age. Then, turning, he, too, contemplated the girl for a while. She had finished braiding her hair, and, squatting in her pipe, sang softly, her head rocking back and forth.

"She's Lilith," the Tischler said to me suddenly.

"You know her? That's her name?"

“I don’t know her, but I recognize her. She’s Lilith, Adam’s first wife. You don’t know the story of Lilith?”

I didn’t, and he laughed indulgently: everybody knows the Western Jews are all Epicureans, *apikorsim*, unbelievers. Then he continued, “If you had read the Bible carefully, you would recall that the story of the creation of woman is told twice, in two different ways; but of course they teach you a little Hebrew at thirteen and that’s it. . . .”

A classic situation was emerging, a game I liked, the dispute between the pious man and the unbeliever, who is ignorant by definition, and whose adversary, pointing out his error, “makes him gnash his teeth.” I accepted my role, and answered with the proper impudence: “Yes, it’s told twice, but the second time is just a comment on the first.”

“Wrong. That’s what you think if you don’t delve below the surface. You see, if you read carefully and think about what you’re reading, you realize that the first story says only ‘God created male and female’: it means that he created them equal, out of the same dust. On the next page, however, it says that God makes Adam, then, deciding that it’s not good for man to be alone, takes a rib from him and from the rib creates a woman, or, rather, a *Männin*, a man-ess, a female man. You see, there’s no longer equality; indeed, some believe that not only are the two stories different but also the two women, and that the first wasn’t Eve, man’s rib, but Lilith. Now, the story of Eve is written, and it’s well-known; the story of Lilith, on the other hand, is only told, so it’s not well-known—or, rather, stories, because there are a lot of them. I’ll tell you some, because it’s our birthday and it’s raining, and because today my role is to tell and to believe. Today the unbeliever is you.

“The first story is that the Lord not only made them equal but from the clay made a single form, in fact a Golem, a formless form. It was a figure with two backs, that is, the man and woman already joined; then he separated them, but they yearned to be reunited, and Adam immediately wanted Lilith to lie down on the ground. Lilith wouldn’t hear of it: Why should I be on the bottom? Aren’t we equal, two halves of the same material? Adam tried to force her, but they were equal in strength, too, and he couldn’t, and so he asked God for help: He, too, was a male, and would side with him. In fact He did side with him, but Lilith rebelled, equal rights or nothing; and since the two males insisted, she cursed the name of God, became a she-devil, flew away like an arrow, and settled at the bottom of

the sea. There are those who claim to know more about it, and they say that Lilith lives, to be precise, in the Red Sea, but every night she rises up and flies around the world, she rustles against the windowpanes of houses where there are newborns and tries to suffocate them. You have to watch out: if she gets in, trap her under a bowl turned upside down, and she can't do any harm.

"At other times she enters a man's body, and the man is possessed; then the best remedy is to take him to a notary or a rabbinical court, and draw up a contract following the correct procedure, under which the man declares that he wishes to repudiate the she-devil. Why are you laughing? Of course I don't believe it, but I like to tell these stories. I like it when they're told to me, and I would be sorry if they were lost. Besides, there's no guarantee that I haven't added something myself: maybe everyone who tells a story adds something, and that's how stories get started."

We heard a distant clatter, and soon afterward a tractor passed nearby. It was pulling a snowplow, but the plowed mud fused again right behind the machine, like Adam and Lilith, I thought. Good for us: we could stay here resting for a while longer still.

"Then, there's the story of the seed. She is gluttonous for man's seed, and is always lying in ambush where the seed might be scattered, especially between the sheets. All the seed that doesn't end up in the only permissible place, that is, the wife's womb, is hers; all the seed that every man has wasted in his life, in dreams or vice or adultery. Of course she gets a lot, and so she's always pregnant; and she's always giving birth. Being a devil, she gives birth to devils, but they don't do much harm, even if they might like to. They're evil, bodiless little spirits—they spill the milk and the wine, run through the attics at night, and tangle the girls' hair.

"But they're also the children of man, of every man, illegitimate children, and when their father dies they come to the funeral along with the legitimate children, who are their stepbrothers. They flit around the funeral candles like nocturnal butterflies, screeching and demanding their share of the inheritance. You laugh, because you're an *apikor* and your role is to laugh; or maybe you've never scattered your seed. But it's possible that you'll get out of here, you'll live, and you'll see that at certain funerals the rabbi, with his followers, circles the dead man seven times; you see, he's making a barrier around the dead man so that his bodiless children can't hurt him.

“But the strangest story remains to be told, and it’s not strange that it’s strange, because it’s written in the books of the Cabbalists, and they were people who had no fear. You know that God created Adam, and right afterward He realized that it wasn’t good for man to be alone, and He set beside him a companion. Well, the Cabbalists said that for God Himself it wasn’t good to be alone either, and so, right from the beginning, He took for his companion the Shekinah, that is, His very presence in Creation; so the Shekinah became the wife of God, and hence the mother of all peoples. When the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, and we were dispersed and enslaved, the Shekinah got angry, left God, and came with us into exile. I’ll tell you that I’ve thought this myself sometimes: that the Shekinah, too, became a slave, and is here around us, in this exile-within-exile, in this house of mud and suffering.

“So God was left alone, as happens to many of us, and, unable to bear solitude or temptation, He took a lover. You know who? Lilith, the she-devil, which was an unprecedented scandal. It seems that it was, in short, like a quarrel, when every insult is met with a more serious insult, and so the quarrel never ends; in fact, it accelerates like a landslide. Because you must know that this indecent affair isn’t over yet, and won’t be over soon: in one sense, it’s the cause of the evil that comes to pass on Earth; in another, it’s the effect of that. As long as God continues to sin with Lilith, there will be blood and suffering on Earth; but one day a power will arrive, the one that all of us are waiting for, and kill Lilith, and put an end to God’s lechery and our exile. Yes, and to yours and mine, Italian: *Mazel tov, Buona stella*, May your stars be lucky.”

The stars were lucky enough for me, not for the Tischler. But many years later I happened to be present at a funeral that unfolded as he had described, with the protective dance around the bier. And I can’t explain why destiny has chosen an *apikor* to repeat this tale, which is both pious and impious, full of poetry, ignorance, bold wisdom, and the incurable sadness that grows over the ruins of lost civilizations.

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1. “I’ll pay with my blood” (*Il Trovatore*); “Let us drink from the goblets of joy” (*La Traviata*).
2. A German civil and military engineering firm founded by Fritz Todt.

A Disciple

The Hungarians arrived among us not a few at a time but en masse. Within two months, May and June of 1944, they had invaded the camp, convoy upon convoy, filling the void that the Germans had not failed to create by a series of diligent selections. They caused a profound change in the fabric of all the camps. At Auschwitz, the wave of Magyars reduced all other nationalities to minorities, without, however, touching the “cadres,” which remained in the hands of the German and Polish common criminals.

All the barracks and all the work squads were flooded with Hungarians, around whom, as happens to new arrivals in all communities, an atmosphere of derision, gossip, and vague intolerance rapidly condensed. They were strong, simple workers and peasants, who did not fear manual labor but were used to plenty of food, and so in a few weeks they were reduced to pitiful skeletons. Others were professionals, students, and intellectuals who came from Budapest or other cities; they were meek individuals, slow, patient, and methodical, and hunger was not so hard on them, but they had delicate skin, and were soon covered with wounds and bruises, like ill-treated horses.

At the end of June a good half of my squad was made up of capable men who were still well nourished, still full of optimism and good humor. They communicated with us in a curious sung, drawled German, and among themselves in their exotic language, which is bristling with unusual inflections and seems to consist of interminable words, all pronounced at an irritatingly slow pace, and with the accent on the first syllable.

One of them was assigned to me as a mate. He was a robust, rosy young man, of medium height, whom everyone called Bandi—the diminutive of

Endre, that is, Andrea, he explained to me, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Our job, that day, was to carry bricks on a kind of crude wooden stretcher, equipped with two shafts in front and two behind—twenty bricks per trip. Halfway along the route was a superintendent, who made sure that the load was in order.

Twenty bricks are heavy, so on the way we didn't have (or at least I didn't) much breath for talking; but on the way back we spoke, and I learned many likable things about Bandi. I couldn't repeat all of them today: all memories vanish, and yet I hold on to the memories of this Bandi as to something precious, I am content to set them down on a page, and I wish that, by some not impossible miracle, this page would reach him in the corner of the world where perhaps he is still living, and that he would read it, and would find himself in it.

He told me that his name was Endre Szántó, a name that's pronounced approximately like *santo*, or saint, in Italian, which reinforced in me the vague impression of a halo encircling his shaved head. I said this to him; but no, he explained laughing, *Szántó* means "plowman," or more generically "farmer"; it's a very common last name in Hungary, and anyway he wasn't a plowman but worked in a factory. The Germans had captured him three years earlier, not as a Jew but because of his political activity, and had assigned him to the Todt Organization and sent him to cut wood in the Ukrainian Carpathians. He had spent two winters in the woods, cutting down pine trees with three companions; it was hard work, but he had got on well there, almost happily. Indeed, I soon realized that Bandi had a unique talent for happiness: oppression, humiliation, work, exile seemed to slide over him like water over a rock, without corrupting or wounding him, in fact purifying him, and heightening in him an inborn capacity for joy, as in the story of the innocent, happy, pious Hasidim whom Jirí Langer describes in *Nine Gates*.[1]

He told me about entering the camp: when the train arrived, the SS had forced all the men to take off their shoes and hang them around their necks, and had made them walk barefoot on the gravel of the track bed, for the seven kilometers that separated the station from the camp. He recounted the episode with a timid smile, not looking for pity but, rather, with a trace of childish, playful vanity in having "made it."

We did three trips together, during which, bit by bit, I tried to explain to him that the place he had ended up in was not for nice people or for quiet

people. I tried to convince him of some of my recent discoveries (in truth, not yet well digested): that here, in order to get by, you had to be active, arrange for illegal food, avoid work, find influential friends, hide yourself, hide your thoughts, steal, lie; that those who didn't behave like that soon died; and that his sanctity seemed to me dangerous and out of place. And since, as I said, twenty bricks are heavy, on the fourth trip, instead of picking up twenty bricks, I picked up seventeen, and showed him that if you arranged them on the stretcher in a certain way, with a space in the bottom layer, no one would suspect that there were not twenty. This was a trick I thought I had invented (though I later learned that it was in the public domain); I had performed it several times successfully, while other times I had been hit, but it seemed to me that it lent itself well to the pedagogic purpose, as an illustration of the theories that I had set forth a little earlier.

Bandi was very sensitive to his situation as *Zugang*, or new arrival, and the social subjection that derived from it, and so he didn't resist; but he wasn't at all enthusiastic about my discovery. "If there are seventeen, why should we make them think there are twenty?" "But twenty bricks weigh more than seventeen," I replied impatiently, "and if they're arranged right no one notices; anyway, they're not being used to build your house or mine." "Yes," he said, "but still they are seventeen and not twenty." He wasn't a good disciple.

We worked for some weeks on the same squad. I learned from him that he was a Communist, a sympathizer, not enrolled in the Party, but his language was that of a proto-Christian. At work he was skilled and strong, the best on the squad, but he didn't try to take advantage of his superiority, either to place himself in a favorable light with our German masters or to give himself airs with us. I told him that, in my view, working like that was a useless waste of energy, and it wasn't even politically correct, but Bandi gave no sign of having understood. He didn't want to lie; in that place we were supposed to work, therefore he worked as well as he could. Bandi, with his radiant, boyish face, with his energetic voice and his awkward gait, soon became very popular, a friend to all.

August arrived, with an extraordinary gift for me: a letter from home—an unheard-of event. In June, with a terrifying lack of awareness, and using a "free" Italian mason as my intermediary, I had written a message to my mother, who was in hiding in Italy, and had addressed it to a friend of mine named Bianca Guidetti Serra. I had done all this as one observes a ritual,

without true hope of success; but my letter had arrived without a hitch, and my mother had answered by the same route. The letter from the sweet world burned in my pocket. I knew it was elementary prudence to be silent about it, and yet I couldn’t not speak of it.

At that time we were cleaning cisterns. I went down into my cistern, and with me was Bandi. In the weak lamplight, I read the miraculous letter, translating it quickly into German. Bandi listened attentively: he certainly couldn’t understand much, because German wasn’t my language or his, and then because the message was spare and reserved. But he understood what was essential to understand: that that piece of paper in my hands, which had reached me so precariously, and which I would destroy before evening, was nevertheless a breach, a gap in the black universe that crushed us, and that through it hope could pass. Or at least I think that Bandi, although *Zugang*, understood or intuited all this, because, when I had finished reading, he came over to me, dug in his pockets for a long time, and finally extracted, with loving care, a radish. Blushing intensely, he gave it to me, and said, with timid pride, “I’ve learned. This is for you: it’s the first thing I ever stole.”

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1. Jirí Langer (1894–1943) was a Jewish poet and scholar; his book Nine Gates to the Hasidic Mysteries described his experiences among the Hasidim of eastern Galicia.

Our Seal

In the morning here things go like this: when the wake-up sounds (and it's still the dead of night), the first thing we do is put on our shoes, otherwise someone steals them, and it's an unspeakable tragedy; then, amid the dust and the crowd, we try to make our beds according to the rules. Immediately afterward we run off to the latrines and the washhouse, hurry to get in line for bread, and finally rush to assemble for the roll call, line up with our work squad, and wait for the roll call to end and the sky to begin to lighten. One by one, in the darkness, the ghosts who are our companions approach. Our team is a good one: we have a certain esprit de corps, there are no clumsy, whining novices, and among us is a crude friendship. In the morning, it's our custom to greet one another politely: Good day, Doctor, greetings, Mr. Lawyer, how was your night, Mr. President? Did you like your breakfast?

Lomnitz, an antiques dealer from Frankfurt, arrived; Joulty, a mathematician from Paris, arrived; Hirsch, a mysterious businessman from Copenhagen; Janek the Aryan, a giant railroad worker from Kraków; Elias, a dwarf from Warsaw, crude, mad, and probably a spy. The last to arrive was, as usual, Wolf, a pharmacist from Berlin, stooping, hook-nosed, and bespectacled, murmuring a musical theme. His Jewish nose cleaved the dark air like the prow of a ship: he called it, in Hebrew, *hutménu*, "our seal."

"Here comes the enchanter, the oiler of scabies," Elias announced ceremoniously. "Welcome among us, Most Illustrious Excellence, *Hochwohlgeborener*. Did you sleep well? What's the news of the night? Is Hitler dead? Have the English landed?"

Wolf took his place in the row; his murmuring increased in volume, its tones were enriched and took on color, and some of his companions recognized the final notes of the Brahms Rhapsody no. 53. Wolf, a reserved and dignified man of forty, lived on music. He was permeated by it; new themes continuously followed one after another inside him, others he seemed to inhale, extracting them from the air of the camp, through his celebrated nose. He secreted music the way our stomachs secreted hunger; he reproduced with accuracy (but without virtuosic displays) individual instruments—now he was a violin, now a flute, now he was the conductor of the orchestra and, scowling, conducted himself.

Someone laughed, and Wolf ("Wolef," pronounced in the Yiddish way) gestured, with irritation, for silence, he hadn't finished yet. He sang intently, leaning forward, his eyes on the ground; soon, beside him, shoulder to shoulder, a knot of four or five men formed, in the same position, as if drawing warmth from a brazier at their feet. Wolf went from violin to viola, repeated the theme three times, in three glorious variations, and then ended it in a rich final chord. He discreetly applauded himself; others joined in, and Wolf bowed gravely. The applause ended, but Elias continued to clap his hands violently, crying, "Wolf, Wolef! Long live Wolef, Mangewolef. Wolef is the cleverest of all, and you know why?"

Wolf, returning to the dimensions of an ordinary mortal, looked at Elias distrustfully.

"Because he's got scabies and he doesn't scratch!" said Elias. "And that is a miracle. Blessed art Thou, our Lord God, King of the universe. I know them, those Prussians: the elder of the camp is Prussian, the scabies doctor is Prussian, Wolf is Prussian, and so you see, Wolf becomes the oiler, he becomes Mangewolf. But what can you say? He's a marvelous oiler, he oils like a Jewish mama. It's a dream the way he oils: even me he oiled, and cured me, praise be to God and praise be to all the Just. And because he oils everybody, now he's got scabies, and he oils himself. Isn't it true, Master? Ah yes, he's oiling his stomach, because it starts there: he oils it secretly, every night. I've seen him, nothing escapes me. But he's a strong man and he doesn't scratch; the Just don't scratch."

"Nonsense," said Janek the Aryan. "If you have scabies, you scratch. Scabies is like being in love: if you have it, it's obvious."

"All well and good, but Master Mangewolf has it and he doesn't scratch. Didn't I tell you, he's the best of all?"

“Elias, you’re a liar, the biggest liar in the camp. It’s impossible to have scabies and not scratch.” Having spoken, Janek began to scratch, without realizing it, and little by little the others, too, began to scratch; after all, everyone had scabies, or was about to get it, or had just been cured. Elias pointed to Janek with an ogre-like laugh. “Uhh, see, see if Wolef isn’t a man of iron, even the healthy are scratching, and that mangy fellow is standing there like a king!” Then, suddenly, he rushed at Wolf, pulled down his pants, and raised his shirt. In the uncertain light of dawn, we could glimpse Wolf’s pale wrinkled stomach, covered with scratches and abrasions. Wolf jumped back, trying at the same time to push Elias away; but, shorter than Wolf by a whole head, Elias leaped up and seized him around the neck. They both fell to the ground, in the black mud. Elias was on top, and Wolf was gasping, half suffocated. Some tried to get between them, but Elias was strong, and clung to Wolf with arms and legs like an octopus. Wolf’s defenses became weaker and weaker, as he blindly sought to kick or knee Elias.

Luckily for Wolf, the Kapo showed up, administered kicks and punches impartially to the two men who were entangled on the ground, separated them, and lined everyone up: it was time to march to the job. The incident was not among the most memorable, and in fact it was soon forgotten, but the nickname “Mangewolf” (*Krätzewolf*) stuck tenaciously to the man, damaging his respectability, even months after he was cured of scabies and exempted from the job of oiling. He took it badly, suffering visibly from it, and thus contributing to its persistence.

Finally, a tentative spring arrived, and during one of the first periods of sun there was a Sunday afternoon without work, fragile and precious as a peach blossom. Everyone spent the time sleeping, the more energetic visiting other barracks, or trying to mend their rags or sew on buttons with wire, or filing their nails against a rock. But from a distance, following the caprices of the warm wind, fragrant with damp earth, came a new sound, a sound so improbable, so unexpected, that all raised their heads to listen. It was a weak sound, like that sky and that sun, and came from a distance, yes, but from within the boundaries of the camp. Some, conquering their inertia, began to hunt like bloodhounds, meeting with clumsy steps and ears alert: and they found Mangewolf, sitting on a pile of boards, ecstatically playing a violin. His “seal” vibrated, stretched to the sun, his nearsighted eyes were lost beyond the barbed wire, beyond the pale Polish sky. Where he had

found a violin was a mystery, but the veterans knew that in a Lager anything can happen: maybe he had stolen it, maybe rented it for bread.

Wolf played for himself, but everyone who passed by stopped to listen with a greedy expression, like a bear who scents honey, eager, timid, and perplexed. A few feet away from Wolf, Elias lay on his belly on the ground, staring at him as if spellbound. On his gladiator's face lay that veil of contented stupor which you sometimes notice on the faces of the dead, and which makes you think that, there on the threshold, they truly had, for an instant, the vision of a better world.

The Gypsy

A notice was pasted to the door of the barrack, and everyone crowded around to read it; it was written in German and Polish, and a French prisoner, squeezed between the crowd and the wooden wall, struggled to translate it and comment on it. The notice said that, as an exception, all prisoners were permitted to write to their relatives, under conditions that were minutely specified, in the German manner. One could write only on forms that the head of each barrack would distribute, one for each prisoner. The only language permitted was German. The only addressees permitted were those who resided in Germany or in occupied lands or in allied countries like Italy. We were not permitted to ask for food packages but were permitted to give thanks for packages possibly received. At this point the Frenchman energetically exclaimed, "*Les salauds, hein!*" and broke off.

The uproar and the crowding increased, and there was a confused exchange of opinions in various languages. Who had ever officially received a package or even just a letter? And, besides, who knew our address, assuming that "KZ Auschwitz" was an address? And to whom could we write, given that all our relatives were prisoners in some camp, like us, or dead, or hidden throughout the four corners of Europe in fear of following our destiny? Clearly, it was a trick; the thank-you letters postmarked "Auschwitz" would be shown to a delegation from the Red Cross, or some other neutral authority, to prove that the Jews of Auschwitz were not treated so badly, given that they received packages from home. A filthy lie.

Three factions formed: not to write at all; to write without thanks; to write and thank. The partisans of the last argument (few, in truth)

maintained that the business of the Red Cross was likely but not certain, and that a possibility existed, however slim, that the letters would arrive at their destination, and the thank-you would be interpreted as an invitation to send packages. I decided to write without thanks, addressing the letter to Christian friends who in some way would find my family. I borrowed a stub of a pencil, obtained the form, and prepared for the work. First I wrote a draft on a scrap of paper from a cement bag, the same I wore on my chest (illegally) to protect myself from the wind, then I began to rewrite the text on the form, but I felt uneasy. I felt, for the first time since my capture, in communication and in communion (even if only putative) with my family, and so I needed solitude; but solitude, in the camp, is rarer and more precious than bread.

I had the annoying impression that someone was watching me. I turned: it was my new bed companion. He was quietly watching me as I wrote, with the innocent but provocative gaze of a child, who doesn't know the embarrassment of staring. He had arrived a few weeks earlier with a transport of Hungarians and Slovaks; he was slender and dark, and very young, and I didn't know anything about him, not even his name, because he worked in a different squad from mine, and came to the bunk to sleep only at the moment of the blackout.

Any feeling of camaraderie among us was scant, limited to compatriots, and even with them was weakened by the minimal conditions of life. So it was nonexistent, or, rather, negative, toward newcomers. In this and in many other respects we were strongly regressed and hardened, and in a "new" companion we tended to see an alien, a clumsy and troublesome barbarian, who takes away space, time, and bread, who doesn't know the silent but iron rules of living together and survival, and who, furthermore, complains; and he complains unjustly, in an irritating and ridiculous manner, because a few days ago he was still at home, or at least outside the barbed wire. The newcomer has only one virtue: he brings recent news of the world, because he has read newspapers and listened to the radio, maybe even Allied radio; but if the news is bad, for example, that the war isn't going to be over in two weeks, he is nothing but a nuisance to avoid, or to mock for his ignorance, or to subject to cruel jokes.

That newcomer behind me, however, although he was spying on me, roused a vague sense of pity. He seemed harmless and disoriented, in need of support, like a child; certainly he had not grasped the importance of the

choice to be made, whether to write and what to write, and felt neither anxiety nor suspicion. I turned my back, to keep him from seeing my sheet of paper, and continued my work, which wasn't easy. I had to weigh every word, so that it would carry the maximum of information to the unlikely recipient, and yet not appear suspicious to the likely censor. The fact of having to write in German increased the difficulty: I had learned German in the camp, and it reproduced, without my having any idea, the impoverished, vulgar jargon of the barrack. I didn't know many terms, especially those needed to express feelings. I felt inept, as if I had had to chisel that letter in stone.

My neighbor waited patiently until I had finished, then he said something in a language that I didn't understand. I asked him in German what he wanted, and he showed me his form, which was blank, and pointed to mine, covered with writing: he was asking me, in other words, to write for him. He must have understood that I was Italian, and to better clarify his request he made a muddled speech in a simplified language that in fact was more Spanish than Italian. Not only did he not know how to write in German; he didn't know how to write. He was a Gypsy, born in Spain, and had wandered through Germany, Austria, and the Balkans, to fall into the Nazis' clutches in Hungary. He introduced himself politely: Grigo, his name was Grigo, he was nineteen, and he asked me to write to his girlfriend. He would compensate me. With what? With a gift, he answered without specifying. I asked him for bread: half a ration seemed to me a just price. Today I am a little ashamed of this request of mine, but I have to remind the reader (and myself) that the etiquette of Auschwitz was different from ours, and, besides, Grigo, as a recent arrival, was less hungry than I was.

In fact he accepted. I reached my hand toward his form, but he drew it back, and offered me instead another scrap of paper. It was an important letter; it was better to do a draft. He began to dictate the address of the girl. He must have caught a mote of curiosity, or maybe of envy, in my eyes, because he drew from his breast a photograph and showed it to me proudly: she was almost a child, with laughing eyes and a white kitten beside her. My respect for the Gypsy increased; it wasn't easy to enter the Lager with a hidden photograph. Grigo, as if he needed to justify himself, explained that it wasn't he who had chosen her, but, rather, his father. She was an official fiancée, not a girl who had simply been abducted.

The letter he dictated was a complicated letter of love and domestic details. It contained questions whose meaning escaped me, and news about the Lager that I advised Grigo to omit, because it was too compromising. Grigo insisted on one point: he wanted to tell the girl that he would send her a *mugneca*. A *mugneca*? Yes, a doll, Grigo explained, as well as he could. This made me uncomfortable for two reasons: because I didn't know how to say "doll" in German, and because I couldn't imagine why and how Grigo would or should undertake this dangerous and senseless operation. It seemed to me my duty to explain all this. I had more experience than he did, and I thought that my condition of scribe conferred on me some obligation.

Grigo gave me a disarming smile, a newcomer's smile, but he didn't explain much, I don't know if out of inability, or linguistic strain, or precise intention. He told me that he absolutely had to send her the doll. That to get one wasn't a problem: he would make it right there, and he showed me a fine pocket knife. No, this Grigo was certainly not a fool; yet again I was forced to admire him. He must have been very alert on entering the Lager, when they take away everything you have on you, even your handkerchief and your hair. Maybe he didn't realize it, but a knife like his was worth at least five rations of bread.

He asked me to tell him if there was a tree somewhere from which he could cut a branch, because it would be better if the doll were made *de madera viva*, from living wood. I tried again to dissuade him by descending to his terrain: there were no trees, and, besides, wasn't sending the girl a doll made with wood from Auschwitz like calling her here? But Grigo, with a mysterious expression, raised his eyebrows, touched his nose with his index finger, and said that, if anything, it was the opposite: the doll would call him outside, the girl knew what to do.

When the letter was finished, Grigo took out a ration of bread and offered it to me, along with the knife. It was customary, indeed an unwritten law, that in all payments based on bread one of the parties cut the bread and the other chose, since that way the cutter was led to make the portions as equal as possible. I was astonished that Grigo already knew the rule, but then I thought that maybe it was in use outside the camp, too, in the world, unknown to me, that Grigo came from. I cut, and he praised me courteously: that the two pieces were identical was to his disadvantage, but I had cut well, no doubt about it.

He thanked me, and I never saw him again. There’s no need to add that none of the letters we wrote that day ever reached their destination.

The Cantor and the Veteran

The new head of the barrack was German, but he spoke in an accent that, colored by his dialect, made his conversation barely comprehensible; he was about fifty, and was tall, muscular, and heavy. It was rumored that he was from the old guard of the German Communist Party, that he had taken part in the Spartacist Uprising, and had been wounded,[1] but, since the camp was crawling with spies, this was not a subject that could be discussed out loud. He had a scar that ran obliquely between his bushy blond eyebrows, and certainly he was a veteran: he had been in the Lager for seven years, and under the red triangle of the political prisoner he proudly wore an unbelievably low number, the number 14. Before Auschwitz he had been at Dachau, and he was one of the founding fathers of Auschwitz. He had been part of the legendary patrol of thirty prisoners who were sent from Dachau to the swamps of Upper Silesia to build the first barracks; in other words, one of those who, in all human communities, claim the right to say “in my time,” and expect for that reason to be respected. He was respected, in fact: not so much for his past as because he had powerful fists and reflexes that were still rapid. His name was Otto.

Now, Vladek didn’t wash. It was notorious, and provided the barrack with a subject of mockery and gossip; in fact it was comic, because Vladek wasn’t Jewish. He was a Polish boy from the countryside who received packages from home containing lard, fruit, and woolen socks; in other words he was potentially a person of consequence. And yet he didn’t wash. He was scrawny and clumsy, and as soon as he returned from work he retreated to his bunk, without talking to anyone. The fact is that Vladek didn’t have the brain of a chicken, poor fellow, and if he hadn’t had the

privilege of getting packages, much of the contents of which was stolen anyway, he would have ended up in the gas chamber long since, although he, too, bore the red triangle of a political prisoner. Some politician Vladek must have been!

Otto had called him to order several times, because the head of a barrack is responsible for the cleanliness of his subjects, first kindly, that is to say with insults shouted in his dialect, then by kicking and hitting, but in vain. To all appearances, Vladek (who, besides, barely understood German) was incapable of connecting causes with effects, or didn't remember the blows from one day to the next. There came a warm Sunday in September; it was one of the rare non-working Sundays, and Otto let us know that there would be a celebration, in fact a spectacle that had never been seen before, which he was offering free to all the inhabitants of Barrack 48: the public washing of Vladek. He had one of the soup vats carried outside, cursorily rinsed, and filled with hot water from the showers; he put Vladek in it, naked and upright, and washed him personally, as you might wash a horse, scrubbing him from head to toe first with a brush and then with rags for cleaning the floor.

Vladek, who was covered with bruises and scrapes, stood there like a post, his eyes blank; the onlookers laughed till they cried, and Otto, frowning as if he were doing a precision job, addressed to Vladek some crude words of the sort that blacksmiths use so that the horse doesn't move as it's being shoed. It really was a comical sight, which made you forget your hunger and was something to tell your companions from the other barracks. At the end Otto lifted Vladek bodily out of the vat and muttered something in his dialect about the soup that remained; Vladek was so clean that he had changed color and was barely recognizable.

We went away concluding that this Otto was not among the worst: someone else, in his place, would have used cold water, or would have transferred Vladek to the Penal Squad, or would have beaten him, because certainly fools, in the Lager, do not enjoy particular indulgences. Rather, they run the risk of being officially categorized as such, and (by virtue of the German national passion for labels) given a white bracelet with the word *Blöd*, "fool," written on it. This indication, especially if coupled with the red triangle, constituted for the SS an inexhaustible source of amusement.

We soon had confirmation that Otto was not among the worst. A few days later was Yom Kippur, the day of atonement and purification, but naturally we worked anyway. It's hard to say how the date leaked out in the Lager, given that the Jewish calendar is lunar and doesn't coincide with the common calendar; maybe one of the more religious Jews had kept a precise count of the passing of the days, or maybe the news had been brought by one of the new arrivals, since there were always new arrivals to fill the empty spots.

The evening before, we had lined up to get our soup, as we did every evening; in front of me was Ezra, a watchmaker by trade, a cantor on Saturdays, in a remote Lithuanian village. From exile to exile, by paths that I couldn't describe, he had reached Italy, and in Italy had been captured. He was tall and thin, but not bent; his eyes, which had an oriental shape, were mobile and lively; he spoke seldom and never raised his voice. When he stood in front of Otto he didn't hold out his pail, but said to him instead, "Mr. Head of the Barrack, for us today is a day of atonement, and I cannot eat the soup. I ask you respectfully to save it for me until tomorrow evening."

Otto was as tall as Ezra, but twice as heavy. He had already scooped the ration of soup from the vat, and he stopped suddenly, with the ladle raised halfway: his jaw slowly lowered, without lurching, and his mouth hung open. In all his years in the Lager he had never met a prisoner who refused food. For some instants he was undecided whether to laugh or to slap that tall, skinny stranger: was the man mocking him? But he didn't seem the type. He told Ezra to stand aside, and to come and see him when he had finished ladling the soup.

Ezra waited without impatience, then knocked at the door. Otto told him to enter, and ordered his courtiers and parasites to leave the room: he wanted to be alone for that conversation. Thus freed from his role, he spoke to Ezra in a voice that was a little less harsh and asked him what this business of atonement was. Maybe he was not as hungry that day as on other days?

Ezra answered that of course he was just as hungry; that on the day of Yom Kippur he was also supposed to refrain from work, but he knew that, if he did that, he would be reported and killed, and so he would work, since the Law allows one to disobey almost all precepts and prohibitions in order to save a life, one's own or that of others; that in any case he intended to

observe the prescribed fast, from that evening until the following one, because he wasn't certain that it would result in his death. Otto asked what the sins were that he had to atone for, and Ezra answered that he knew some of them, but that he might have committed others without being aware of it; and that, besides, in the opinion of some wise men, which he shared, atonement and fasting were not a strictly personal matter. It was likely that they helped gain forgiveness from God for the sins committed by others.

Otto was increasingly puzzled, caught between astonishment, laughter, and another feeling, which he couldn't name, and which he had thought was dead, killed by the years of devious, savage life in the Lagers, and even before that by his political militancy, which had been strict. In a low voice, Ezra spoke, and explained to him that, on the day of Yom Kippur, it is customary to read from the book of the prophet Jonah: yes, the one who was swallowed by the whale. Jonah was a stern prophet; after the story of the whale, he had preached repentance to the king of Nineveh, but even when the king repented of his sins and those of his people, and published a decree that imposed fasting on all the Ninevites, including the animals, Jonah continued to suspect a trick, to distrust and argue with the Eternal, who, however, was inclined to forgive—yes, to forgive even the Ninevites, although they were idolaters and couldn't distinguish the right hand from the left. Otto interrupted him.

"What are you trying to tell me with this story of yours? That you're fasting for me, too? And for everyone . . . even for them? Or that I should fast, too?"

Ezra replied that although he, unlike Jonah, was not a prophet but a cantor from the countryside, he insisted on asking the head of the barrack for this favor: to save his soup for the following night, and the next morning's bread, too. But there was no need for the soup to be kept hot, Otto should let it get cold. Otto asked why, and Ezra said that there were two reasons, one sacred, one profane. In the first place (and here, maybe unintentionally, he began to speak in a singsong, and his chest swayed slightly, forward and back, as is customary in discussions of ritual subjects), according to some commentators it was inadvisable to light a fire, or its equivalents, on the day of atonement, even if it was done by Christian hands; in the second, and more simply, the Lager soup tended to turn sour quickly, especially if it was kept warm; all the prisoners preferred to eat it cold rather than sour.

Otto objected that the soup was very liquid, in other words more water than anything else, and so it was a question of drinking rather than of eating: and he rediscovered, in saying this, another long-lost taste, for the stubborn dialectical controversies at meetings of his party. Ezra explained to him that the distinction wasn't relevant: on days of fasting you don't eat or drink anything, not even water. However, you don't incur divine punishment if you swallow food whose total volume is less than that of a date or a drink whose volume is less than what can be held between one cheek and your teeth. In this calculation, food and drink don't count.

Otto grumbled something incomprehensible, in which the word *meshugge* recurred, which means "crazy" in Yiddish but is understood by all Germans; yet he took Ezra's pail, filled it, and put it in the personal closet that he, as an official, was entitled to, and told Ezra that he could come and get it the following night. To Ezra it seemed that the ration of soup was particularly generous.

I wouldn't have learned the details of this conversation if Ezra himself had not reported them, in bits and pieces, one day when we were carrying bags of cement together from one warehouse to another. Now, Ezra was not really *meshugge*; he was the heir to an ancient, sorrowful, and strange tradition, whose core consists in holding Evil in abomination, and in "making a hedge around the Law," so that Evil does not flood in through gaps in the hedge to drown that very Law. In the course of millennia, this core has become encrusted with a vast proliferation of maniacally subtle comments, deductions, distinctions, and with further precepts and prohibitions; and in the course of millennia many have acted like Ezra, through migrations and slaughters without number. This is why the history of the Jewish people is so ancient, sorrowful, and strange.

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1. The Spartacists were a radical left-wing group; they joined a revolt against the German government in January 1919.

The Story of Avrom

You often hear people say, these days, that they're ashamed of being Italian. In fact we have good reasons to be ashamed: most important, we have been incapable of producing a political class that represents us, and for thirty years have tolerated one that does not represent us. On the other hand, we have virtues that we are unaware of, or at least we don't know how rare they are in Europe and the world. I think of those virtues whenever I tell the story of Avrom (as I'll call him), a story I happened to hear. For now, it survives just like that, as a saga transmitted from mouth to mouth, at risk of distortion or elaboration, of being taken for a romantic invention. It's a story I like because it contains an image of our country seen by innocent, foreign eyes, in the strong light of salvation, and seen in its finest hour. I'll relate it here, with apologies for possible inaccuracies.

Avrom was thirteen in 1939; he was a Polish Jew, the son of a poor hatmaker in L'viv. When the Germans entered Poland, Avrom understood right away that it was best not to sit at home and wait for them; his parents had decided to stay, and were immediately captured and had vanished. Avrom, left alone, blended into the background of the small local underworld, living by petty thefts, minor smuggling, the black market, and vague and precarious occupations, sleeping in the cellars of bombed houses, until he found out that there was a barrack of Italians in L'viv. It was probably one of the bases of the Armir, the Italian Army in Russia; in the city the rumor immediately spread that the Italian soldiers were different from the Germans, that they were good-hearted, went with the girls, and were not too fussy about military discipline, about permissions and prohibitions. At the end of 1942, Avrom was living permanently, and

semiofficially, in that barrack. He had learned some Italian and tried to make himself useful by doing various jobs, such as interpreter, shoeshine, porter. He had become the barrack mascot, though he was not alone: a dozen other boys or children who had been abandoned, without relatives, without a home and without means, lived like him. They were Jews and Christians; for the Italians it didn't seem to make any difference, and Avrom never got over his amazement at that.

In January 1943, the Armir was routed; the barrack filled with stragglers and then was demobilized. All the Italians returned to Italy, and the officers let it be understood that if someone wanted to bring those boys, the children of no one, they would close an eye. Avrom had made friends with an *alpino*, a member of the Alpine troops from the Canavese: they crossed the Tarvisio in the same troop train and the Fascist government confined them together to a quarantine camp in Mestre. In name it was a medical quarantine, and, for that matter, they all had fleas; in fact it was a political quarantine, because Mussolini didn't want those veterans to tell too many stories. They remained there until September 12, when the Germans arrived, as if they were pursuing him, Avrom, tracking him down in all the hiding places of Europe. The Germans sealed off the camp and loaded the inmates onto freight trains to carry them to Germany.

Avrom, in the freight car, said to the *alpino* that he would not go to Germany, because he knew the Germans and what they were capable of; it would be better to jump off the train. The *alpino* said that he had seen what the Germans did in Russia, but he didn't have the courage to jump off. If Avrom escaped, the *alpino* would write a letter for his relatives in the Canavese, saying that Avrom was a friend of his, that they should give him his bed and treat him exactly as if Avrom were he. Avrom jumped out of the train with the letter in his pocket. He was in Italy, but not the glossy, slick Italy of picture postcards and geography textbooks. He was alone, on the track bed of the railroad, without money, in the middle of the night, amid German patrols, in an unknown land, somewhere between Venice and the Brenner Pass. He knew only that he had to reach the Canavese. Everyone helped him and no one reported him; he found a train for Milan, then one for Turin. At Porta Susa he took the Canavesana, the local train, got off at Cuorgné, and on foot followed the road to his friend's village. At this point Avrom was seventeen.

The parents of the *alpino* welcomed him, but they didn't say much. They gave him clothes, food, and a bed, and since two young arms were useful, they put him to work in the fields. In those months Italy was full of displaced people—English, Americans, Australians, Russians—who had escaped on September 8[1] from the prison camps, and so no one paid much attention to a foreign boy. No one asked questions; but the parish priest, talking to him, realized that he was bright, and told the parents of the *alpino* that it was too bad not to let him go to school. So they sent him to the priests' school. He, who had seen so much, liked school and studying; it gave him a sense of tranquility and normality. But he found it funny that he had to learn Latin: why did Italian boys have to learn Latin, since Italian was almost the same? But he studied diligently, he had very good grades in all his subjects, and in March the priest called on him to serve at Mass. This business, of a Jewish boy serving at Mass, seemed to him even funnier, but he was careful not to say that he was Jewish, because you never know. In any case, he had quickly learned to make the sign of the cross and all the Christian prayers.

In early April, a truck full of Germans descended on the village square, and all the inhabitants ran away. But then they realized that these were odd Germans: they didn't yell orders or threats, they spoke not German but a language that had never been heard before, and they tried politely to make themselves understood. Someone had the idea of calling Avrom, who was, after all, a foreigner. Avrom arrived, and he and those Germans understood one another very well, because they weren't Germans at all; they were Czechs whom the Germans had recruited by force into the Wehrmacht, and now they had deserted, stealing a military truck, and they wanted to join the Italian partisans. They spoke Czech and Avrom answered in Polish, but they understood one another just the same. Avrom thanked his Canavesan friends and went off with the Czechs. He didn't have well-defined political ideas, but he had seen what the Germans did to his country, and it seemed to him right to fight them.

The Czechs were attached to a division of Italian partisans who operated in the Valle dell'Orco, and Avrom stayed with them as an interpreter and courier. One of the Italian partisans was Jewish and he told everyone; Avrom was astonished, but still he didn't tell anyone that he, too, was Jewish. There was a roundup, and his group had to go up the valley to Ceresole Reale, where they explained to him that it was called Reale—royal

—because the king of Italy came there to hunt chamois, and they also showed him, with binoculars, the chamois, on the ridges of the Gran Paradiso. Avrom was dazzled by the beauty of the mountains, the lake, and the woods, and it seemed to him absurd to come there to wage war; at that point, he, too, was armed. The partisans fought the Fascists who came up from Locana, then withdrew into the valleys of Lanzo through the Colle della Crocetta. For the boy who came from the horror of the ghetto, and from monotonous Poland, that passage across the rugged, solitary mountain and the many others that followed was the revelation of a splendid new world, which contained experiences that intoxicated and overwhelmed him: the beauty of Creation, the freedom and trust of his companions. Battles and marches followed one after another. In the autumn of 1944, his group descended the Val Susa, from village to village, as far as Sant'Ambrogio.

By now Avrom was an experienced partisan, brave and tough, disciplined by his strong nature, but quick with machine gun and pistol, polyglot, and sly as a fox. An American secret service agent got to know him, and entrusted him with a radio transmitter: it was in a suitcase, and he had to carry it with him, shifting it constantly so that it wouldn't be detected by a radio direction finder, and staying in contact with the armies that were coming north from southern Italy, especially the Poles under General Wladyslaw Anders. Moving from one hideout to the next, Avrom reached Turin. He had been given the address of the parish of San Massimo and the password. April 25[2] found him hiding in the belfry with his radio.

After the liberation, the Allies summoned him to Rome to legalize his position, which in fact was rather confused. They put him in a Jeep, and, traveling over the bumpy roads of the time, through cities and villages filled with ragged, cheering people, he reached Liguria and, for the first time in his short life, saw the sea.

The undertaking of the eighteen-year-old Avrom, an innocent soldier of fortune, who, like many distant Nordic travelers, discovered Italy with a virgin eye and, like many heroes of the Risorgimento, fought for the freedom of all in a country that wasn't his, ends here, before the splendor of the Mediterranean in peacetime.

Avrom now lives in Israel, on a kibbutz. He, a polyglot, no longer has a language that is really his own: he has almost forgotten Polish, Czech, and Italian, and hasn't yet fully mastered Hebrew. In this language new to him he set down his memories, in the form of spare, modest notes, obscured by

distance in space and time. He is a humble soul, who wrote not with the ambitions of the literary man or the historian but with the thought of his children and grandchildren, so that some memory of the things he saw and experienced might survive. Let’s hope they find someone who can restore to them the broad, pure spirit that they potentially contain.

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1. On September 8, 1943, an armistice was signed between the government led by Marshal Pietro Badoglio and Allied forces in Italy.
2. April 25, 1945, is the date on which Italy was liberated from the Nazis and Fascists.

Tired of Fictions

Those who have had the opportunity to compare the real image of a writer with the one that can be deduced from his writings know how frequently these do not coincide. The subtle investigator of mental states, vibrating like an oscillator circuit, turns out to be an arrogant oaf, pathologically full of himself, eager for money and flattery, blind to the sufferings of his neighbor; the orgiastic, magniloquent poet, in Pan-like communion with the universe, is an abstinent and abstemious little man, not by aesthetic choice but by doctor's orders.

How pleasing, on the other hand, how equalizing and reassuring is the opposite case, of the man who remains himself in what he writes! Even if he's not brilliant, our sympathy immediately goes out to him: here is neither pretense nor transfiguration, neither muses nor quantum leaps, the mask is the face, and the reader seems to look down at a clear stream and see the multicolored pebbles on the streambed. I had this impression when, several years ago, I read the German manuscript of an autobiography that later appeared in Italian, in 1973, under the title *Sfuggito alle reti del Nazismo* (*Escape from the Nazi Dragnets*); the publisher is Mursia, the author's name is Joel König, and, not coincidentally, the first chapter is entitled "Tired of Disguises." König is not a writer by profession; he's a biologist, and he took up the pen only because it seemed to him that his story was too interesting not to be told.

Joel, a German Jew born in 1922 in Heilbronn, in Swabia, narrates with candor, and with the failings of the nonprofessional, often expanding on the superfluous and neglecting essential facts. He's a bourgeois, the son of a provincial rabbi, and from childhood practiced the complex Jewish rituals

without any sense of constriction, rebellion, or irony; rather, he felt that he was reliving an ancient, joyful tradition, filled with symbolic poetry.

His father taught him that each of us has received from God a single soul, but that on Saturday God grants every pious man a second, which enlightens and sanctifies him from sunset to sunset, and so on Saturday he doesn't work, or even touch tools, neither hammer, scissors, nor pen, still less money, in order not to defile the Sabbath soul. And children can't catch butterflies, because that comes under the category of hunting, and that into the broader category of work, and, further, because Saturday is the day of freedom for all, even for animals. Besides, animals, too, honor the Creator, and when chickens drink they raise their beaks to the sky to thank Him for every single drop.

In 1933, the black shadow of Hitler begins to extend over this "Swabian idyll." The father, meanwhile, has been transferred (still as a rabbi) to a small city in Upper Silesia, not far from Auschwitz, but Auschwitz, at that time, was merely an ordinary border town. The way Joel and his father react to the new climate is very instructive, in the sense that it teaches us essential things about the Germany of then and of now.

The rabbi taught his son that, after original sin and the destruction of the Temple by Titus, the Treaty of Versailles was the most catastrophic event in the history of the world, but that nevertheless the German Jews should not oppose injustice with violence: "To suffer unjustly is better than to act unjustly." In the years of the economic crisis, he voted for the Catholics of the Center Party, "because they fear God," but in 1933 the Catholics voted full powers to Hitler; and he recognized in the Nuremberg Laws the warning hand of God and a punishment for the transgressions of the Jews.

Did they do business on Saturday? Now their shops are boycotted. Did they marry Christian women? The new, prudent laws forbid mixed marriages.

The nets of Nazism tighten around the German Jews, and a few foresighted ones attempt to flee to neutral countries, or seek a precarious refuge in hiding. The majority, like Joel's parents, live from day to day, bewildered, feeding on absurd illusions and false information, while every day, with refined, progressive cruelty, with deliberate intent to inflict humiliation and suffering, law after law is promulgated.

In an impious parody of the ritual rules, instead of the words of the Lord Jews have to wear a yellow star next to their hearts and on the doors of their

houses; they cannot own bicycles or telephones, telephone in public places, subscribe to newspapers. They have to hand over woolen clothes and furs, and they receive starvation rations of food; a few at a time, the transfers “to the East” begin: people think of ghettos, of forced labor, no one suspects the slaughter, and yet even children and the sick are deported. . . .

Like many other youths, Joel finds refuge in a farm school organized by Zionists for the purpose of training boys and girls for agricultural work and communal life, in view of an increasingly less likely emigration to Palestine. The Gestapo tolerates this, because workers are scarce and the business (the youths are not paid) is profitable. But little by little the farm becomes a Lager in miniature; Joel tears off his yellow star and escapes to Berlin.

Soon afterward, his parents are deported, and Joel finds himself alone in an enemy city, devastated by bombardments and swarming with spies, police, and foreign workers of all races. He has destroyed his documents marked with the “J,” the first letter of *Jude,* and has no ration card: he’s an outlaw. Well, one might say that only in this situation of extreme marginalization does the youth in love with order in heaven and on earth discover himself, and become aware of his own extraordinary resources.

He becomes a Chaplin-like hero, both innocent and astute, ready for fantastic improvisation, never desperate, radically incapable of hatred and violence, lover of life, of adventure and joy. He passes through all perils miraculously: as if God’s pact with the people of Israel had found, in him and for him, a practical application; as if God Himself, in whom he believes, had laid a hand on his head, as He is said to do with children and drunks.

He finds a first insecure refuge with an old shoemaker, who offers to take him in not so much out of generosity as out of stupidity: he doesn’t realize that to give lodging to a Jew in the Berlin of the Gestapo might cost him his life, but Joel knows, and, in order not to compromise an innocent, he once again goes off. Where to spend the nights in the harsh winter of 1942–43? In the control cab of a crane, in sheds for firefighting equipment, in the body of a Soviet tank displayed in a square as a monument? Joel chooses at random, and it always works out.

He wanders through Berlin, a desert of ruins separated from the sky by endless camouflage nets, and temporarily settles in an abandoned latrine, two square meters, but better than nothing. A lover of cleanliness, he

carefully examines the bomb-damaged buildings and finds hot water heaters that are still functioning, if missing a fourth wall: with the proper precautions, maybe the help of an accomplice, he can take a hot bath. It's a delight, and, in addition, the strangeness of the invention produces in Joel a sharp childish pleasure that adds spice to the danger.

A police check could be a deadly trap. Joel needs papers, of any sort, because in the tide of foreign workers the police can't be too particular, and he gets them in the most unexpected way. Giving an "Aryan" name, he applies to enroll at the Fascist headquarters in Berlin, where Italian classes are held for German soldiers and civilians. He goes to the lessons, a clandestine Jew amid fellow students who are mainly soldiers of the SS, and obtains what he wants, an ID card in the name of "Wilhelm Schneider," with his picture, an enormous Fascist symbol, and a lot of stamps; it's not perfect, an intelligent cop would discover the ruse with a few questions, but, again, it's better than nothing. Trusting in the tenuous protection of the card, Joel fills the interminable days wandering around and trying to come up with a plan of flight.

Fortune helps him: he happens to meet an engineer, a former Social Democrat, who gives Joel's vague ideas concrete form. He will be able to reach Vienna, and from there a smuggler will get him into Hungary.

Joel is twenty-one, but he looks seventeen, and his face doesn't have Jewish features; it seems to him logical to disguise himself in the uniform of the Hitler Youth, the equivalent of our Fascist youth organizations of the time. The Hitler Youth aren't of military age, so it's one less check, and, besides, he has always liked "playing soldier"; his brother Leon, too, hiding in the city like him, goes around in a false uniform, and maybe it's not a bad idea.

The Hitler Youth Joel König–Wilhelm Schneider leaves for Vienna in May 1943; he has in his suitcase, among other things, a Hebrew Bible, a Hungarian grammar and phrase book, an Arabic grammar. He's an educated traveler, and foresees that in Budapest he'll have little time for purchases; and how could he "live in Palestine without being able to speak with the inhabitants of the place in their language?"

He keeps the yellow star in a pocket; it will be useful in Vienna in order to be recognized as a Jew. In the suitcase, foolishly suspect, he has not forgotten to place his two "timing switches," for turning on the lights and the electric stove on Saturday evening, because a pious Jew is prohibited

from manually lighting a fire or its modern equivalents; it's a servile job, which would profane the sacred day. During the baggage inspection, at the crucial moment of leaving Berlin, Joel distinctly perceives the ticking of one of the devices, which the jolts have set off: the clerk at the window will hear it, and think it's a deadly bomb! But yet again Fortune protects the bold, and no one notices anything.

Here, unexpectedly, the book ends. The rest of Joel's adventures are condensed into two pages of epilogue, but I heard them many years later, in detail and in person, from Joel himself. He told me about going from one to another of the last Jews left in Vienna, now resigned to their fate. They are frightened by the appearance of the Hitler Youth who knocks at their door, and he has trouble proving that he is who he is. They give him money generously; for them, by now, it is of no use.

In Vienna, Joel is distrusted by everyone, and no one is willing to put him up permanently; he goes to the Jewish Community, depopulated by the deportations but still functioning, thanks to the self-sacrifice of some surviving employees. In the evening he's shut in, and he spends the night in the toilet, locked from the inside; but during the day, as an attentive and curious tourist, he makes sure to see the city. When he asks the Viennese for directions to the monuments, they answer rudely: Do they realize that he's Jewish? Or do they not like his uniform? No, it's his German accent they find disagreeable. Joel is happy to hear them murmur behind his back, *Saupreuss*, "Prussian pig."

The first smuggler betrays and robs him; on the second attempt he gets to Hungary, feels himself a free man, and strips off the uncomfortable uniform, but in March of '44 he has to put it on again, because the German tanks appear there, too. He crosses the border into Romania with no trouble, and manages to embark secretly on a Turkish ship that carries him, in wartime, to the Land of his Fathers, at that time a British Mandate. And here, most ironically, the English secret service doesn't believe his story, which is in fact unbelievable, and finally throws him in prison, suspected of spying, the young blond with the German accent, the Joel König who had crossed all of Nazi Europe at war without the Gestapo's touching a hair of his head.

But Joel will not write this story. He got a degree and married, and settled in Holland; he loves and admires the Dutch, who are tenacious and peace-loving, as he is. He is tired, tired of fictions and disguises: that's why,

writing about his extraordinary adventure, he didn’t try to pretend, to represent himself as different from what he is and always has been.

The Return of Cesare

Many years have passed since I recounted the adventures of Cesare, and still more since the time, now obscured by distance, when those adventures took place. In some I also took part, for example in the purchase-conquest of a chicken in the marshes of Pripet; in others Cesare was alone, like the time he took on the job of selling fish for a syndicate of clients but was so moved by the hunger of three children that instead of selling the fish he gave it to them.

Until now I hadn't recounted the boldest of his undertakings because Cesare had forbidden it: he had returned to Rome and to orderliness, he had constructed around himself a family, he had a respectable job and a modest bourgeois house, and did not willingly recognize himself in the resourceful vagrant I described in *The Truce*. Today, however, Cesare is neither the inspired, ragged, and indomitable veteran of Belorussia 1945 or even the spotless bureaucrat of Rome in 1965; incredibly, he is a retired man of sixty, fairly peaceful, fairly wise, harshly tried by fate, and he released me from the ban, authorizing me to write "before the desire to do so passes."

So before the desire passes, I will here set about telling how Cesare, on October 2, 1945, fed up with the arabesques and interminable halts of the troop train that was carrying us to Italy, and impatient to put into action his creative abilities and the monstrous freedom that destiny had bestowed on us after the trials of Auschwitz, abandoned us, because he had decided to return home by airplane. Maybe after us, but not like us: not starving, tattered, weary, in a herd escorted by the Russians, on an exhausting snail-

train. He wanted a glorious reentry, an apotheosis. He saw the dangers of it, but *O a Napoli in carozza o in machina a fa' carbone*—"To Naples in a carriage or to the coal mines."

Our troop train, with its variegated burden of fourteen hundred Italians tortuously returning home, had been stuck for six days in the rain and mud of a small town on the border between Romania and Hungary, and Cesare was enraged by the forced idleness and by impotence-impatience. He invited me to join him, but I refused, because the undertaking frightened me; so he made some cursory arrangements with Signor Tornaghi, said goodbye to everyone, and left with him.

Signor Tornaghi was a mafioso from the north, a fence by profession. He was a ruddy and affable Milanese of forty-five; in our earlier wanderings he had been distinguished by his almost elegant style of dress, which was for him a habit, a symbol of social status and a necessity imposed by his profession. Until a few days before, he had even flaunted a coat with a fur collar, but then hunger had compelled him to sell it. Such a companion suited Cesare very well; Cesare never made a fuss about caste or class. The two took the first train leaving for Bucharest, that is, in the opposite direction to ours, and in the course of the journey Cesare taught Signor Tornaghi the main Jewish prayers, and was in turn taught by him the Our Father, the Credo, and the Ave Maria, because Cesare already had in mind the outlines of a plan for the first stage in Bucharest.

They arrived in Bucharest without incident, but had used up all their meager resources. In the war-ravaged city, uncertain of its fate, the two spent several days begging, impartially, in the convents and in the Jewish Community; they introduced themselves alternately as Jews who had escaped the slaughter, or as Christian pilgrims fleeing ahead of the Soviets. They didn't collect much but divided the proceeds and invested in clothes: Tornaghi to restore the honest appearance required by his profession, and Cesare to provide a front for the second stage of his plan. That done, they separated, and no one heard anything more about what happened to Signor Tornaghi.

Cesare, wearing a jacket and tie after a year with a shaved head and convict-striped clothing, was in a daze at first, but he quickly found the confidence necessary for the new role that he intended to assume, which was that of the Latin lover: for Romania (Cesare soon realized) is a country much less neo-Latin than the textbooks tell us. Cesare didn't speak

Romanian, obviously, or any language apart from Italian, but the difficulties of communication were not a hindrance. In fact they were a help, because it's easier to tell lies when you know you'll be misunderstood, and, besides, in the techniques of courtship eloquent language has a secondary function.

After a few attempts that came to nothing, Cesare met a girl who responded to his requirements: she was from a wealthy family and didn't ask too many questions. Concerning the putative father-in-law, the information provided by Cesare is vague; he was an owner of oil wells in Ploiesti, and/or the director of a bank, and lived in a villa whose gate was flanked by two marble lions. But Cesare is a fish who swims in all waters, and it doesn't surprise me that he was welcomed into that well-to-do bourgeois family, which surely was already frightened by the imminent political upheavals of the country; who knows, maybe a married daughter in Italy could be seen as a future bridgehead.

The girl went along. Cesare was introduced, invited to the villa with the lions, brought bouquets of flowers, and was officially engaged. Summoned to an interview with the future father-in-law, he didn't hide the fact that he had been in the Lager. He mentioned that, at the moment, he was short of cash: a small loan would be useful, or an advance on the dowry, to establish himself in the city in some way in anticipation of the marriage documents and finding a job. The girl continued to go along. She was flawless; she had immediately understood everything, and went from being a victim of the scam to an accomplice. The exotic adventure was to her taste, even if she knew it would soon be over, and she didn't care about her father's money.

Cesare got the money and vanished. A few days later, around the end of October, he boarded a plane for Bari. So he was victorious; true, he got home after us (who crossed the Brenner on the 19th of the month), and that scam cost him something, in the form of compromises of conscience and a broken-off love affair, but he returned by airplane, like a king, as he had promised himself and us when we were mired in the Romanian mud.

That Cesare descended from the sky in Bari there is no doubt. He was seen by numerous witnesses, who had rushed to wait for him, and they never forgot the scene, because as soon as Cesare set foot on the ground he was stopped by the carabinieri, at that time still the Royal Carabinieri. The reason was simple: after the plane took off from Bucharest, the airline officials realized that the dollars that Cesare had got from the father-in-law, and with which he had paid for the flight, were counterfeit, and they had

immediately sent a telegram to the airport at Bari. It's not clear if the equivocal Romanian father-in-law had acted in good faith, or if he had had a hint of the trick and taken preventive revenge, punishing Cesare and at the same time getting rid of him. Cesare was interrogated, sent to Rome with an expulsion order and provisions of bread and dried figs, again interrogated, and then released for good.

This is the story of how Cesare fulfilled his vow, and in writing it here I, too, have fulfilled a vow. It may be imprecise in some details, because it's based on two memories (his and mine), and over long distances human memory is an erratic instrument, especially if it isn't reinforced by material souvenirs, and is instead drugged by the desire (this, too, his and mine) for the story that's told to be a good one. But the detail of the counterfeit dollars is true, and meshes with facts of European history in those years. Around the end of the Second World War, counterfeit dollars and pounds circulated in abundance, throughout Europe and especially in the Balkan countries; among other things, they were used by the Germans to pay the double agent Cicero, in Turkey, whose story has been recounted many times and in various ways, and so they were here in Italy, too, in response to a scam.

The proverb says that money is the devil's excrement, and never was money more excremental or diabolical than the counterfeit. It was printed in Germany, to inflate the circulation of money in the enemy camp, to sow distrust and suspicion, and to make "payments" of the type just mentioned. Starting in 1942, these bank notes were produced mainly in the camp at Sachsenhausen, where the SS had gathered some hundred and fifty special prisoners: they were draftsmen, lithographers, photographers, engravers, and counterfeiters, who constituted Operation Bernhard, a small, very secret camp of experts within the greater camp, a version of the Stalinian *saraski* described by Solzhenitsyn in *The First Circle*.

In March 1945, before the arrival of the Soviet troops, Operation Bernhard was moved, en masse, first to Schlier-Ridl-Zipf, then (on May 3, 1945, a few days before the surrender) to Ebensee; both were auxiliary camps of Mauthausen. It seems that the counterfeiters worked until the last day, and then the plates were heaved to the bottom of a lake.

The Return of Lorenzo

I've also spoken of Lorenzo elsewhere, but in deliberately vague terms. Lorenzo was still alive when I was writing *If This Is a Man*, and the task of transforming a living person into a character ties the writer's hands. This happens because such a task, even when it's carried out with the best intentions, and in the case of a loved and respected person, verges on private violence, and is never painless for the one who is the object of it. Each of us constructs, consciously or not, an image of ourself, but it is fatally different from the image, or, rather, images—different, in turn, from one another—that are constructed by those who are near to us; and to find ourself portrayed in a book with features that are not the ones we attribute to ourself is traumatic, as if the mirror suddenly reflected the image of someone else—maybe more noble than ours, but not ours. For this reason, and for others more obvious, it's a good rule not to write a biography of a living person, unless the author openly chooses one of the two opposing paths of hagiography or propaganda, which diverge from reality and are not disinterested. What, then, is our "true" image is a meaningless question.

Now that Lorenzo has been dead for many years, I feel released from the constraints that hindered me before, and it seems instead that I ought to try to reconstruct the image I've kept of him, in these stories of the present perfect that assemble what was left out of my first two books. I met Lorenzo in June of 1944, after a bombing raid that had devastated the big site where both of us worked. Lorenzo wasn't a prisoner like us; in fact he wasn't a prisoner at all. Officially, he was one of the volunteer civilian workers whom Nazi Germany was swarming with, but his choice had hardly been voluntary. In 1939, he was employed as a mason by an Italian

firm that did work in France. The war broke out, and all the Italians in France were interned, but then the Germans came, reorganized the firm, and moved the whole operation to Upper Silesia.

These workers, although not soldiers, lived like soldiers: they were quartered in barracks in a camp not far from ours, they slept on cots, they had Sundays off and a week or two of holidays, they were paid in marks, they could write and send remittances to Italy, and from Italy they could receive clothes and packages of food.

That bombardment, one of the first, had damaged the buildings, and this damage could be repaired; but fragments and debris had also struck the delicate machinery that would start up when the enormous complex of Auschwitz Buna-Werke entered the production phase, and here the damage was much greater. The factory management had arranged for the most valuable machines to be protected by thick brick walls, and had entrusted their construction to Lorenzo's firm. My squad, at that time, had the job of fetching and carrying at the same underground site where the Italian masons were working, and, by pure chance, our Kapo sent me to be the helper for two masons whom I had never seen before.

The wall that the two men were putting up was already high, and they were working on a scaffolding. I was on the ground, waiting for someone to tell me what to do. They laid bricks energetically, without speaking, so that at first I didn't realize they were Italian. Then one of them, who was tall and slightly bent, with gray hair, said to me in bad German that the mortar was about to run out and that I should bring up the bucket. A full bucket is heavy and unwieldy, and if you hold it by the handle it hits your legs; you have to hoist it onto your shoulder, but that isn't easy. The skilled helpers do it like this: they spread their legs, grab the handle with both hands, lift the bucket, and give it a swing backward, that is, between the legs; taking advantage of the momentum thus gained, they bring the load forward and heave it up to their shoulder. I tried, with wretched results; the impetus wasn't sufficient and the bucket fell, dumping half the mortar on the ground. The tall mason snorted, and, turning to his companion, said, in Italian, "Oh well, of course, with people like this . . ." Then he prepared to come down from the scaffolding. I hadn't been dreaming: he had spoken in Italian, and with a Piedmontese accent.

We belonged to two different orders of the Nazi universe, and so in speaking to each other we were committing a crime; but we spoke just the

same, and it came out that Lorenzo was from Fossano, that I was from Turin, but that I had distant relatives in Fossano whom Lorenzo knew by name. I don't think we said much more, either then or later: not because of the prohibition but because Lorenzo almost never spoke. He seemed to have no need to speak; the little I know of him came in small part from his few hints, and in larger part from what his fellow workers told me there and his relatives in Italy later. He wasn't married, he had always been alone; his work, which was in his blood, possessed him to the point that it hindered human relations. At first he had been a mason in his town and the surrounding area, changing bosses often, because he didn't have an easygoing character; if a supervisor reprimanded him, even in the kindest way, he wouldn't answer, but put on his hat and took off. In winter, he often went to work in France, on the Côte d'Azur, where there was always a job; he had neither passport nor papers, he went on foot, by himself, he slept wherever he happened to be, and crossed the border over the passes used by smugglers. In spring he returned the same way.

He didn't speak, but he understood. I don't think I ever asked him for help, because at the time I didn't have a clear idea of the way these Italians lived or what was available to them. Lorenzo did everything on his own; two or three days after our encounter, he brought me an Alpine division mess pail (the aluminum kind, which holds around two liters) full of soup, and told me to bring it back empty before evening. From then on, the soup was always there, sometimes along with a piece of bread. He brought it to me every day for six months: as long as I worked as a laborer for him, there was no difficulty about handing it over, but after a few weeks he (or I, I don't remember) was transferred to another part of the site, and then the danger increased. That danger was that we would be seen together: the Gestapo had eyes everywhere, and any of us seen talking to a "civilian" for reasons not justified by work risked a trial for spying. In reality, the Gestapo was afraid of something else: it feared that through the civilians the secret of the gas chambers at Birkenau would be leaked to the external world. The civilians were at risk, too; any of them who turned out to be guilty of illegal contact with us would end up in our camp. Not for an indefinite period, like us: a fixed time, a few months only, for the purpose of *Umschuling*, reeducation. I myself had warned Lorenzo of this danger, but he had shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

I shared Lorenzo's soup with my friend Alberto. Without it we could not have survived until the evacuation of the camp; in the end, that extra liter of soup served to make up the balance of our daily calories. The food in the Lager provided us with about 1600 calories, which is not enough to live on if you're working. That soup provided another four or five hundred: still insufficient for a man of medium build, but Alberto and I were small and thin to begin with, and our need was less. It was a strange soup. We found in it plum pits, salami casings, once even the wing of a sparrow with all its feathers; another time a scrap of an Italian newspaper. I learned the origin of these ingredients later, when I saw Lorenzo in Italy: he had told his comrades that among the Jews in Auschwitz there were two Italians, and every evening he made the rounds to collect their leftovers. They, too, were hungry, even if not as hungry as we were, and many managed to do a little private cooking for themselves, with stuff stolen in the camps or found lying around. Later, Lorenzo figured out a way of stealing directly from the camp's kitchen what remained in the cooking pots, but to do it he had to go to the kitchen secretly, at three in the morning, when everyone was sleeping; and he did it for four months.

To avoid being seen together, we decided that when Lorenzo arrived at his worksite in the morning he would leave the pail in an agreed-upon hiding place, under a pile of boards. This system worked well for a few weeks; then evidently someone must have seen me and followed me, because one day I found in the hiding place neither pail nor soup. Alberto and I were humiliated by this blow, and also frightened, because the pail belonged to Lorenzo, and his name was incised in it. The thief could report us, or, more likely, blackmail us.

Lorenzo, to whom I immediately reported the theft, told me that he didn't care about the pail, he would get another, but I knew that wasn't true; it had been his tin since he was in the Army, and he had carried it on all his travels; certainly it was dear to him. Alberto meanwhile went around the camp until he identified the thief, who was much stronger than us, and shamelessly carried around that rare and beautiful Italian pail. He had an idea: to offer Elias three rations of bread, in installments, if he would take on the job of recovering the pail, by any means possible, from the hands of the thief, who, like him, was a Pole. Elias was the Herculean dwarf I described in *If This Is a Man* and mentioned in the story "Our Seal," in this collection. We flattered him, praising his strength, and he accepted; he liked

showing off. One morning, before the roll call, he confronted the Pole and ordered him to give back the stolen pail. The man naturally refused: it was bought, not stolen. Elias attacked him without warning; they fought for ten minutes, then the Pole fell in the mud and Elias, applauded by the audience attracted by the unusual spectacle, triumphantly brought us the pail. From then on, he was our friend.

Alberto and I were astonished by Lorenzo. In the violent and depraved atmosphere of Auschwitz, a man who helped other men out of pure altruism was incomprehensible, alien, like a saviour fallen from the sky: but he was a sullen saviour, with whom it was difficult to communicate. I offered to have a sum sent to his sister, who was in Italy, in compensation for what he was doing for us, but he refused to give us her address. Still, in order not to insult us by this refusal, he accepted a compensation more suitable for the place. His leather work shoes were worn out, in his camp there was no cobbler, and in the city of Auschwitz repair was very expensive. In our Lager, however, anyone who had leather shoes could have them repaired free, because (officially) none of us could keep money. So one day he and I exchanged shoes; he walked and worked for four days in my wooden shoes, and I had his repaired by the shoemakers of Monowitz, who in the meantime had given me a pair of temporary shoes.

At the end of December, shortly before I got sick with scarlet fever, which saved my life, Lorenzo returned to work near us, and I could get the pail directly from his hands. I saw him arrive one morning in the snow, wrapped in his gray-green cape, at the worksite devastated by the nighttime bombardments. He walked with long, sure, slow steps. He handed me the pail, which was bent and dented, and told me that the soup was a little dirty. I asked him why, but he shook his head and went off, and the next time I saw him was a year later, in Italy. In fact there was dirt and stones in the soup, and not until the year later did he tell me, almost in apology, that that morning, while he was making his collection round, his camp had suffered an air strike. A bomb had fallen near him and exploded in the soft ground; it had buried the pail and burst an eardrum, but he had the soup to deliver and had come to work just the same.

Lorenzo knew that the Russians were about to arrive, but he was afraid of them. Maybe he wasn’t wrong; if he had waited for them he would have got back to Italy much later, as in fact happened to us. On January 1, 1945, when the front was close, the Germans freed the Italians’ camp—they could

go where they wanted. Lorenzo and his comrades had an extremely vague idea of the geographical location of Auschwitz, and even of the name, which he didn't know how to write, and which he pronounced "Suíss," maybe associating it with Switzerland. But he set out just the same, along with Peruch, the fellow worker who had been with him on the scaffolding. Peruch was Friulano, and was to Lorenzo like Sancho to Don Quixote. Lorenzo moved with the natural dignity of those who are indifferent to danger; Peruch, short and stocky, was nervous and uneasy, and was constantly turning his head, with a little jerk. He was cross-eyed; his eyes diverged strongly, as if, in his permanent fear, he were struggling to look in front of him and to both sides at the same time, the way chameleons do. He had also brought bread to Italian prisoners, but secretly and irregularly, because he was too afraid of the incomprehensible and sinister world into which he had been catapulted. He brought food and immediately ran away, without even waiting for thanks.

The two left on foot. They had taken from the station in Auschwitz a railroad map, one of those distorted schematic maps on which only the stations are indicated, joined by the straight lines of the tracks. They walked at night, heading toward the Brenner Pass and guiding themselves by this map and the stars. They slept in haylofts and ate potatoes that they stole from the fields; when they were tired of walking, they stopped in villages, where there was always a job for two masons. Working, they rested; they were paid in money or in kind. They walked for four months. They arrived at the Brenner precisely on April 25, encountering the flood of German divisions fleeing northern Italy; an armored tank opened fire on them with a machine gun, but missed. Once they had crossed the Brenner, Peruch was almost home, and headed to the east. Lorenzo continued on foot, and in twenty days reached Turin. He had the address of my family, and found my mother, to whom he intended to bring news of me. He was a man who didn't know how to lie; or maybe, having seen the abomination of Auschwitz and the destruction of Europe, he thought that lying was futile, ridiculous. He told my mother that I would not return: the Jews of Auschwitz had all died, in the gas chambers, at work, or finally killed by the Germans as they fled (which was almost literally true). Further, he had learned from my companions that at the moment the camp was evacuated I was sick. It was better for my mother to resign herself.

My mother offered him money so that he could take the train at least for the last stage, from Turin to Fossano, but Lorenzo didn't want it, he had walked for four months and who knows how many thousands of kilometers, it wasn't really worth his while to take the train. He met his cousin in a cart, a little beyond Genola, six kilometers from Fossano: the cousin invited him to climb in, but by now it really would have been a sin, and Lorenzo arrived home on foot; besides, he had always traveled on foot, all his life. Time meant little to him.

When I returned myself, five months later, after my long journey through Russia, I went to Fossano to see him and bring him a sweater for the winter. I found a weary man: not weary of the road but mortally weary, a weariness from which there was no recovering. We went to have a drink together at the tavern, and from the few words I managed to get out of him I understood that his margin of love for life had narrowed, had almost disappeared. He had stopped working as a mason, he traveled among the farmhouses with a cart, buying and selling scrap iron. He could no longer tolerate rules or bosses or schedules. The little he earned he spent at the tavern; his drinking wasn't a vice—he drank to get away from the world. He had seen the world, he didn't like it, he felt it was going to ruin; living no longer interested him.

I thought he needed to change his environment, and I found him a job as a mason in Turin, but Lorenzo refused it. By now he was living like a nomad, sleeping wherever he happened to be, even, in the harsh winter of 1945–46, outside. He drank, but he was lucid; he wasn't a believer, he didn't know much about the Gospels, but then he told me something that at Auschwitz I hadn't suspected. I wasn't the only one he had helped there. He had had other dependents, Italians and others, but it had seemed to him right not to tell me: we are in the world to do good, not to boast of it. In "Suíss" he had been a rich man, at least compared to us, and had been able to help us, but now it was over, and he had no more opportunities.

He got sick; thanks to doctor friends I was able to get him into the hospital, but he couldn't have any wine and he left. He was confident and consistent in his rejection of life. Lorenzo was found nearly dead a few days later, and he died in the hospital, in solitude. He who was not a survivor of the camps died of the illness of survivors.

The King of the Jews



On my return from Auschwitz I found in my pocket a curious coin of an aluminum alloy, which is reproduced here. It's scratched and corroded; on one side it bears the Jewish star (the Shield of David), the date 1943, and the word *getto*, which is pronounced *ghetto* in German, and, on the other, the words *quittung über 10 mark and der älteste der juden in litzmannstadt, respectively*, "Value of 10 Marks" and "Elder of the Jews of Litzmannstadt." For many years I forgot about it; for a time I carried it in my wallet, maybe unconsciously attributing to it the value of a good-luck charm, then I left it lying at the bottom of a drawer. Recently, information I've received from various sources has allowed me, at least in part, to reconstruct its history, and it's an unusual, fascinating, and sinister history.

In today's atlases there exists no city with the name of Litzmannstadt, but a General Litzmann was and is known in Germany for having broken through the Russian front near Lodz, in Poland, in 1914; in Nazi times, in honor of this general the city of Lodz was rechristened Litzmannstadt. In the last months of 1944, the last survivors of the Lodz Ghetto were deported to Auschwitz; I must have found that coin on the ground, in Auschwitz, right after the liberation: certainly not before, because nothing that I had with me then was I able to keep.

In 1939, Lodz had around 750,000 inhabitants, and was the most industrial city in Poland, the most "modern," and the ugliest: it was a city that lived on the textile industry, like Manchester and like Biella, dependent on the presence of numerous factories, big and small, most of which had been founded several decades earlier by German and Jewish industrialists and were already largely obsolete. The Nazis were quick to establish a ghetto in Lodz, as in all the cities of a certain importance in occupied Eastern Europe, reviving the conditions of the ghettos of the Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation, but made worse by modern savagery. The Lodz Ghetto, established in February 1940, was the first in time and the second, after that of Warsaw, in number; it eventually held more than 160,000 Jews, and was liquidated only in the autumn of 1944. It was therefore also the longest-lived of the Nazi ghettos, and that should be ascribed to two causes: its economic importance for the Germans, and the disturbing personality of its president.

His name was Chaim Rumkowski. He had been the co-owner of a velvet factory in Lodz; it failed, and he had made several trips to England, perhaps to deal with his creditors. He had then established himself in Russia, where he somehow became wealthy again; ruined by the 1917 Revolution, he returned to Lodz. In 1940, he was nearly sixty; he had been twice widowed and had no children; he was known as the director of Jewish charitable institutions, and as an energetic, crude, and authoritarian man. The position of president (or elder) of a ghetto was intrinsically frightening, but it was a position, it meant recognition, it elevated one by a degree, and conferred authority. Now, Rumkowski loved authority. How he came to be appointed is not known: perhaps as a joke, in the malicious Nazi style (Rumkowski was, or seemed to be, a fool with an appearance of respectability; in other words, an ideal dupe); maybe he himself schemed to obtain it, so fierce, apparently, was his desire for power.

The four years of his presidency, or, rather, of his dictatorship, proved to be a surprising tangle of megalomaniac dream, raw energy, and real diplomatic and organizational ability. He soon came to see himself in the role of an absolute but enlightened monarch, and certainly he was encouraged in this path by his German masters, who undoubtedly manipulated him, but appreciated his talents for administration and order. From them he received authorization to mint money, both coins (the coin I had) and bills, on watermarked paper that was officially provided; the

exhausted workers of the ghetto were paid in this money, and could spend it in the shops to buy their food rations, which amounted on average to 800 calories a day.

Since he had at his disposal a starving army of excellent artists and craftsmen, ready at a nod to do his bidding for a quarter of a loaf, Rumkowski had stamps designed and printed that bore his image, his hair and beard illuminated by the light of Hope and Faith. He had a carriage drawn by a bony nag, and in this he drove through the streets of his tiny kingdom, which were teeming with beggars and petitioners. He had a regal cloak, and surrounded himself with a court of flatterers, lackeys, and assassins; from his poet-courtiers he commissioned anthems celebrating his "firm and powerful hand," and the peace and order that, thanks to him, reigned in the ghetto. He instructed that the children in the abominable schools, their numbers continually diminished by death from starvation and German raids, be assigned themes in exaltation and praise of "our wise and beloved President." Like all autocrats, he quickly organized an efficient police force, nominally to maintain order, in fact to protect his person and impose discipline; it was made up of six hundred agents armed with clubs, and an unspecified number of informers. He made many speeches in an unmistakable style, some of which have been preserved. He had adopted (deliberately? knowingly? or had he unconsciously identified with the model of the providential man, the "necessary hero," that was dominant in Europe at the time?) the oratorical technique of Mussolini and Hitler, of the inspired monologue, the pseudo-conversation with the crowd, the creation of approval through praise and blame.

And yet his figure was more complex than it might appear. Rumkowski was not only a traitor and an accomplice. In some measure, apart from making others believe it, he must gradually have convinced himself that he was a *mashiach*, a messiah, a saviour of his people, whose good—at times, anyway—he must have desired. Paradoxically, alongside his identification with the oppressor, or maybe alternating with it, was an identification with the oppressed, since man, as Thomas Mann says, is a confused creature; and he becomes more confused, we might add, when he is subjected to extreme pressure, and so he eludes our judgment, the way a compass goes wild at the magnetic pole.

Although he was despised and derided, and sometimes beaten, by the Germans, Rumkowski probably thought of himself not as a servant but as a

master. He must have taken his authority seriously: when, without warning, the Gestapo seized some of “his” advisors, Rumkowski rushed courageously to their aid, exposing himself to the sneers and slaps of the Nazis, which he bore with dignity. On other occasions, he tried to bargain with the Germans, who were demanding more and more cloth from the slaves assigned to the looms, and larger and larger contingents of useless mouths (the old, the sick, children) to send to the gas chambers. The harshness with which he quickly repressed movements of insubordination among his subjects (there existed, in Lodz as in other ghettos, nuclei of stubborn, bold political resistance, with Zionist or Communist roots) derived not so much from servility toward the Germans as from lèse majesté, indignation at the insult inflicted on his royal person.

In September 1944, as the Russians were approaching, the Nazis began the liquidation of the Lodz Ghetto. Tens of thousands of men and women who until then had managed to endure hunger, grueling work, and disease were deported to Auschwitz, *anus mundi*, the ultimate drainage point of the German universe, and almost all of them died there, in the gas chambers. A thousand men remained in the ghetto, to disassemble and dismantle the precious machinery and to erase the traces of the slaughter; they were freed by the Red Army shortly afterward, and to them we are indebted for the information reported here.

Of Chaim Rumkowski’s final destiny two versions exist, as if the ambiguity under whose sign he lived had been extended to envelop his death. According to the first version, during the liquidation of the ghetto he sought to oppose the deportation of his brother, from whom he did not want to be separated; a German officer proposed that he leave voluntarily with him, and Rumkowski accepted. According to another version, Hans Biebow, another character shrouded in duplicity, attempted to rescue Rumkowski from German death. This shady German industrialist was the official responsible for the administration of the ghetto, and at the same time the overseer of the factories; he had an important and delicate task, because the ghetto factories were working for the German armed forces. Biebow wasn’t a brute; he wasn’t interested in causing suffering or in punishing the Jews for the crime of being Jews. Rather, he wished to make

money as a supplier. The torture of the ghetto touched him, but only indirectly. He wanted the slave laborers to work, and yet he didn't want them to die of hunger; his moral sense stopped there. In fact, he was the true boss of the ghetto, and was bound to Rumkowski by that client-supplier relationship which often leads to a rudimentary friendship. Biebow, a small jackal too cynical to take seriously the demonizing of the race, would have liked to put off the dissolution of the ghetto, which for him was a good business, and save his friend and ally Rumkowski from deportation, and so we see that very often a realist is better than a theorist. But the theorists of the SS were of the opposite opinion, and were stronger. They were *gründlich*, fundamentally thorough, and radical. Out with the ghetto and out with Rumkowski.

Unable to make any other arrangements, Biebow, who had good connections, handed Rumkowski a sealed letter addressed to the commander of the camp he was assigned to, and assured him that it would protect him and guarantee favorable treatment. Rumkowski obtained permission from Biebow to travel to Auschwitz with the dignity that suited his rank, that is, in a special car, at the tail end of a convoy of freight cars crammed with deportees who had no privileges; but a single fate awaited Jews in German hands, whether they were cowards or heroes, humble or proud. Neither the letter nor the car could save Chaim Rumkowski, king of the Jews, from the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

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A story like this is not self-contained. It is pregnant, it raises more questions than it satisfies, and leaves us hanging; it cries—shouts—out to be interpreted, because we glimpse a symbol in it, as in dreams and signs from heaven, but it isn't easy to interpret.

Who is Rumkowski? He's not a monster, but he's not a man like other men, either; he is like many, like the many frustrated men who taste power and are intoxicated by it. In numerous respects, power is like a drug: the need is a mystery to those who haven't tried it, but after the initiation, which can be accidental, the "addiction" is born, the dependency, the need for higher and higher doses, and, along with this, the denial of reality and a return to childish dreams of omnipotence. If the hypothesis of a Rumkowski

intoxicated by power is valid, we have to admit that this intoxication developed not because of but in spite of the ghetto environment; in other words, it is so powerful that it prevails even in conditions that might seem such as to extinguish any individual will. In fact, the well-known syndrome of enduring, uncontested power was clearly visible in him: the distorted vision of the world, the dogmatic arrogance, the convulsive grip on the levers of command, the view of himself as above the law.

All this does not exempt Rumkowski from responsibility. That a Rumkowski existed grieves and torments us; it's likely that, had he survived his tragedy, and the tragedy of the ghetto—which he polluted, superimposing on it his second-rate actor's figure—no court would have absolved him, and we certainly cannot absolve him on the moral plane. There are, however, some extenuating circumstances: a lower order, like National Socialism, exercises a frightening power of seduction, which it's hard to guard against. Rather than honor its victims, it debases and corrupts them, assimilates them, surrounds itself with complicities great and small. To resist it, a solid moral structure is needed, and the one available to Chaim Rumkowski, the merchant of Lodz, was frail. His is the shameful and disturbing story of the Kapos, of the petty officials behind the lines, of the bureaucrats who sign everything, of those who shake their heads but assent, of those who say, "If I didn't do it, someone worse than me would."

It's typical of regimes where all the power comes from the top—and no critic can ascend from below—to weaken and confuse the capacity for judgment, and to create a broad band of gray consciences that stands between the potentates of evil and the pure victims; in this band Rumkowski should be placed. Whether higher up or lower down it's hard to say: he alone would be able to clarify it if he could speak to us, even if he were lying, as perhaps he always lied. He would help us understand, as every defendant helps his judge, helping even if he doesn't want to, even if he lies, because the capacity of man to play a part is not unlimited.

But all this is not enough to explain the sense of urgency and threat that this story exudes. Perhaps its meaning is different and wider. In Rumkowski we are all reflected: his ambiguity is ours, that of hybrids kneaded of clay and spirit; his fever is ours, that of our Western civilization that "descends into hell with trumpets and drums";[1] and his wretched trappings are the distorted image of our symbols of social prestige. His folly is that of the

presumptuous and mortal Man as Isabella describes him in *Measure for Measure*:

> *Drest in a little brief authority,*
> *Most ignorant of what he's most assured,*
> *His glassy essence, like an angry ape,*
> *Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven*
> *As make the angels weep.*

Like Rumkowski, we, too, are so dazzled by power and money that we forget the fragility of our existence: we forget that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that outside the fence are the lords of death, and a little way off the train is waiting.

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1. The expression "hell with trumpets and drums" is taken from Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

FUTURE ANTERIOR

A Tranquil Star

Once upon a time, somewhere in the universe very far away from here, lived a tranquil star, which moved tranquilly in the immensity of the sky, surrounded by a crowd of tranquil planets about which we have not a thing to report. This star was very big and very hot, and its weight was enormous; and here a reporter's difficulties begin. We have written "very far," "big," "hot," "enormous"; Australia is very far, an elephant is big and a house is bigger, this morning I had a hot bath, Everest is enormous. It's clear that something in our lexicon isn't working.

If in fact this story must be written, we must have the courage to eliminate all adjectives that tend to excite wonder: they would achieve the opposite effect, that of impoverishing the narrative. For a discussion of stars our language is inadequate and seems laughable, as if someone were trying to plow with a feather. It's a language that was born with us, suitable for describing objects more or less as large and long-lasting as we are; it has our dimensions, it's human. It doesn't go beyond what our senses tell us. Until two or three hundred years ago, small meant the scabies mite; there was nothing smaller, nor, as a result, was there an adjective to describe it. The sea and the sky were big, in fact equally big; fire was hot. Not until the thirteenth century was the need felt to introduce into daily language a term suitable for counting "very" numerous objects, and, with little imagination, "million" was coined; a little later, with even less imagination, "billion" was coined, with no care being taken to give it a precise meaning, since the term today has different values in different countries.

Not even with superlatives does one get very far: how many times higher than a high tower is a very high tower? Nor can we hope for help

from disguised superlatives, like “immense,” “colossal,” “extraordinary”; to relate the things that we want to relate here, these adjectives are hopelessly unsuitable, because the star we started from was ten times as big as our Sun, and the Sun is “many” times as big and heavy as our Earth, whose size so overwhelms our own dimensions that we can represent it only with a violent effort of the imagination. There is, of course, the slim and elegant language of numbers, the alphabet of the powers of ten, but then this would not be a story in the sense in which this story wants to be a story; that is, a fable that awakens echoes, and in which each of us can perceive distant reflections of himself and of the human race.

This tranquil star wasn’t supposed to be so tranquil. Maybe it was too big: in the far-off original act in which everything was created, it had received an inheritance too demanding. Or maybe it contained in its heart an imbalance or an infection, as happens to some of us. It’s customary among the stars to quietly burn the hydrogen they are made of, generously giving energy to the void, until they are reduced to a dignified thinness and end their career as modest white dwarves. The star in question, however, when some billions of years had passed since its birth, and its companions began to rarefy, was not satisfied with its destiny and became restless—to such a point that its restlessness became visible even to those of us who are “very” distant and circumscribed by a “very” brief life.

Of this restlessness Arab and Chinese astronomers were aware. The Europeans no: the Europeans of that time, which was a time of struggle, were so convinced that the heaven of the stars was immutable, was in fact the paradigm and kingdom of immutability, that they considered it pointless and blasphemous to notice changes in it; there could be none, by definition there were none. But a diligent Arab observer, equipped only with good eyes, patience, humility, and the love of knowing the works of his God, had realized that this star, to which he was very attached, was not immutable. He had watched it for thirty years, and had noticed that the star oscillated between the fourth and the sixth of the six magnitudes that had been described many centuries earlier by a Greek, who was as diligent as he, and who, like him, thought that observing the stars was a route that would take one far. The Arab felt a little as if it were his star: he had wanted to place his mark on it, and in his notes he had called it Al-Ludra, which in his dialect means “the capricious one.” Al-Ludra oscillated, but not regularly: not like a pendulum; rather, like someone who is at a loss between two

choices. It completed its cycle sometimes in one year, sometimes in two, sometimes in five, and it didn't always stop in its dimming at the sixth magnitude, which is the last visible to the naked eye; at times it disappeared completely. The patient Arab counted seven cycles before he died: his life had been long, but the life of a man is always pitifully brief compared with that of a star, even if the star behaves in such a way as to arouse suspicions of its eternity.

After the death of the Arab, Al-Ludra, although provided with a name, did not attract much interest, because the variable stars are so many, and also because, starting in 1750, it was reduced to a speck, barely visible with the best telescopes of the time. But in 1950 (and the message has only now reached us) the illness that must have been gnawing at it from within reached a crisis, and here, for the second time, our story, too, enters a crisis. Now it is no longer the adjectives that fail but the facts themselves. We still don't know much about the convulsive death-resurrection of stars: we know that, fairly often, something flares up in the atomic mechanism of a star's nucleus and then the star explodes, on a scale not of millions or billions of years but of hours and minutes; we know that these events are among the most cataclysmic that the sky today holds; but we understand only—and approximately—the how, not the why. We'll be satisfied with the how.

The observer who, to his misfortune, found himself on October 19 of that year, at ten o'clock our time, on one of the silent planets of Al-Ludra would have seen, "before his very eyes," as they say, his gentle sun swell, not a little but "a lot," and would not have been present at the spectacle for long. Within a quarter of an hour he would have been forced to seek useless shelter against the intolerable heat—and this we can affirm independently of any hypothesis concerning the size and shape of this observer, provided he was constructed, like us, of molecules and atoms—and in half an hour his testimony, and that of all his fellow beings, would end. Therefore, to conclude this account, we must base it on other testimony, that of our earthly instruments, for which the event, in its intrinsic horror, happened in a "very" diluted form, besides being slowed down by the long journey through the realm of light that brought us the news. After an hour, the seas and ice (if there were any) of the no longer silent planet boiled up; after three hours, all its rocks melted, and its mountains crumbled into valleys in the form of lava. After ten hours, the entire planet was reduced to vapor, along with all the delicate and subtle works that the combined labor of

chance and necessity, through innumerable trials and errors, had perhaps created there, and along with all the poets and wise men who had perhaps examined that sky, and wondered what was the value of so many little lights, and had found no answer. That was the answer.

After one of our days, the surface of the star had reached the orbit of its most distant planets, invading their sky and, together with the remains of its tranquility, spreading in all directions—a billowing wave of energy bearing the modulated news of the catastrophe.

Ramón Escojido was thirty-four and had two charming children. With his wife he had a complex and tense relationship: he was Peruvian and she was of Austrian origin, he solitary, modest, and lazy, she ambitious and eager for social life. But what social life can you dream of if you live in an observatory at an altitude of 2900 meters, an hour's flight from the nearest city and four kilometers from an Indian village, dusty in summer and icy in winter? Judith loved and hated her husband, on alternate days, sometimes even in the same instant. She hated his wisdom and his collection of shells; she loved the father of her children and the man who was under the covers in the morning.

They reached a fragile accord on weekend outings. It was Friday evening, and they were getting ready with noisy delight for the next day's excursion. Judith and the children were busy with the provisions; Ramón went up to the observatory to arrange the photographic plates for the night. In the morning he struggled to free himself from the children, who overwhelmed him with lighthearted questions: How far was the lake? Would it still be frozen? Had he remembered the rubber raft? He went into the darkroom to develop the plate, he dried it and placed it beside the identical plate that he had made seven days earlier. He examined both under the microscope: good, they were identical; he could leave in tranquility. But then he had a scruple and looked more carefully, and realized that there was something new: not a big thing, a barely perceptible spot, but it wasn't there on the old plate. When these things happen, ninety-nine times out of a hundred it's a speck of dust (one can never be too clean while working) or a microscopic defect in the emulsion; but there is also the minuscule probability that it's a nova, and one has to make a report, subject to

confirmation. Farewell, outing: he would have to retake the photograph the following two nights. What would he tell Judith and the children?

Gladiators

Nicola would happily have stayed home, and even in bed until ten, but Stefania wouldn’t hear of it. At eight, she was already on the phone: she reminded him that he had been making excuses for far too long. Sometimes it was the rain, sometimes it was the contestants, who were mediocre, sometimes he had to go to a meeting, and sometimes there were his silly humanitarian excuses. Noticing in his voice a shadow of reluctance, or, perhaps, only of a bad mood, she ended by telling him outright that promises are made to be kept. She was a girl with many virtues, but when she got an idea in her head there was no way around it. Nicola didn’t recall having made her an actual promise. He had said, vaguely, that yes, someday they would go to the stadium—all his colleagues went, and also (alas!) all her colleagues. Every Friday they filled in betting forms for the gladiator contest, and he had agreed with her that one shouldn’t set oneself apart, give oneself the airs of an intellectual; and then it was an experience, a curiosity that, once in your life, you needed to satisfy, otherwise you don’t know the world you’re living in. Yet now that it had come to the point, he realized that he had made all those speeches with some mental reservation—he had no desire to actually see the gladiators and never would. On the other hand, how to say no to Stefania? He would pay dearly, he knew, with insults, sulks, rebuffs. Maybe even worse—there was that fair-haired cousin of his . . .

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He shaved, washed, dressed, went out. The streets were deserted, but there was already a line at the store on Via San Secondo. He hated lines, but he got on the end of it just the same. The advertisement was hanging on the wall, in the usual garish colors. There were six entrants; the names of the gladiators meant nothing to him, except that of Turi Lorusso. Not that he knew much about Lorusso's technique; he knew that he was good, that he was paid an enormous sum, that he slept with a countess, and perhaps also with the relevant count, that he gave a lot to charity and paid no taxes. While Nicola waited his turn, he listened in on the conversations of his neighbors.

"If you ask me, after thirty years they shouldn't allow it anymore . . ."

"Of course, the acceleration and the eye aren't what they used to be, but, on the other hand, he has experience of the arena that . . ."

"But did you see him, in '91, against that madman who drove the Mercedes? When he threw the hammer from twenty meters and hit him straight on? And remember the time they ejected him for . . . ?"

He bought two tickets for the grandstand: it wasn't the moment to worry about cost. He went home and telephoned Stefania; he would pick her up at two.

By three, the stadium was full. The first entry was scheduled for three, but still at three thirty nothing had happened. Near them sat a white-haired old man with a deep tan. Nicola asked him if the delay was normal.

"They always make you wait. It's incredible—they act like prima donnas. In my time it was different. Instead of foam-rubber bumpers there were beaks—no nonsense. It was hard to escape without injury. Only the top players managed it, the ones who were born with combat in their blood. You're young, you don't remember the champions who came out of Pinerolo's stable and, even better, Alpignano's. Now, can you believe it?, they're all from reformatories or from the New Prisons, or even from the prison for the criminally insane; if they accept, their sentence is commuted. It's laughable now, they have insurance, disability, paid holidays, and after fifty fights they even get a pension. Oh, yes, there are some who retire at forty."

A murmur rose from the bleachers, and the first man entered. He was very young; he appeared confident but you could see he was afraid. Immediately afterward a flame red Fiat 127 came into the ring; the three

ritual honks of the horn sounded, and Nicola felt the nervous grip of Stefania's hand on his biceps. The car aimed straight at the boy, who waited in a slight crouch, tense, legs wide, gripping the hammer convulsively in his fist. Suddenly the auto accelerated, its tractor wheels spewing two jets of sand in its wake. The boy dodged and struck a blow, but too late: the hammer just grazed the side, denting it slightly. The driver couldn't have had much imagination; there were several more such charges, extremely monotonous, then the gong sounded and the round concluded with no decision.

The second gladiator (Nicola glanced at the program) was called Blitz, and he was stocky and smooth-skinned. There were several skirmishes with the Alfasud compact car that he had drawn as an adversary; the man was skillful enough and managed to keep wide of it for two or three minutes, then the car hit him, in first gear but hard, and he was thrown a dozen meters. His head was bleeding; the doctor came, declared him incapacitated, and the stretcher bearers carried him off amid the catcalls of the spectators. Nicola's neighbor was outraged. He said that Blitz, whose real name, by the way, was Craveri, was an impostor, that he got himself injured on purpose, that he should change careers—in fact, the Federation should change careers for him, take away his license and put him back in the ranks of the unemployed.

In the case of the third, who was also up against an economy car, a Renault 4, he pointed out that these cars were more dangerous than the big heavy cars. "If it was up to me, I would make them all Morris Minis. They have acceleration, and they handle well. With those monsters of 1600 and up, nothing ever happens. They're fine for newcomers—just smoke in their eyes." At the third charge, the gladiator waited for the auto without moving: at the last instant he threw himself flat on the ground and the car drove over him without touching him. The spectators shouted with enthusiasm; many of the women threw flowers and purses into the arena, and even a shoe, but Nicola learned that that move, though it looked impressive, wasn't really dangerous. It was called "the Rudolf," because a gladiator named Rudolf had invented it; he had later become famous, had had a political career, and was now a big shot on the Olympic Committee.

Next, there was the usual comic interlude: a duel between two forklifts. They were the same model and color but one had a red stripe painted on it and the other a green stripe. Because they were so heavy, they were difficult

to maneuver, sinking into the sand almost up to their hubs. In vain they tried to push each other back, with their forks entwined like battling stags; then the green stripe disentangled itself, backed up rapidly, and, making a tight turn, butted the side of red with its rear. Red yielded but quickly went into reverse and managed to lodge its fork under the belly of green. The fork rose, and green swayed and fell on one side, indecently exposing its differential and muffler. The audience laughed and applauded.

The fourth gladiator had to go against a banged-up Peugeot. The crowd immediately began to shout: “Rigged!” The driver even had the audacity to switch on his turn signal before swerving.

The fifth entry was a real spectacle. The gladiator was gutsy and obviously aiming not just at the windshield but at the head of the driver, and he missed by a hair. He dodged three charges, with precision and lazy grace, not even raising the hammer; at the fourth, he bounced up in front of the car like a spring, came down on the hood, and with two brutal hammer blows shattered the windshield. Nicola heard a brief, strangled cry that stood out from the roar of the crowd: it was Stefania, who was pressed tight against him. The driver seemed to be blinded. Instead of braking, he accelerated and hit the wooden barrier sideways; the car rebounded and came to rest on its side, trapping one of the gladiator’s feet in the sand. He was mad with rage and continued, through the empty frame of the windshield, to pound the head of the driver, who was trying to get out of the car by the door facing up. Finally he emerged, his face bleeding; he tore the hammer away from the gladiator, and began wringing his neck. The crowd yelled a word that Nicola couldn’t understand, but his neighbor calmly explained to him that they were asking the director of the competition to spare his life, which in fact was what happened.

A tow truck from the automobile club entered the arena, and in a flash the car was turned right side up and towed away. The driver and the gladiator shook hands amid the applause, and then walked toward the locker rooms waving, but after a few steps the gladiator staggered and fell. It wasn’t clear if he was dead or had only fainted. They loaded him, too, onto the tow truck.

As the great Lorusso entered the arena, Nicola realized that Stefania had turned very pale. He felt a vague rancor toward her, and he would have liked to stay longer, if only to make her pay—he couldn’t care less about Lorusso. On principle he would have preferred Stefania to ask him if they

could leave, but he knew her, and knew that she would never stoop to that, so he told her that he had had enough, and they left. Stefania didn’t feel well, she felt like throwing up, but when he questioned her she said curtly that it was the sausage she had eaten at dinner. She refused to have a glass of bitters at the bar, refused to spend the evening with him, rebuffed every topic of conversation that he suggested. She really must be ill. Nicola took her home, and realized that he, too, had little appetite, and didn’t even feel like playing the usual game of pool with Renato. He drank two cognacs and went to bed.

The Beast in the Temple

Perhaps the tip I had given him the night before was excessive: we hadn't yet had time to get a clear idea of the exchange rate or of the buying power of the local money. It was barely seven when Agustín knocked at the straw mats that served as the door to our room; we opened to him, because we instinctively trusted him. Among all the strangers who upon our arrival had crowded around us with bothersome offers or requests, Agustín stood out for his efficiency, his discretion, and the clarity, or rather the elegance, of the Spanish he spoke. He had come to make us a proposal: to leave the group, quietly and without drawing attention, and follow him, us and another couple, to the temple of the Trece Mártires, near Magaán. Had we never heard of it? He gave us a timid, quick smile; trust him, we would not regret the detour.

We consulted with the Torreses, young newlyweds from our city, and within a few minutes had decided to accept the proposal. Our other traveling companions were loud and vulgar; a morning of silence and relative solitude would do us good. Agustín explained to us that the temple was not very far: half an hour by taxi (the taxi drivers were all friends of his), ten minutes in a rowboat to reach the small island, almost in the middle of the lagoon of Gorontalo, then a half hour's climb.

The lagoon was flat as a mirror, and covered by a thick layer of luminous fog that veiled the sun without diminishing the heat. The air was damp and heavy, permeated by swamp odors. We disembarked at a small wooden wharf, slick with algae, and followed Agustín up a steep, winding path. The hills around us were rocky and deserted, and pierced by caves; some of these were not far from the path, and had been barricaded by

boards and bundles of sticks, perhaps to be used as stalls or sheep pens, but they seemed abandoned. The opposite slope of the valley was covered with vegetation, and no trace of a path could be seen; at intervals the thin, short bleat of a goat reached us.

The temple rose at the top of the hill, elusive as a mirage; it appeared vast and formless, and we had difficulty measuring the distance. We struggled to reach it, harassed by the insects and enervated by the utter lack of wind. It was a tall structure made of square blocks of pale stone; the shape was an irregular hexagon, the walls broken by a few small openings at different levels. These walls were not straight: some were noticeably concave, others convex, and the component blocks were only approximately aligned, as if the ancient builders had not known the use of plumb line and string. In the shadow of the walls, fearful of the sun, were some horses, motionless and dark with sweat, panting in the heat.

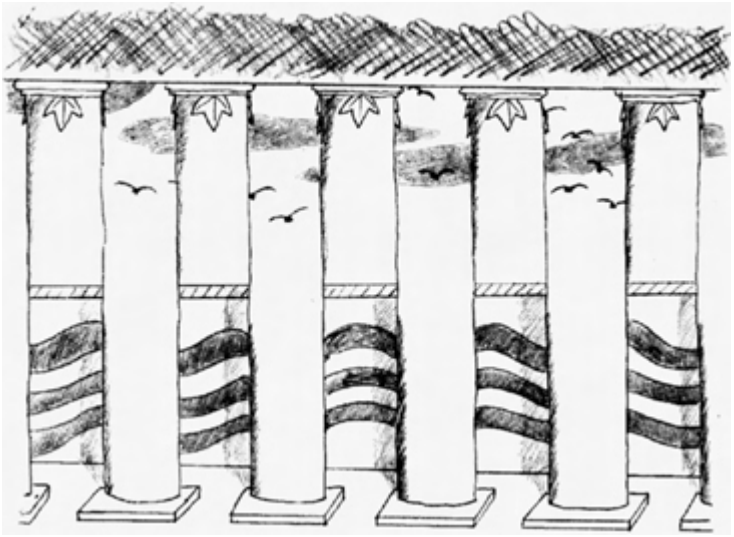
We entered the temple through a narrow aperture, which seemed to have been crudely chiseled out of the rock, or breached as if with a battering ram; no real doors could be seen. While from the outside the structure appeared simply massive, the inside was, in contrast, highly articulated and serpentine: succeeding one another were courtyards large and small, terraces, hothouses, hanging gardens, dry fountains, and pools; these elements were connected (when they were connected) by wide or narrow flights of stairs, broad steps, steep spiral staircases. Everything was in a state of extreme abandonment. Many of the structures had collapsed, some a long time ago, to judge from the angle of the plants that had grown up everywhere among the ruins; soil had accumulated in all the cracks, and wild grasses and brambles with a penetrating odor had taken root, along with mosses and small fragile mushrooms. Certainly ten days would not have been enough to explore all the twists and turns of the building. Agustín insisted on leading us to the Passage of the Dead, and through this to the innermost courtyard, which he called the Courtyard of the Beast. The Passage of the Dead was a long strip of beaten earth, perhaps eighty meters by ten: strangely, not a blade of grass grew there. Agustín ordered us to proceed single file along the edge, without crossing a line of demarcation that was indicated by a row of small stakes. He pointed out a hundred or so sharp, rusty metal objects protruding from the ground, vertically or at oblique angles. Some stuck up a few inches, others were barely visible; and he told us that they were the tips of swords and lances. His country, he said,

had been invaded often; some centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, a horde of horsemen had descended from the north, from where, exactly, no one knew. They were violent and cruel, but few in number. His forebears (“They were braver than we are,” he said, with one of his modest smiles) had tried in vain to drive them back to their ships, but they had barricaded themselves in the temple; from here they had controlled the land for some years, with sudden raids, fires, and massacres, and a disease they brought with them. The horsemen who died of disease or in battle were buried by their companions according to their barbaric custom—each one mounted on his horse, and with his weapon raised to challenge heaven.

The Courtyard of the Beast was vast, and covered by a vault that was still almost undamaged; the only light that penetrated was what filtered through the gaps in the roof. It took some time for our eyes to get accustomed to the semi-darkness. We then saw that we were at the edge of an arena, more or less elliptical in shape; around it, in place of tiers of seats, innumerable boxes were arranged, in four or five rows, supported and separated by a forest of columns of stone or gilded wood. The columns were only approximately vertical, and the rows did not extend along horizontal lines, so the boxes weren’t all the same; some were tall and narrow, others wide and low (some so low that a man would have been able to enter only by crawling on his belly). Opposite us, an entire area was sharply tilted, like a geological fault, or a fragment of a bee’s hive that has been removed and reinserted at an angle.

We lingered for a long time trying to understand how a structure like that could not only remain standing for so many centuries but even exist. As we got used to the half-light, we perceived that some of the columns closest to us exhibited an irritating phenomenon, difficult to express here in words —and in fact at the moment itself we had observed to one another how impossible it was to describe what our eyes were seeing. It would certainly be easier to show in a drawing. We felt this phenomenon as an insolence, a challenge to our reason—something that had no right to exist, yet existed. In their lower part, the columns let you glimpse, through the gaps between them, the rear of the boxes, painted in festoons of black and ochre; but as your gaze moved upward, their outlines changed function, so that the gaps became columns and the columns became gaps, and through these gaps you could see the opaque sky of the lagoon. We tried in vain, the Torreses and ourselves, to get to the bottom of this absurd illusion, which vanished if we

approached but imposed itself with the heavy evidence of concrete things if observed from a distance of a few dozen meters. Claudia took some photographs, but without confidence; the light was too dim.



The pit of the arena appeared overgrown by thick, low vegetation. Agustín kept us on the sides, and had us climb to the top of a pile of ruins; then, without speaking, he pointed out a dark form that was rustling amid the bushes. It was a massive brown animal, somewhat taller and larger than a water buffalo; in the silence we could hear its deep, harsh breathing, and the tearing and crushing of the bushes that it ripped up as it fed. One of us, perhaps I myself, asked in bewilderment, “What is that?” Immediately Agustín made a sign to be quiet, but the beast must have heard, because it raised its head and gave a loud snort, at which a flight of birds rose in agitation from the boxes. The beast bellowed, shook itself, and took off at a run, straight ahead, as if it were charging an invisible enemy—perhaps the senselessness, the impossibility of the scene in which it was confined. We looked around: the pit had several openings, but they were narrow and obstructed. The beast would not be able to get through any of them.

It galloped more and more violently, smashing bushes and branches in its path; the ground echoed to the triple rhythm of its hooves, and we could hear fragments of capitals break off the columns and fall. The beast headed for one of the openings, the widest and least obstructed by debris. It butted against the doorposts, as if, blinded with rage, it hadn’t seen them; it got caught for a moment, and, emitting a roar of pain, drew back; the crash sent

the stone architrave tumbling down, and the opening appeared narrower than before, half blocked by fallen stones. Claudia clutched my arm tensely: “It’s a prisoner of itself. It’s closing off all the ways out.”

We emerged into the afternoon light, which seemed to us dazzling. Signora Torres pointed out scaly gray-brown lizards nesting in the cracks in the stone; others lay motionless in the veiled sun, like tiny bronzes. If disturbed, they fled rapidly to their dens, or curled up like armadillos, and in that form, reduced to small, compact discs, fell into emptiness.

Outside the temple a crowd of gaunt beggars had gathered, men and women, with a threatening aspect. A short distance away, some had erected low black tents, and were squatting there, sheltered from the sun. They stared at us with an insolent and insistent curiosity, but did not say a word.

“They’re waiting for the beast,” said Agustín. “They’re waiting for it to come out. They’ve been coming every evening, forever; they spend the night here, and in the tents they have knives. They’ve been waiting for as long as the temple has existed. When the beast comes out, they will kill it and eat it, and then the world will be restored. But the beast will never come out.”

Disphylaxis

Amelia knew that not all hours of the day lend themselves equally well to studying. For her it was the early morning and late afternoon until dinner; then no more, she felt she could absorb no more. But the exam was important, the most important of this two-year period, and she couldn't waste the evening before; she would try to use it in the best possible way, combining some review with a small good deed.

Grandmother Letizia hardly ever went out now; she had few occasions to talk, and yet she needed to talk, and her contacts were limited to the neighborhood shopkeepers, uncultured people, of suspect origins. At home, she seldom opened her mouth because she was afraid of repeating herself, and in fact she did repeat herself, always returning to the same subjects, to the world of her youth, so tranquil, reasonable, and orderly. Well, these were just the subjects that interested Amelia: certain things were not found in textbooks.

Her grandmother, then, would be happy to talk about them. All old people are like that; the world around them holds little interest, it disturbs them, they don't understand it, it feels hostile, and so their memory doesn't record it. That's why they remember long-ago events and not recent ones; it's not that they've grown rigid—it's self-defense. Their true world is the world of their youth, and it's good by definition, "the good old days," even if it did give mankind two world wars.

Amelia was essentially human in terms of her race, and she had no trouble communicating with Grandma Letizia. Not so with her paternal grandmother, who had died many years earlier. Amelia recalled her as a nightmare. During a trip to the Val di Lanzo in the early years of the

disphylaxis, when the controls were still rudimentary, Grandma Gianna's mother had been imprudent and had been inseminated by pollen from a larch: that was how Grandma Gianna was born. Poor woman, it wasn't her fault, but as Amelia remembered her she wasn't very likable.

It was luck that human heredity had dominated—it's generally the rule, in any case—yet anyone would have realized that she was a disphylactic: she had rough, scaly dark skin, and greenish hair, which in autumn turned yellow-gold and in winter fell out, leaving her bald; fortunately it grew back quickly in the spring. She talked in a faint voice, almost a whisper, and with irritating slowness. It was incredible that she had found a husband, maybe it was simply because of her legendary domestic virtues.

"Ah yes, the disphylaxis. You, child, may think what you like about it. I myself have always said that when one has to die, it's because God has decided, and one mustn't oppose His will. That business of transplants I never understood well, from the beginning: eyes, then kidneys, then the liver . . . and, at the first sign of rejection, down goes that thingamajig, what's it called, I've never been good at names, but that I don't remember because I don't want to remember."

"Hypostenone," Amelia suggested.

"Hypostenone, yes, and so all the transplants succeeded. At all the pharmacists', a thousand lire a bottle. They dispensed it like nothing, even to people who had false teeth and ladies who had had their noses fixed. They had tried it on mice, and it was harmless. Safe, harmless—just like defoliants, the ones in that country . . . Harmless, but those know-it-alls didn't know what the farmers know, that nature is like a short blanket, if you pull it in one direction . . ."

This wasn't what interested Amelia: she would have liked to know other things, about how people lived before, when there were no surprises in the obstetric wards and all the cats had four legs; she found it difficult to imagine that time. Orderly, yes, but perhaps a little insipid; it was almost impossible to make comparisons. As for the story of hypostenone, even children knew that: it was indestructible, but no one had realized that until it was too late. It passed from excrement to the sewers and then the sea, from the sea to the fish and the birds; it flew through the air, fell with the rain, seeped into milk, bread, and wine. Now the world was full of it, and all immune defenses had broken down. It was as if living nature had lost its distrust: no transplant was rejected, but at the same time all vaccines and

serums had lost their power, and the old scourges—smallpox, rabies, cholera—had returned.

And so even the immune defenses that had once impeded cross-breeding between different species were weak or nonexistent; nothing prevented you from having the eyes of an eagle implanted or the stomach of an ostrich, or maybe a pair of tuna gills so you could go hunting underwater, but, in exchange, any seed—animal, vegetable, or human—that the wind or the water or some accident brought in contact with any ovum had a good possibility of causing the conception of a hybrid. All women of childbearing age had to be on their guard. It was an old story. Amelia was sleepy, she said good night to her grandmother, laid out her things for the next day, and went to bed. She was a good sleeper; she had often thought that her fondness for sleep was due to the fact that one-eighth of what flowed through her veins was vegetable lymph. She barely had time to say a mental good night to Fabio before her breathing became deep and regular.

She had told Fabio over and over that when she was going to take an exam she preferred not to see him, and yet there he was, smiling, efficient, carefully shaved, protective.

"Just to say good luck; then I'm off to the bank."

"Thanks. Now go, okay? I'm already nervous, and you know that even if you don't mean . . ."

"I know, I know. I just wanted to see you. Bye, you'll see, it'll all be fine."

Someone in the bank had spread the rumor that Fabio was one-quarter stickleback. Amelia, discreetly, had done some research at the Bureau of Vital Statistics, and everything had turned out to be normal; but the situation at the Bureau is well-known, and anyway Amelia had no prejudices—sticklebacks are faithful husbands, affectionate fathers, and stubborn defenders of their territory. Better a pinch of stickleback than of certain other beasts. You heard so many stories . . . there might be some truth to them: if a woman wasn't very clean, and the flea was male, it could spring the trap. On these subjects the Restored Church didn't joke around: the soul was sacred, and the soul was everywhere, even in month-old embryos, and certainly in individuals who were born, even if they didn't

have much that was human about them. And there were those who said that the condition of women had improved!

She screwed up her courage and entered the Institute of Modern History. After the sun's glare, the hall appeared dark: before she could make out the faces, she began to distinguish the masks of antiseptic gauze that everyone wore, the males white, the females bright colors. You went in alphabetical order; she made her way into the corridor to hear what people were saying. A porter came in and called Fissore. Amelia's name was Forte: her turn would be next. Fissore emerged soon afterward, happy and satisfied: all okay, Mancuso was polite and sensitive; in five minutes he had come through with a 29, not bad. No, there was no trap, he had been questioned on the wars in Uganda, and the person before him on punitive approaches to education. The porter returned and called Amelia.

Mancuso was in his forties. He was small and nervous, with black eyes and hair, and a sparse, stiff black mustache, too. He spoke so fast that it was hard to follow: you often had to ask him to repeat the questions. He had a sharp, strident little voice, which reminded Amelia of a tape recording played too fast. She sat down, and for some seconds the professor examined her from head to toe, with abrupt jerks of his head, his eyes, and his hands, which played with a pencil; even his nostrils quivered. Then he drew back, settled himself more comfortably in his chair with two flicks of his hips, gave Amelia a broad, cordial smile that, however, vanished in a flash, blinked his eyelids rapidly, and told Amelia to speak on whatever subject she liked. He's taken with me, Amelia thought, without enthusiasm, and said that she would talk about the disphylaxis. She seemed to see a shadow of opposition pass quickly over Mancuso's face, but she began her exposition anyway.

The subject was important to her, and not only for personal reasons; it had always seemed to her unjust that in school, at all levels, it was so little discussed, as if the world before had never existed. How could the young people of today know themselves if they didn't know their own roots? How could they close themselves to what appeared open to her? Usually at exams she was timid and awkward, but that day she didn't recognize herself: excited and surprised, she heard her voice describing the fantastic universe of seeds, germs, and enzymes in which man lives without realizing it, the teeming pollen and spores in the air we breathe at every moment, of masculine and feminine powers in the waters of rivers and seas.

She felt herself blush when she began to speak of the wind in the woods, saturated with countless fertilities, innumerable invisible seeds, of how every seed, inscribed with a fateful message, was cast into the void of sky and sea in search of its consort, bearer of the second mysterious message that would give meaning to the first. Thus for billions of years, from the horsetails of the Carboniferous up to today—no, not to today, to yesterday, to the moment when the iron barrier between species and species had shattered, and it still wasn't known whether for good or for ill.

She went into the thorny question of evaluation of the disphylaxis in its moral, religious, and utilitarian aspects, and was about to expound an observation of her own, a comparison between the Mosaic dictates against the abomination of mixing and the recent extremely oppressive laws intended to control the indiscriminate use of the antirejection agents, when she realized that Mancuso wasn't listening to her. Nor was he looking at her. He was turning around with rapid jerks of his head, and scratching himself here and there with a speedy back-and-forth of his fingers, almost a vibration; at a certain point he dug a nut out of his pocket, crushed it quickly with his teeth, and began to gnaw on it with his incisors. Amelia, overcome by rage, was silent.

Mancuso, still nibbling on the nut, stared at her questioningly. "Are you finished? Good. Quite good. Are you free tonight? No? A pity. Passed with a 19"—barely. "Come this way. Here's the exam book. Goodbye." In order to speak, he had shoved the nut between his cheek and his jaw.

Amelia took the book and left without saying goodbye. That story about hamsters that was murmured in the corridors must be true. On the threshold she felt tempted to go back into the room and refuse the grade, but then she thought that if she had to take the exam again things could be even worse. She got on the bus, went to the end of the line, and took a path through the woods that she knew well: no one would expect her at home before evening. Mancuso was an ass, about this there was no question. Maybe he had some excuse, maybe the story of the hamster was true, but it's pointless to go too far with justifications; if a railway worker causes a train to derail, he is brought to trial and not pardoned, even if his grandfather was a goat.

We aren’t racists, but to call a donkey a donkey, and a boor a boor isn’t racist, right?

The path was flat, shady, and solitary, and as she walked she grew calmer. There were flowers along the edges, modest but pretty—primula, forget-me-not, some tiny white strawberry flowers—and Amelia felt drawn to them. It’s not odd to feel attracted to flowers, but she felt attracted in a strange way. Amelia knew herself well, and knew that that way was strange, even though it was common to many men and many women, and not all with the blood of larches in their veins. She thought about it, as she went on walking: they must have been pretty gray, pretty boring, the good old days, when men were attracted only to women, and women only to men.

Now many were like her; not all, certainly, but, when it came to flowers, plants, some animals, many young people—at the sight of them, at their odor, hearing their voices or even only a rustling—felt a kindling of desire. Few satisfied it (come on, it wasn’t always easy to satisfy), but, even unsatisfied, that desire—so various, so vivid and subtle—enriched and ennobled them. It was stupid to stop at surfaces, at puritan morality, and count the disphylaxis among the catastrophes. For more than a century humanity had been intoxicated by catastrophic prophecies; nuclear death had not arrived, the energy crisis seemed to have passed, the population explosion was over, and, to the shame of all the prophets, the world was instead becoming another world on the verge of the disphylaxis, which no seer had foretold.

And it was strange, strange and marvelous, that nature turned upside down had found a coherence. Along with fertility between different species desire had been born; sometimes grotesque and absurd, sometimes impossible, sometimes happy. Like hers: or like that of Graziella, lost with the seagulls. Of course, there was Mancuso with his gnawing (maybe he was only rude), but every year, every day, new species were born, more quickly than names could be found for them by an army of naturalists; some monstrous, others lovely, still others unexpectedly useful, like the milk oaks that grew in the Casentino. Why not hope for the best? Why not trust in a new millenarian selection, in a new man, swift and strong as the tiger, long-lived as the cedar, prudent as the ant?

She stopped in front of a flowering cherry tree: she caressed its shiny trunk, feeling the sap rise, lightly touched its rubbery nodes, then, looking around, she embraced it tightly, and it seemed to her that the tree responded

with a rain of flowers. She shook them off, laughing: “It might be beautiful if what happened to my great-grandmother happened to me!” Well, why not? Was Fabio better, or the cherry tree? Fabio was better, no doubt, one needn’t yield to the impulse of a moment; but at that moment Amelia was aware of a desire that in some way the cherry tree enter her, fructify in her. She reached the clearing and lay down among the ferns, a fern herself, alone, light, and supple in the wind.

Dizzying Heat

Of one thing he was certain: he would not let himself get trapped a second time. All true: we live in a democracy, and democracy means participation, participation from the bottom up. But let's be serious, is this participation? To be nailed to a bench, as hard and uncomfortable as a school bench, in fact it is a school bench; to be in Rome in the humid heat of July, listening to a crazy woman who endlessly repeats the same things that she has already said yesterday, last month, and six months ago, and which, besides, have been printed, illustrated, and televised hundreds of times? Signora Di Pietro is sick, it's undeniable; she's neurotic, and it's plain that at home her husband and children don't let her speak, so she lets it all out here.

Ettore had lost the thread some time ago. If only he were allowed to light a cigarette! But if we're the ones to set the bad example . . . He opened the plastic folder in front of him, and began to draw stick figures on a piece of paper, just to keep himself awake. Then he wrote *Ettore* in italics and, below, in capital letters and in gothic letters. Backward it read "*e rotte*." He wrote "*e rotte*" at the end of the line and saw his hand, as if guided by an automatic device, finish the sentence: *Ettore evitava le madame lavative e rotte*. Ettore avoided shiftless and fallen ladies.

Ettore was a civilized person, and in a waking state he would not have allowed himself to describe Signora Di Pietro that way: boring yes, but shiftless and fallen never ever; yet it was true that he would happily have avoided her. He checked again, reading from right to left: yes, it was correct. But correct doesn't mean true; it would be terrible if all reversible sentences were true—they would be oracular pronouncements. And yet . . . and yet, when you read them backward, and they make sense, there is

something about them, something magical, revelatory. Even the Latins knew them, and wrote them on sundials: *Sator Arepo tenet opera rotas. / In gyrum imus nocte et consumimur igni.* (The sower Arepo has as his work the wheels. / We enter the circle at night and are consumed by fire.) They're like horn amulets, or finding a four-leaf clover. You don't believe in it, but you pick it and hesitate to throw it away. You aren't sure why, but you never know. It's a vice; well, yes indeed, I, too, have my vice. I don't drink, I don't gamble, I don't smoke much, but I, too, have my vice, which is less destructive than a lot of others: reading backward. I don't take heroin. I write reversible sentences—do you have any objections? *Eroina motore in Italia—Ai latini erotomani or è* (For Latin erotomanes, heroin now is the motor in Italy). Excellent, two sonorous decasyllables, and not completely meaningless.

Signora Di Pietro went on: now she was talking about the fruit and vegetable markets. Ettore, too, went on. In short, amid the doodles and sketches of his neighbors, other maxims flourished: *Oimè Roma amore mio* (Alas, Rome, my love); and right next to it *A Roma fottuta tutto fa mora* (In fucking Rome, everything goes bad), which seemed to him appropriate. And then, *Ad orbi, broda* (For the blind, dishwater), with an obscure meaning, probably sapiential: a peremptory order, like a commandment. *E lì varrete terra vile* (And there you will be worth vile earth). Remember, man, that you are dust, and to vile dust you will return. Soon, too. But as long as you are on this earth you must gird your loins with determination, and fight like a good soldier: *Accavalla denari, tirane dalla vacca* (Pile up money, squeeze it from the cow). If you know how to live, the world isn't bad: you leave on Friday, join Elena in Sperlonga, eat freshly caught fish, forget the office and the subcommittee, and feel like a new man.

It would be terrible if Elena weren't there. He didn't feel like marrying her, nor had she ever insisted: they were fine as they were. When you pass forty and are still a bachelor, you have to be careful; maybe you don't realize it, but certain of your habits could be annoying. For example, what if Elena had been right there, reading what he was writing? Elena, Anele: *Essa è leggera, ma regge le asse* (She is light, but she holds her ground). *È lo senno delle novità, genere negativo nelle donne sole* (It is the wisdom of novelties, a negative type in lonely women), although Elena had never been lonely; in fact, wherever she was, she had a talent for soon being the center of a small troop of admirers. But nothing to be said, the agreement between

them was clear, no jealousy, two sensible people in mutual good faith, all out in the light of the sun.

Il livido sole, poeta ossesso, ateo, peloso di villi (The livid sun, obsessed atheist poet, shaggy with hairs). He could see it through the half-closed skylight, and it really was livid, obscured by the haze. Shaggy with hairs is, so to speak, hairy, which is a bold image, but poetic. Next to the sentence Ettore drew a sinister black sun, bristling with severed rays, like a sea urchin; then the sea, and himself in it: *Ogni marito unico ci nuoti ramingo* (May every single husband swim to us, roving).

After Signora Di Pietro, Moretti took the floor, on the subject of the local transportation services. Ettore wrote *Ero erto tre ore* (I was erect three hours), then erased it. No bragging; on the contrary, that evening he was feeling a little peculiar. Maybe it was because of the heat and humidity. The local transportation services were completely outside his area of expertise; he rose and slipped out, trying not to be noticed, but the president waved to him with ostentatious irony. *È mala sorte, ti carbonizzino braci, tetro salame* (It's bad luck, let the coals carbonize you, somber salami). They elected you president? Well, you can stay there, whereas I, on the other hand, am leaving. The president was a bigot and a hypocrite; he had never liked him.

He went down the stairs and out to the parking lot; he gave the usual two hundred lire to the unauthorized attendant, and started the car. There was no one in front of him: yet, who knows why, maybe because he was tired and distracted, he put the car in reverse, and badly scratched the Renault parked next to him, which was really a little too much on an angle. The attendant made a calming motion with his hand and stuck out his lower lip as if to say, "See nothing, know nothing." He drove home amid the traffic of the Lungotevere, pondering *ovisuba, ivisuba* (*abusivo, abusivi,* unauthorized), but without pencil and paper he couldn't make anything of it. In Sperlonga it was never hot; if only Friday would arrive quickly. *O morbidi nei pieni di bromo!* (O soft moles full of bromine!) Elena had a mole on her right knee. If a man, or a woman, breathes organic chlorine, he gets chloracne, as at Seveso; does bromacne also exist? Elena had better be careful.

He didn't feel like eating at the trattoria; he would run into the usual clientele and he had had enough words for that evening. He went home, opened all the windows in the vain hope of creating a little breeze, and

dined on two hard-boiled eggs and a salad. He turned on the TV, but immediately turned it off, he didn't care at all about *Games Without Frontiers*. He felt a vague unease, as if his brain were frying—maybe he had a slight fever. If not, that business of backing up couldn't be explained; modesty aside, he was a skillful and attentive driver. It was silly and sad to spend evenings like this, lonely as a dog; and then why a dog? Dogs are never alone; they sniff in corners, and find their companion, male or female, in a moment, by scent. His beard was rough, but he didn't feel like shaving. In four days, Friday would arrive, and he would leave and no longer be alone.

He had a bad night, populated by unhinged and anguished dreams. The next morning he rose, washed, and picked up the electric razor, but then he touched his cheeks and found them smooth. He felt a wave of distress swelling inside: yesterday the backing up and now the beard . . . Had he shaved the night before? He stood, perplexed, before the mirror, in his undershirt, with his fingers on his cheeks: in the mirror he saw the reflection of the thermos of hot coffee, he turned, grabbed it like a life preserver, and fiddled for some moments with the top, which he wanted to unscrew and instead was screwing tighter. He left it, went to the night table, and looked fearfully at the wristwatch lying on it: if he saw the second hand turning backward, then it would be all over. But no, everything was in order. There was nothing objective, no concrete symptom, it must have been the fault of the heat and humidity. *O soci, troverò la causa, la sua: calore vorticoso* (O companions, I will find the cause, his: dizzying heat). In any case he would be more cautious from now on; he wouldn't overdo it. It couldn't be said that even that vice did not present some danger, but, for that matter, *In arts it is repose to life: è filo teso per siti strani* (It's a thread stretched through strange sites).

Bridge Builders

Boris had sometimes thought of the old ballad about the giant's daughter who finds a man in the wood and, surprised and pleased, takes him home to play with. The giant orders her to let him go, telling her that she will only break him.

—ISAK DINESEN, "THE MONKEY,"
IN *SEVEN GOTHIC TALES* (1934)

Danuta was glad that she was made like the deer and the doe. She was a little sorry about the grass, the flowers, and the leaves she had to eat, but she was happy that she was able to live without extinguishing other lives, which is the fate of the lynx and the wolf. She was careful to go to a different place every day, so that new growth would quickly cover over the empty spaces; as she walked, she avoided trampling the willow, hazelnut, and alder shoots, and she gave a wide berth to the forest trees in order not to wound them. Her father, Brokne, had always behaved like that, too; of her mother she had no memory.

They had a regular place to drink, a deep pool in the stream, shaded at sunset by a row of old oaks that grew on the right bank; the left bank, however, opened onto a clearing where the two could easily lie down, either on their backs, to sleep, or facedown, to drink. Once there had been stumps that poked their backs, but Brokne had pulled them up one by one. Unicorns and minotaurs, shy as shadows, also came to that watering place, but only later, when twilight yields to night. Brokne and Danuta had no enemies, except for the thunder, and the cold in the frigid winters.

Danuta's favorite meadow was a deep green valley, with thick grass and abundant water; a stream ran along the valley floor, and this was spanned

by a stone bridge. Danuta spent long hours thinking about the bridge: in their entire territory, which encircled more than a hundred miles, there was nothing like it. The water couldn't have excavated it, nor could it have fallen like that from the mountains. Something or someone must have constructed it, with patience, ingenuity, and slimmer hands than hers; she leaned over to see it close up, and never tired of admiring the precision with which the stones had been cut and placed, to form a graceful, regular arc that made Danuta think of a rainbow.

It must have been very old, because the parts exposed to the sun were covered with yellow and black lichen, the parts in the shade with thick moss. Danuta touched it delicately with her finger, but the bridge held up: it really seemed to be made of rock. Once she picked up some stones that seemed to her the right shape and tried to build a similar bridge, but of her size. There was no way; as soon as she put the third rock in place, and let go to grab the fourth, it fell down on her, and sometimes bruised her hands. She would have needed fifteen or twenty hands, one for each stone.

One day she asked Brokne how, when, and by whom the bridge had been built, but Brokne answered irritably that the world is full of mysteries, and if you wanted to solve them all you would no longer digest, you wouldn't sleep, and you might even go mad. That bridge had always been there; it was beautiful and strange, and so? Stars and flowers are beautiful and strange as well, and if you ask too many questions you end up forgetting that they're beautiful. He went to feed in another valley; grass was not enough for Brokne, and every so often, unbeknownst to Danuta, he quickly devoured a young poplar or a willow.

On a morning toward the end of summer, Danuta came upon a fallen beech: it couldn't have been knocked down by lightning, because the sun had been shining for days, and Danuta was sure that she herself hadn't inadvertently bumped into it. She approached, and saw that it had been cut cleanly: you could see on the ground the whitish disc of the stump, as wide as two of her fingers. As she gazed in astonishment, she heard a rustling, and saw, on the other side of the valley, another beech fall to the ground, disappearing among the neighboring trees. She descended and climbed up again, and saw a little animal fleeing at full speed toward the cliff where the caves were. It was upright and ran on two legs; it threw on the ground a shiny tool that was hindering its course, and ducked into the nearest cave.

Danuta sat beside the cave with her hands outstretched, but the little animal made no sign of coming out. It seemed to her graceful, and it must also be skillful if it had been able to cut down a beech by itself; suddenly Danuta was sure that it had built the bridge. She wanted to be friends, to speak to it, not drive it away. She stuck a finger in the opening of the cave, but she felt a prick and withdrew it immediately; there was a drop of blood on the tip. She waited until dark, then left, but she didn't tell Brokne about it.

The little creature must have had a great hunger for wood, because in the following days Danuta saw traces of it in various places in the valley. It preferred to cut down the biggest beeches, and you couldn't understand how it would manage to carry them away. On one of the first cold nights Danuta dreamed that the forest was in flames and she woke with a start; there was no fire but there was the smell of fire, and Danuta saw on the other slope a red glow that pulsed like a star. In the following days, when Danuta listened carefully, she could hear a minute, regular ticking, as when woodpeckers peck at bark, but slower. She tried to get closer to see, but as soon as she moved the noise stopped.

Finally one day Danuta was lucky. The little creature had become less timid, maybe he had got used to Danuta's presence, and often appeared between one tree and another, but if Danuta made any move to approach he ran away and hid among the rocks or the forest underbrush. Thus Danuta saw him set off toward the clearing at the watering hole; she followed him at a distance, trying not to make too much noise, and when she saw him out in the open she was on him, in two long steps, and had trapped him in the hollow of her hands. He was small but fierce: he had that shiny tool of his with him, and he struck Danuta's hands two or three times before she managed to pinch it between thumb and index finger and throw it far away.

Now that she had captured him, Danuta realized that she had absolutely no idea what to do with him. She picked him up, holding him between two fingers: he squealed, struggled, and tried to bite. Danuta, hesitant, laughed nervously and attempted to calm him by caressing his head with her finger. She looked around: in the stream there was a little island a couple of her steps away; she leaned over from the bank and set the little creature down there, but, as soon as he was free, he dashed into the current, and would certainly have drowned if Danuta hadn't hurried to fish him out. Then she brought him to Brokne.

Brokne didn’t know what to do with him, either. He grumbled that she really was an odd girl; the little beast bit, pricked, and wasn’t good to eat, Danuta should let him go, there was nothing else to do. Besides, night was falling, and it was time to sleep. But Danuta wouldn’t listen to reason; she had captured him, he was hers, he was intelligent and cute, she wanted to keep him to play with, and then she was sure he would become tame. She tried to offer him a tuft of grass, but he turned his head in the other direction.

Brokne sneered that he wasn’t very tame and that in prison he would die, and he lay down on the ground, already half asleep, but Danuta threw a terrible tantrum, and in the end they spent the night taking turns holding the little creature. One held him and the other slept; toward dawn the creature fell asleep, too. Danuta took advantage of his sleep to observe him calmly and from close up: he was really very lovely. His face, hands, and feet were tiny but well shaped, and he must be a child, because he had a small head and a slender body. Danuta was dying to hug him to her breast.

As soon as he woke he tried to escape, but after a few days he began to get slow and lazy. “Naturally,” said Brokne. “He won’t eat.” In fact the little creature refused everything, grass, tender leaves, even acorns and beechnuts. It couldn’t be that he was wild, for he drank greedily from the hollow of Danuta’s hand, as she laughed and wept with tenderness. Yet in a few days it became clear that Brokne was right: he was one of those animals who when they feel they are prisoners refuse food. On the other hand, Brokne and Danuta couldn’t go on like this, taking turns holding him in their hands day and night. Brokne had tried to make a cage, because Danuta wouldn’t agree to keep him in the cave; she wanted to have him before her eyes, and she was afraid that he might get sick in the dark.

Brokne had tried, but without success: he had pulled up some tall straight ashes, had replanted them in a circle, had put the little creature in the middle, and had tied the tops together with reeds, but his fingers were thick and awkward, and he had made a bad job of it. In a flash, the little creature, although weakened by hunger, had climbed up one of the trunks, found a gap, and jumped to the ground outside. Brokne said it was time to let him go where he wanted. Danuta burst into tears, and her tears softened the ground under her. The little creature looked up, as if he had understood, then he started running and disappeared among the trees. Brokne said, “It’s

best that way. You would have loved him, but he was too small, and in some way your love would have killed him.”

A month went by, and already the leaves of the beeches were turning crimson, and at night the stream covered the rocks with a thin layer of ice. Again Danuta was wakened in anguish by the smell of fire, and she shook Brokne to rouse him, because this time there was a fire. All around, in the light of the moon, innumerable threads of smoke could be seen, rising toward the sky, straight up into the still and frigid air: yes, like the bars of a cage, but this time they were the ones inside. Along the whole crest of the mountains, on both sides of the valley, fires were burning, and other fires peeped out, much closer, between the trunks of the trees. Brokne stood up roaring like thunder—there they are at work, those small, industrious builders of bridges. He seized Danuta by the wrist and dragged her toward the head of the valley, where the fires seemed to be sparser, but soon they had to turn back, coughing and weeping; the air was poisoned, they couldn’t get through. In the meantime, the clearing had become populated by animals of all species, gasping and frightened. The ring of fire and smoke kept getting closer. Danuta and Brokne sat down on the ground to wait.



Self-Control

The doctor at the health service hadn't taken him seriously. Not that he was stupid or in a hurry; he had examined him according to all the rules, had even had some tests done, and had told him that he was not sick. Of course, if you do a job that requires effort and responsibility, you feel tired at the end of your shift, it's only natural. Gino should get on with it, he was still young, he could advance from driver to inspector, or even, with a little luck and a bit of a leg up, join the administration and sit behind a desk. Not that that solves all your problems, but anyway.

It wasn't that Gino really wanted to be sick, but the conversation had left him unsatisfied. The fact is that when he got off work he felt a sort of weight on the right side, just under the ribs. The doctor had felt it and said it was the liver; it was neither swollen nor inflamed, it was a healthy liver, but it was there, everyone has one, and it may very well happen that if you have been standing for many hours, or sitting uncomfortably, you may become aware of it and feel its weight. Did he smoke, drink? No? He ought to calm down, not eat fried foods and not take too many medications: yes, because the liver is precisely what manages medications, it lets them through or not, it breaks them down after they've done their job (assuming they've done it), in such a way that they don't get into the bloodstream and cause trouble.

The liver is also what administers fats, that is, it manufactures the bile that's parked in the gallbladder and then, on demand, appears and passes into the intestine to cook the fats, so that the less fat one eats, the less bile is needed, and the less work the liver does. In essence, his liver was healthy, but he shouldn't make it do overtime. Gino liked fried foods and rich ones —too bad. He would keep an eye on his liver as one does with a car if one

wants it to last: regular washing and greasing, and a glance every so often at the electrical system, the fuel injectors, all the pumps, the battery, and the brakes.

Gino was a bus driver, on the 81 and the 84, which are noisy and difficult routes, but on all the urban routes it's more or less the same story. You're bored but you have to pay attention, which is a contradiction, and then, ever since they put in the machines and took away the conductor, you don't even have the diversion of exchanging a few words with him when you get to the end of the line and the bus is empty; plus you've got that annoyance of the pneumatic doors.

He drove, one eye on the street and one on the rearview mirror, and meanwhile he thought how complicated we are. Besides the liver, there's an infinity of contraptions. You get distracted, and you've had it; an organ stops, doesn't work anymore or doesn't work properly and starts doing things it shouldn't. Like Ernesta, who had neglected herself, got thyroid trouble, and couldn't sleep at night; instead she would sleep during the day, so he had made an application to move to the night shift, but with the head of personnel it was useless. So you had to pay attention to the thyroid as well.

He went to a bookstore, and bought a book, which he found interesting but somewhat confusing. For example, merely what you're supposed to eat is a problem, because, if you eat meat, your blood pressure rises and uric acid collects; if you eat bread and pasta, you become obese and live five years less than other people; and if you eat fats woe to the world. You can eat fruit, but at what cost; besides, Gino had tried it, and after three days he felt ill, and faint with hunger. But he couldn't tear himself away from the illustrations. To have so many things inside your skin was marvelous but also worrying. They could be seen from the front, in profile, and in cross-section, set precisely one inside the other with not even the tiniest empty space.

He thought of the engine compartment of his buses, and in comparison it was the work of a blockhead, so much space had been wasted, not to mention the heat, the noise, and the stink. But, upon closer inspection, he saw that the problem of symmetry had been resolved the same way there, that is, by a preoccupation with keeping up appearances: symmetrical from the outside, but inside not at all, just like us. The nice symmetrical stomach is a pleasure to look at, especially in women, but, inside, the liver is on the

right, the heart on the left, on the right the appendix; and under the hood the alternator is on one side and the air filter on the other. Anyway, it was sensible not to have too many scruples about aesthetics, since you almost never look inside, except when you open the hood or when you have an operation.

One great idea must have been the elimination of all the hinges and gears, that is, all the metallic material. We are made of soft stuff, except for our bones, and yet everything still functions. The stomach and the intestine, for example: they barely move, and yet food enters in one place, makes its round in silence, so that not even you are aware of it, and the waste comes out at the other end. Gino began to pay attention, especially at night, and gradually he realized that, yes, everything was moving, but smooth as clockwork.

The book also had a chapter on hormones and vitamins, and Gino felt uneasy. As for vitamins, okay, basically you just had to remember to eat tomatoes and lemons, and you won't get scurvy, but hormones? Not much to be done, you have to manufacture the hormones yourself. Who knows how and where, the book didn't say, maybe in the intestine with salvaged material, or maybe in the bone marrow, where blood is also manufactured. And how? A mystery; the book provided figures and formulas, they weren't simple structures, and yet even animals, children, and savages produce them.

They are manufactured by themselves: a fine explanation! And if the factory breaks down, or they come out defective? For example, the male hormone rather than the female, which, if you look at the formulas (strange but beautiful, all made of hexagons, like the beehive radiators that were once in use), are almost the same: well, my dear ladies and gentlemen, what if there is a mistake? A mere nothing would suffice, a moment of inattention, a detail neglected. In that little corner between the two hexagons you get a CO instead of a CHOH, as the plan shows, and, lo and behold, you find yourself a woman instead of a man, you become concave instead of convex, and maybe you even get a child. In short, you can never be attentive enough. You'll be in trouble if you get distracted, as at a traffic signal.

After a few weeks, Ernesta and his colleagues began to make fun of him, because he always had the book with him. He read it in all his free moments, at the end of the line, sometimes even at a stoplight when the

passengers weren’t looking. He finished it and then he started again from the beginning, and he always found new, alarming, and interesting things. He also talked about it with everyone, but then he stopped, because people told him he was crazy, a lunatic, as if they were made of air, as if they, too, didn’t have that arsenal inside to keep an eye on.

But it was laborious: more so every day. Every now and again Gino realized that he was forgetting to breathe; that is, he was drawing breath, but rapidly, without those refinements of oxygen and carbon dioxide, one toward the inside and the other toward the outside, and then he felt his hands and feet tingling, a sign that his blood was beginning to be polluted. In short, he had to remember where he was, and take a deep breath, twenty or thirty of them: one day it happened while he was on the job, and the passengers were looking at him but didn’t dare to say anything because the notice says, “Please do not speak to the driver.” Maybe the driver has dropped dead: but please don’t speak to him.

His brain, too, preoccupied him, though somewhat less: in fact, if Gino was worrying about it that meant that he was reasoning, that is, that his brain was functioning, and if it was functioning there was no reason to be worried. But he was worried just the same; he was like that. He was worried, for example, about forgetting what he knew: even if one doesn’t have a degree, one knows, altogether, quite a number of things, and all of them must be written inside the skull; if they are so numerous they must be written very small, and so the slightest thing could erase them. Who knows, an emotion, a small scare, a surprise, and you forget the alphabet, or maybe the traffic laws, so you have to take your driver’s test again.

The worst problem, of course, was the heart. Here it’s no joke, here you can’t ever go on holiday, from when you’re born to when you die. The brain can take a vacation—for example, when you sleep or when you get drunk or even when you’re driving the bus, because, once you’ve got the hang of it, you don’t need the brain anymore, in fact it drives while thinking about something else. Even the lungs can go on vacation for a few minutes; if not, how would scuba divers manage? But the heart no, never: it doesn’t have substitutes, it doesn’t have days off, it doesn’t have an end of the line. Terrible. No overhaul, no maintenance. On permanent duty. And yet even it must surely need some repairs, after thirty or forty years of activity. Evidently they’re done while it’s running: can you imagine, changing a valve or a piston on a diesel engine while it’s running?

In the end Gino really began to feel palpitations, as if his heart had stopped for a moment, and then started racing to catch up and get back on schedule. Even the doctor noticed, taking measurements with the tape on the electrocardiogram: there was an arrhythmia, undeniably. It wasn’t serious but it was there. Yes, he could continue to do his job, but he should take some medication and be a little more attentive. Definitely attentive. Gino now had trouble keeping up with the demands of the bus, how could one pay attention to the gas, the clutch, the steering wheel, the traffic signals, the lever for the doors, the bell for the stops, and at the same time monitor the heart and all the rest? One day, while he was slowing down for a stop, he felt the whole thing shake, he heard a clanking noise and people shouting. He had clipped a car parked along the sidewalk; luckily it was in a no parking area and no one was in it. But the company took him off driving and assigned him to office cleaning, which for someone with his seniority was a low blow.

At the same time there was no way of getting Ernesta on the phone: her sister, like a parrot that has learned its lesson, always said that Ernesta had just gone out and she didn’t know when she would be back. Gino realized that he was alone, and he felt like running away; he got his severance pay, packed his bag, and took the first train out.



Dialogue Between a Poet and a Doctor

The young poet hesitated a long time before ringing the bell. Was this appointment really indispensable? Were his friends in Rome and Milan right, who had extolled the almost miraculous virtues of the doctor, or were his father and mother right instead, who had tried to restrain him, and had not hidden their contempt and their shame, as if a conversation with a wise and experienced man were a stain on the family name? But for some years he had been suffering too much; he felt that he couldn't go on like this.

The doctor opened the door himself: he was uncombed, wearing slippers, and bundled into a worn, shapeless dressing gown. He had him sit at the desk; no, there was no need to lie on the couch, not for the moment. The doctor intimidated him, but from the start made a good impression—he wasn't self-important, he didn't use difficult words, he had tact and good manners. Maybe his untidy appearance was deliberate, so that the patients wouldn't feel uncomfortable. The poet felt embarrassed (but the doctor, too, seemed embarrassed) when the other asked cautiously for an account of his medical history: had he ever had X rays? ever had a corset prescribed? But then he had immediately changed the subject, or, rather, had let him come to the point.

Certainly he had no lack of words to describe his illness: he felt the universe (which he had studied with diligence and love) as an immense useless machine, a mill that was eternally grinding nothing, and to no end; not mute, in fact eloquent, but blind and deaf and closed to the pain of the human seed. Every one of his waking moments was saturated with this pain, his only certainty. He felt no joys but negative ones, that is, the brief respites from his suffering. He saw with pitiless clarity that this, and

nothing else, was the common fate of every thinking creature, so that he often envied the unconscious gaiety of birds and animals. He was sensitive to the splendor of nature, but in it he recognized a deception that every uncowardly mind was obliged to tolerate: no man endowed with reason could deny the knowledge that nature is to man neither mother nor teacher but a vast occult power that, objectively, rules to our common detriment.

At a question from the doctor, he admitted that he had occasionally experienced some relief from his anguish: besides the moments of negative joy he had mentioned before, he felt some relief late in the evening, when the darkness and silence of the countryside allowed him to devote himself to his studies, or, rather, to barricade himself within them as if in a fortress. “Of course—a warm, soft, dark fortress,” said the doctor, shaking his head in sympathy. The poet added that he had recently had a moment of reprieve during a solitary walk that had led him up a modest hill. Beyond the hedge that bounded the horizon he had grasped for a moment the solemn and tremendous presence of an open universe, indifferent but not hostile: it was only a moment, yet it had been filled with an inexplicable sweetness, which originated in the thought of a dissolving and melting in the transparent bosom of the void. It had been an illumination, so intense and new that for several days he had been trying in vain to express it in verse.

The doctor listened attentively; then, with professional courtesy, he asked for information about his relationships. The poet felt himself blushing: it was a subject he didn’t like to discuss with anyone, particularly with his parents, and not even with himself, except in the elevated language that he favored in his poems. To the doctor he said only that his human contacts were rare; none in the family, a few with some scholar friends, some timid and long-ago loves. He hesitated, then he added that his relationships with women were always painful. He fell in love often and intensely, but then he lacked the courage to reveal his feelings, because he was conscious of how unappealing his looks were. So his loves were solitary: in his working hours, or on long walks through the fields, he carried within himself a pure image, ideal, perfect, of the beloved woman, and he worshipped that instead of the woman of flesh and blood, whom he scarcely dared look at. From this division he suffered atrociously, so that sometimes he sought relief in a sort of irrational revenge. He wanted to punish the woman for the pain she had caused; in his thoughts, and sometimes in his poems, he accused her of being a deceiver, of trying to

appear in his eyes better than she was; of wanting to conquer him, bring him down, out of her ambitions as a hunter; of being unable (she and every other woman) to measure the effects of her beauty, since these effects are so overwhelming that they exceed the capacity “of their narrow minds.”[1] He had to admit it, love had always been for him a source of travail and not of joy; and without love what is the value of living?

The doctor didn’t insist. He tried to encourage him, reminding him that he was still young, that physical good looks count less than one might think, and that certainly he would meet a woman worthy of him, who would dispel his anguish in an instant. He thought for a moment, then said that perhaps that was enough for this visit, and that the poet’s case did not appear serious; he was hypersensitive rather than ill. A treatment based on support, repeated at intervals of a few months, would certainly diminish his suffering. He picked up his prescription pad and wrote two or three lines. “For the time being, try these, if you want. They’ll give you some relief, but follow the dose I’ve indicated.”

The poet went down the stairs and headed for the nearest pharmacy. As he walked, he stuck the hand holding the prescription in the pocket of his overcoat, and found some sheets of paper that he had forgotten. On them he had written some thoughts that had occurred to him a few days earlier, and that he had thought of expressing in verse. His hand, as if of its own accord, crumpled the prescription and threw it into the gutter that ran along the street.

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1. From Giacomo Leopardi’s “Aspasia.”

Children of the Wind

It is to be hoped that the Islands of the Wind (Mahui and Kaenunu) remain off the tourist routes for as long as possible. Besides, to fit them out wouldn't be easy: the terrain is so uneven that it would be impossible to build an airport, and no vessel larger than a rowboat can land along the coast. Water is scarce; in fact, some years there's none at all, so they have never held permanent human settlements. Yet Polynesian crews have often landed on them (perhaps also in remote times), and for some months during the last war a Japanese garrison stayed there. The only human traces that have been found on the islands go back to this ephemeral presence: on the highest point of Mahui, a low but steep rise of around a hundred meters, are the drywall ruins of an antiaircraft position. One could say that it never fired a shot: we have not found even a shell casing nearby. On Kaenunu, however, we did discover, wedged between two rocks, a whip, evidence of inexplicable violence.

Kaenunu today is in effect deserted. On Mahui, on the other hand, it's possible for someone armed with patience and endowed with good vision to spot some atoúla, or, more often, one of their females, a nacunu. Apart from the well-known cases of certain domestic animals, this is perhaps the only animal species in which the male and female are designated by different names, but that fact is explained by the clear sexual dimorphism which characterizes them, and is certainly unique among mammals. This singular species of rodent is found only on the two islands.

The atoúla—the males—are up to half a meter long and weigh from five to eight kilos. They have gray or brown fur, a very short tail, a pointed nose equipped with black vibrissae, and short triangular ears; their stomach is

bare, rosy, lightly covered by a sparse down, which, as we will see, is not without evolutionary significance. The females are somewhat heavier, and longer and more robust than the males; their movements are quicker and more confident, and, according to the reports of Malay hunters, their senses are more developed—above all, the olfactory. Their coat is entirely different: the nacunu, in all seasons, wear a flamboyant livery of glossy black, marked by four tawny stripes, two on each side, which run from the snout along the sides and join near the tail, which is long and thick and shades from tawny to orange, bright red, or purple according to the animal's age. While the males are almost invisible against the background of the stony ground where they spend their time, the females can be seen from a distance; this is also because their custom is to wag their tail like dogs. The males are dull and lazy, the women agile and active. Both are silent.

Coupling does not exist among the atoúla. In the season of love, which lasts from September to November, and thus coincides with the driest period, the males climb at sunrise to the top of the plateaus, and sometimes even the highest trees, competing to gain the most elevated positions. There they stay, without eating or drinking, for the whole day: they turn their backs to the wind and into the wind discharge their semen. This consists of a thin liquid, which in the warm, dry air evaporates quickly, and is spread by the wind in the form of a cloud of fine dust: every grain of this dust is sperm. We managed to collect some on glass plates smeared with oil; the sperm of the atoúla are different from those of all other animal species, and resemble, rather, the grains of pollen of anemophilous plants. They don't have a caudal filament; they are covered instead by tiny branching, tangled hairs, so that they can be carried by the wind for remarkable distances. On the return trip, we gathered some a hundred and thirty miles from the islands, and, to all appearances, they were vital and fertile. During the discharge of the sperm the atoúla don't move; sitting upright on their haunches, their front paws folded, they are shaken by a slight tremor whose function may be to accelerate the evaporation of the seminal fluid from the hairless surface of the stomach. When the wind changes suddenly (a frequent occurrence in those latitudes), you get the singular spectacle of innumerable atoúla, each one erect on its elevation, all simultaneously orienting themselves in the new direction, like the weathervanes that used to be placed on rooftops. They appear intent and tense, and do not react to stimuli: such behavior is explicable only if one recalls that these animals are

not threatened by any predator, which otherwise would easily get the better of them. Even the Malay hunters respect them. Some say it's because an ancient tradition considers them sacred to Hatola, the god of the wind, from whom, in fact, they got their name; according to others, it's simply because their flesh in this period would cause an unspecified intestinal illness.

During the season of dissemination, the extreme activity of the females contrasts with the stillness of the males. Guided by sight and by smell, they roam swiftly and restlessly over the open land; they don't attempt to get close to the males or travel, like them, to the higher places. They seem to be searching for the positions where the invisible rain of semen can best envelop them, and when they think they have found one they stop and voluptuously turn in circles, but only for a few minutes: immediately, with an agile leap, they tear off and resume their dance, up and down over the rocky places and the plain. During this time, the entire island swarms with the orange and violet flames of their tails, and the wind has a sharp, musky odor, stimulating and intoxicating, which throws all the animals of the island into an aimless tumult. The birds rise up screeching, fly around in circles, head madly toward the sky, and then drop like stones; the leaping mice, which normally can be glimpsed only on moonlit nights as tiny elusive shadows, come out into the open, dazzled and clumsy in the sun's brightness, and can be caught with your hands; even the snakes creep out of their dens as if hallucinating, rise on their coils and their tails, and wriggle their heads as if they were following a rhythm. We, too, in the brief nights that interrupted those days, experienced a restless sleep, full of bright-colored and indecipherable dreams. We could never establish whether the odor that pervades the island comes directly from the males, or if, rather, it is secreted by the inguinal glands of the nacunu.

Their pregnancy lasts around thirty-five days. Birth and lactation have no notable features; the nests, constructed from brush in the shelter of the rocks, are prepared by the males, and lined inside with moss, leaves, sometimes sand. Every male prepares more than one. When the females are close to giving birth, they choose a nest, examining several with care and hesitation, but without disputes. The "children of the wind" that are born, from five to eight per litter, are tiny but precocious. A few hours after birth, they go out into the sun; the young males immediately learn to offer their backs to the wind, like the fathers, and the females, although still without their livery, perform a comic parody of the mothers' dance. After just five

months, the atoúla and the nacunu are sexually mature, and already living in separate packs, waiting for the next season of wind to prepare their remote aerial marriages.

The Fugitive

To compose a poem that is worth reading and remembering is a gift of destiny; it happens to only a few people, without regard for rules or intentions, and to them it happens only a few times in their lives. Perhaps this is a good thing; if the phenomenon were more frequent, we would be drowning in poetic messages, our own and those of others, to the detriment of us all. To Pasquale, too, it had happened only a few times, and the awareness of having a poem in his mind, ready to be caught in flight and fixed on a page like a butterfly, had always been accompanied by a curious sensation, by an aura like that which precedes epileptic fits: each time, he had heard a faint whistle in his ears, and a ticklish shiver ran through him from head to foot.

In a few moments the whistle and the shiver disappeared, and he found himself clearheaded, with the core of the poem lucid and distinct; he had only to write it down, and, lo and behold, the other lines hastened to crowd around it, obedient and strong. In a quarter of an hour the work was done; but this flash, this instantaneous process in which conception and birth succeeded each other almost like lightning and thunder, had been granted to Pasquale only five or six times in his life. Luckily, he wasn’t a poet by profession; he had a tranquil, boring office job.

He felt the symptoms described above after two years of silence, as he was sitting at his desk, examining an insurance policy. In fact, he felt them with an unusual intensity: the whistle was penetrating and the shiver was a nearly convulsive tremor, which disappeared immediately, leaving him with a sensation of vertigo. The key verse was there before him, as if written on the wall, or, rather, inside his skull. His colleagues at the neighboring desks

didn’t notice anything. Pasquale concentrated fiercely on the sheet of paper in front of him. From the core the poem radiated out through all his senses like a growing organism, and soon it was before him; it seemed to be throbbing, just like a living thing.

It was the most beautiful poem that Pasquale had ever written. There it was, right before his eyes, without a correction, the handwriting tall, elegant, and smooth; it was almost as if the sheet of copy paper on which it was written had difficulty bearing its weight, like a column too slender beneath the burden of a giant statue. It was six o’clock. Pasquale locked the poem in his drawer and went home. It seemed to him that he deserved a reward, and on the way he bought himself an ice cream.

The next morning he rushed to the office. He was impatient to reread the poem, because he was well aware how hard it is to judge a newly written work: the value and the meaning, or the lack of value and meaning, become clear only the morning after. He opened the drawer and couldn’t see the page; and yet he was sure that he had left it on top of all the other papers. He dug around among them, frantically at first, then methodically, but he had to admit that the poem had disappeared. He searched the other drawers, and then he realized that the poem was right there in front of him, on the in-box tray. What tricks distraction plays! But how could he not be distracted, in the face of the essential work of his life?

Pasquale was certain that his future biographers would remember him for nothing else—only for that “Annunciation.” He reread it and was enthusiastic, almost in love. He was about to take it to the photocopying machine when the boss called him in; he kept him for an hour and a half, and when Pasquale returned to his desk, the copier was broken. By four o’clock the electrician had repaired it, but the photocopying paper was all used up. For that day there was nothing to be done; recalling the incident of the previous evening, Pasquale placed the sheet of paper in the drawer with great care. He closed it, then changed his mind and opened it, and finally he closed it again and left. The next day the piece of paper wasn’t there.

This business was becoming annoying. Pasquale turned all his drawers upside down, bringing to light papers that had been forgotten for decades; as he searched, he tried to retrieve in memory if not the whole composition

at least that first line, that nucleus which had enlightened him, but he couldn't; in fact, he had the precise sensation that he never would. He was different, different from that moment on: he was no longer the same Pasquale, and he never would be again, just as a dead man does not return to life, and you never put your foot in the same river twice. There was a nauseating metallic taste in his mouth, the taste of frustration, of nevermore. Disconsolate, he sat down in his office chair and saw the page stuck to the wall, to his left, a little distance from his head. It was obvious: some colleague had intended to play a tasteless trick. Perhaps someone had been spying on him and was on to his secret.

He seized the sheet of paper by one edge and detached it from the wall, encountering almost no resistance; the author of the trick must have used a poor-quality paste, or not used very much. He noticed that the other side of the paper was slightly grainy. He put it under his desk pad, and for the entire morning made excuses not to leave his desk, but when the noon whistle sounded and everyone got up to go to lunch, Pasquale saw that the sheet of paper was sticking out from under the desk pad by a good inch. He took it out, folded it in fourths, and put it in his wallet; after all, there was no reason not to take it home. He would copy it by hand, or take it to the copy shop; that would solve the problem.

He reread the poem in the evening as he was going home on the subway. Contrary to what he usually felt, it seemed perfect: not a line or a syllable had to be changed. Still, before showing it to Gloria, he would think about it. Everyone knows how a judgment can change even in a short time: Monday's masterpiece becomes insipid on Thursday, or even vice versa. He locked the sheet of paper in his private drawer, in the bedroom; but the following morning, when he opened his eyes, he saw it above him, stuck to the ceiling. Two-thirds of it was adhering to the plaster; the other third was hanging down.

Pasquale got the ladder and cautiously removed the piece of paper; again, when he felt it, the surface was rough, especially on the back. He touched it with his lips: there was no doubt, sticking out from the page were some tiny bumps, which seemed to be in rows. He took a magnifying glass and saw that it was so. Tiny hairs were sticking out from the page, corresponding to attributes of the letters on the other side. In particular, the extremities stuck out, the legs of the *d*'s and the *p*'s, and, above all, the little legs of the *n*'s and the *m*'s; for example, behind the title "Annunciation," the

eight legs of the four *n*'s could be clearly seen. They stuck out like the whiskers of a poorly shaved beard, and it seemed to Pasquale that they even vibrated slightly.

It was time to go to the office, and Pasquale was perplexed. He didn't know where to put the poem. He realized that, for some reason, perhaps precisely because of its uniqueness, because of the life that openly animated it, the poem was trying to escape, to get away from him. He decided to observe it from close up: never mind the office—for once he would be late. Under the magnifying glass he could see that some of the attributes of the letters were surrounded by a thin, clear inlay, in the form of a narrow, elongated *U*, and were folded back, toward the other side of the paper, in such a way that, if you placed the piece of paper on the surface of the desk, it remained elevated by a millimeter or two: he bent down to look, and could distinctly see the light between the page and the desktop.

And he saw something more: as he watched, the sheet of paper moved in the direction of the title, away from him. It advanced a few millimeters a second, with a slow but uniform and assured motion. He turned it around, so that the title faced away from him; after a few seconds the page took up its march, this time in reverse, that is, toward the opposite edge of the desk.

By now it was getting late. Pasquale had an important appointment at nine thirty, and he could delay no longer. He went to the storage closet, found a strip of plywood, got the paste, and pasted the wood on top of the piece of paper: "Annunciation" was his work, in the end—his thing, his property. It remained to be seen who was stronger. He went to the office in a rage, and was unable to calm down even in the course of delicate negotiations that he was in charge of, so that he conducted them in a rude and clumsy manner, and ended up with a deal that was decidedly mediocre, which, naturally, only increased his rage and ill humor. He felt like a racehorse yoked to a mill wheel: after two days of walking in a circle, are you still a racehorse? Do you still have the desire to run, to be first at the finish line? No, you have a desire for silence, rest, and the stable. Luckily at home, at the stable, the poem awaited him. It would no longer escape: how could it?

It had not in fact escaped. He found the remains of it stuck to the piece of wood: twenty little fragments, each no bigger than a postage stamp, for a total area no more than a fifth of the original sheet of paper. The rest of "Annunciation" had departed, in the form of scraps, tiny crumpled, frayed

shreds, which were scattered in all the corners of the house; he found only three or four, and though he smoothed them out carefully, they were illegible.

Pasquale spent the following Sunday in less and less reliable efforts to reconstruct the poem. From that time on, there were neither whistles nor shivers. He tried many times, during the rest of his life, to call to memory the lost text; in fact, at increasingly rare intervals, he wrote other versions of it, but they were increasingly thin, bloodless, and weak.

“Dear Mama”

A frontier post in Roman Britain: Vindolanda, near Hadrian’s Wall, was a Roman garrison from the first to the fifth century. Interment in the absence of oxygen preserved numerous objects of wood and leather, fabric and notes written in ink, among them a letter accompanying a gift package, which was addressed to a soldier and contained a pair of woolen socks.

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Dear Mama,

Please forgive me for not writing after the letter you sent in March of last year, which arrived just at the end of spring. In this country spring isn’t the way it is at home: here the seasons have no boundaries; it rains summer and winter, and when the sun does appear amid the clouds, it’s as tepid in summer as in winter. But it seldom appears.

I’ve put off answering you because the previous scribe died. After many years, and the many letters he’d written for me, we had become friends, and there was no need to explain every time who I am, who you are and where you live, where our village is and what it’s like, and everything that has to be known for a letter to speak the way a messenger would. The scribe who’s writing my words to you today arrived a short while ago. He is a wise and learned man, but he isn’t Latin or even a Briton, and he still doesn’t know much about how we live here, so I have to help him more than he helps me. He isn’t Latin, I was saying: he comes from Cantium, that is, from the south, but he has always worked in administration, and speaks and writes Latin better than I, who am forgetting it. He is also a skilled magus, and knows how to make the rain fall, but this is a job that even I would be able to do here, because it rains almost every day.

Dear Mama, in four years my service will be up and I'll be able to return to Italy, and then you can meet my wife. We were married last October. I hadn't dared to write to you until now because I was afraid you wouldn't be pleased. You should be, because Isidora is a good wife. Don't be deceived by her Greek-sounding name. She is from here and speaks no language except her own, but here, too, Greek names are considered elegant; besides, the scribe who's writing for me is explaining right now that "Isidora," according to him, doesn't mean anything in Greek, and I have asked him to put it in the letter, so you'll feel reassured.

It's really because of Isidora that I'm forgetting my Latin: all of us here in the garrison are forgetting it, because, married or not, we end up speaking the language of the Britons every day. Of course it's more practical, but the old men of the garrison say it's scandalous. So we end up in this ridiculous situation, where the scribe who writes to you has to correct me as if I were the barbarian rather than him. His name is Mandubrivo, and apart from writing letters he also keeps the accounts, because we aren't very good at that anymore, either. Every so often I think that this really is the land of forgetfulness, maybe even the very place Ulysses was when he forgot Ithaca and his wife, in the children's story. But I haven't forgotten our valley, our wine, the sheep among the patches of melting snow, everything so white and green, and the Arch of Cottius in the middle of town on holidays, when kissing girls in the street isn't a sin.

But I don't want to make you sad, dear Mama, and instead I'll cheer you up by telling you how I met Isidora. It was three years ago, the day of the summer solstice, which here is a holiday. We had all gone to the theater, all of us in the garrison and also the people from the town, I mean the important ones: herdsmen, wool and cheese wholesalers, wood merchants, contractors, mediators, bureaucrats, and priests. You should know that the circus—that is, the theater—was built more than a hundred years ago, at the time when being stationed here may have been less comfortable than now but made more sense, because there was war with the Velauni here beyond Hadrian's Wall. The actors and mimes came from Rome in those days; they danced, sang, and performed plays, and the organizers arranged games with animals. It was fun and felt like home. Then they stopped coming, because naturally while there's a war on a soldier's important, then he doesn't count much anymore. Now the local people do the theater, in their own way: they dance barefoot amid unsheathed swords, and have caber-tossing contests,

which is a spectacle for bears. (*I the scribe write this but I must protest. Tossing the caber is an ancient and noble art, which an untrained person cannot understand.*)

Caber tossing means lifting off the ground a stake that weighs a hundred pounds and is taller than the person: you run toward the goal with the stake held upright, as if pursuing it as it falls; then you stop clear of the goal and throw the stake as far as you can. To me it looked like a boring, stupid game, an activity for morons, which would seem ridiculous even to us in Val Susa, not just at the Colosseum; but Isidora, who was sitting next to me, clapped her hands, urged on the champions, calling them by name, and was having a great time, and so I immediately fell in love with her. She's a girl from a good family; her father has four hundred sheep and forty cows. So far, she hasn't given me any children, but she's a good wife, even if on wet days she tends to hypochondria, and then drinks a lot of beer.

As I've told you, she hasn't learned Latin, and doesn't want to, because she says that in a few years no one will speak it; so I've been obliged to learn her language, which is also an advantage in business and in getting supplies. You have to imagine that everything is different here from Italy: the grass, the sheep, the sea, the clothes, the houses, the dogs, the fish, the shoes; and so it becomes natural even for us to call things not by their Latin names but by the names they have here. Don't laugh if I tell you about the shoes: in a land of rain and mud like this, shoes are more important than bread, so that here in Vindolanda there are more tanners and shoemakers than soldiers. For three-quarters of the year, we wear nailed boots that weigh a good two pounds each—everyone, even women and children.

Besides the language, I've also learned from Isidora their games of patience, which are played with colored stones on a table painted in squares. I taught her to play dice, and then I got mad because she was always winning. After a while, I realized that the dice were loaded: I cut one open and inside was a core of lead that was off-center, so that it tended to fall on the one and the two. It was she who gave them to me, for my birthday. It was only a joke, but you can see that she's a sharp girl. Isidora seems to have a little too much sympathy for the Christians, although as far as I know she hasn't been baptized; she comes with me to the Mithraeum, I mean to the Cave of Mithras, and when they kill the bull for the sprinkling of the blood she stays to watch, and it seems to me that she doesn't dislike it, in fact I think she'll soon agree to be initiated.

Don’t be frightened by the news coming from the borders. There are terrible rumors going around here about what’s happening in the lands of the Dacians and the Parthians, and I’m sure that down there they’ll tell you that all the rest of us have been slaughtered. On the contrary, there is no land more peaceful than this: the sentinels almost never raise the alarm, and, when they do, it’s almost always a buck or a boar, which ends up roasted the next day. Imagine, last week one of my sentinels, a veteran with no less than ten years’ service at the frontier, woke up the camp for a wild goose, and so I had to have him flogged.

All we older men, married or not, are fairly well settled. Each of us has a small room, and all the rooms are in a row and connected by a corridor. In every room there’s a brazier, on which you can do your own cooking, and a porch; we use the brazier a lot and the porch very little. We also have a laundry and an infirmary for the sick. The wives are all Britons, so they don’t quarrel with one another; the children on the other hand do nothing but fight and roll in the mud, but the local people say that the mud is good for them; in fact, illnesses are rare.

Dear Mama, write and send me news of the village. The mail service is fairly good: your letters arrive in sixty days, and in a little more than sixty days your package arrived, too. This is the land of wool, but it’s not soft and clean like the wool you spin. I thank you with a son’s affection: every time I put on these socks, my thoughts will fly to you.

In Due Time

The streetlights were on, the evening traffic was getting more and more intense, but the lady gave no sign of leaving. She had made him pull out half the store, she wanted a length of a fabric that didn't exist in a color that didn't exist. Giuseppe was tired, by every measurement of every instrument on the panel. Tired of being on his feet, tired in his feet, tired of saying Yes, Ma'am, tired of selling fabric, tired of being Giuseppe, tired of being tired. On every dial he felt the needle incline toward the bottom of the scale, tired itself. Giuseppe was fifty, had been selling fabric since he was thirty, and had calculated that with the fabric he had sold you could make a suit for the Statue of Liberty and an outfit for the colossal statue of San Carlo in Arona.

The lady wanted to take another look at the bottom bolt in a pile of bolts, and Giuseppe was doing his best to get it out, when he was called to the telephone. This almost never happened, and Giuseppe was curious rather than worried: it was a male voice asking for an appointment. What for? On a matter that concerned him: yes, it concerned him, Giuseppe N., born in Pavia, October 9, 1930. It seemed that the unknown person knew not only his vital statistics but also several things about him. Was it urgent? It wasn't urgent; yes, Monday morning would be fine. Giuseppe patiently finished up with the client and helped close the shop.

Monday morning the shop was closed, and Giuseppe got up late. The stranger arrived at ten thirty: he was of average height, about fifty; his hair was black on top but white at the nape and the temples, and he wasn't very well educated or polite, and in fact he sat down before Giuseppe asked him to. He wore a dark-blue suit of a vaguely military cut, narrow at the waist, with shoulder pads, and large pockets everywhere: two, long and narrow,

were in his pants below the knees, two more were under the lapels of the jacket, and onto one of these was sewed another, smaller pocket, perhaps for tram or train tickets. To Giuseppe, who knew about such things, the material seemed to be of good quality, but he couldn't identify its nature; maybe it was synthetic, these days you never know, wool is made of acrylic and steaks are made of petroleum.

The visitor remained seated; he didn't speak or show any impatience, and he didn't even seem to be waiting for Giuseppe to say or do something. For a few minutes Giuseppe didn't dare ask any questions, and he took the time to observe the man more carefully. He wasn't very good-looking: he had a low, shapeless forehead, small, dull eyes, with hardly any lashes, and a short, broad nose. His jaw, too, was broad and strong, and so were his teeth, but they were small and seemed worn, so that the cheeks were wrinkled and sunken, and didn't correspond to the age that the rest of his person showed. Giuseppe felt increasingly embarrassed and irritated: he had asked for an appointment, said he had to talk to him; why didn't he talk?

After a few minutes the visitor sighed, then said:

"Really, these times! Even the seasons have gone crazy—it's winter till May, then suddenly it's summer." He was silent again, looked out the window, and then resumed: "And the young people, too . . . all they think about is having fun; they don't think about studying at all, much less about working. If things go on like this, we'll be in trouble—oh no, they can't go on like this. It used to be different, everyone did his duty, maybe there was a little less to eat, but there was more certainty than there is now, even if you got around on a bicycle instead of in a car."

"But you," Giuseppe interrupted, "you said on the phone that you had to speak to me . . ."

"That's not exactly what I said, if you recall: I said only that I am informed about a matter that concerns you, or something of the sort. Yes, in fact I don't remember exactly what I might have said, but anyway . . . Yes, well, I know quite a few things about you. I don't remember what I told you Friday evening, and yet I remember what happened when you were five. Strange, isn't it? But it happens to an extent with all of us when we get old. The time you slipped on a frozen puddle, and the ice broke, and you injured your ankle on a splinter of ice. You don't remember? Strange. And yet you still have the scar, over on the right." Giuseppe looked at his ankle: yes, the scar was there, but he'd forgotten years ago how and when he had got it.

“Just so you know that I’m well informed. And the time you went into your mother’s room without asking permission, and saw her putting on her stockings? And then, many years later, when you stole your colleague’s girlfriend, there in the shop? But you soon got tired of her and left her, and she came to a bad end.”

All these things were true, but the visitor was recounting them with a vague, distracted air, as if he were doing his best to waste time. Giuseppe grew impatient, and asked abruptly, “Well, what do you want from me?”

“I’ve come to kill you,” the visitor answered.

Giuseppe, although he was tired of many things, was not ready to die. Someone who is tired of life, or who says he is, doesn’t necessarily want to die; in general, he wants only to have a better life. He said this to the stranger, but the man answered harshly:

“You know, what you want or don’t want counts only up to a certain point. Don’t think it’s my initiative; these things are decided elsewhere. I have nothing to do with it, and I can’t even say that I much like my job. I like it more or less the way you like yours, if you see what I mean. But it’s my job, I don’t have another one; at my age, which is yours, besides, it’s not so easy to change.”

“And . . . why me? And when? Now? In other words, since I’m the interested party, I’d like to know a little more.”

“My, you really are something! Why, when, how, where! Do you have connections? Are you the relative of somebody important? Do you have a bank account in Zurich? No? Well, then! Of course, we’d all like to know certain things, but we can’t: people like you (or like me, in fact; when we’re off duty we’re just doormats, too) have to accept it, settle down and wait, and live from day to day, hoping it’s not the last day. But look, one thing I can tell you, nothing’s going to happen today. See, I’m not even armed: this is only a warning, in case you want to take some measures. This doesn’t depend on us, either; we’re waiting, too, and when the deadline comes we go and arrange things.”

That mention of weapons had made Giuseppe a little uneasy, but the visitor reassured him: “I said ‘armed’ as a manner of speaking. No, no, look, I’m not carrying a gun or a knife, those are things of the past. These pockets? I keep pens, pencils, notebooks for remittances and receipts, you know, in our work we have to be precise. If you get a date or an address wrong, there’s trouble. It shouldn’t ever happen, with all the checking we

have to do at the end of the day, yet sometimes it does happen, and then people make remarks like ‘So young, in his prime, in perfect health,’ and so on, and for us there’s a penalty. No, no—no weapons, we have other methods now.”

“Painless methods?” Giuseppe dared to ask. The stranger gave an odd little laugh, uncrossed his legs, and held out an envelope.

“There, that’s really the point: I was waiting for you to get it. You see, there are various methods, a year doesn’t pass when a new one doesn’t come out, and the more recent are practically painless. However . . . well, they are rather expensive.” Having said this, the stranger clenched his powerful jaws, so that his flabby cheeks sagged in a complicated network of lines, and was silent, staring Giuseppe in the face. It didn’t take much to understand what he meant, but Giuseppe wasn’t sure how much to offer; he couldn’t imagine even the order of magnitude. The other interrupted coolly: it was clear that it wasn’t the first time he’d been in this situation, and it was also clear that he had a good idea about how much capital Giuseppe had available. Smiling, he murmured that “shrouds don’t have pockets,” and that it was money well spent. He put the check in his pocket in a dignified manner, told Giuseppe that he would be back in due time, asked how far away Via Flavio De Rege was, had him call a taxi, and left.

Tantalum

For many years now I have been engaged in the manufacture of paints and, more precisely, their formulation: from this art I earn my sustenance and support my family. It's an ancient and noble art; the earliest reference appears in Genesis 6:14, where it is related how, in obedience to an exact specification on the part of the Almighty, Noah (probably using a brush) covered the Ark, inside and out, with pitch. But it's also a subtly fraudulent art, which tends to hide the substratum, endowing it with the color and the appearance of what it is not; in this it is related to the arts of makeup and costume, which are equally equivocal and equally ancient (Isaiah 3:16ff).

The most varied demands are constantly being made on those who practice this profession of ours: paints that do not conduct electricity and paints that do, paints that transmit heat or reflect it, that keep mollusks from adhering to hulls, that absorb sound, or that can be removed from a surface like the peel from a banana. People require paints that keep feet from slipping, as for airport steps, and others as slippery as possible, as for the bottoms of skis. We are therefore a versatile people, with vast experience, who are accustomed to both success and the lack of it, and are difficult to surprise.

Nonetheless, we were surprised by a request that came from our agent in Naples, Signor Amato Di Prima. He was pleased to inform us that an important client in his area had experimented with a paint that provided protection from misfortune, and would profitably replace horn amulets, hunchbacks, four-leaf clovers, and charms in general. It had not been possible to glean other information, except for the price, which was very high; he had, however, managed to obtain a sample, which he had already

sent by mail. Given the exceptional interest of the product, he urgently beseeched us to devote the greatest attention to the problem, declared his faith in a quick response, and extended his most sincere greetings.

This business, of the miraculous sample that arrives in the mail, along with an urgent prayer to devote, etc. (that is, without resorting to euphemism, to copy it), is part of our work, and constitutes perhaps its most obscure aspect. We would like to do things our own way: make our own choice, of a refined and elegant problem, take off on the hunt, sight the solution, pursue it, corner it, spear it, strip it of everything inessential, make it in the laboratory, then manufacture it on a small scale, and finally go into full production and get money and glory from it. But that almost never happens. There are many of our kind in this world, and our colleagues and rivals in Italy, in America, in Australia, in Japan are not exactly dozing. We are awash in samples, and would happily yield to the temptation to throw them away or return them to the sender, were it not for the consideration that our own products suffer the same fate, becoming, in their turn, marvelous, being shrewdly seized and smuggled out by the agents of our competitors, scrutinized, analyzed, and copied: some badly, others well—by the addition, that is, of a particle of originality and genius. Thus begins an endless network of espionage and cross-fertilization, which, illuminated by solitary creative flashes, constitutes the foundation of technological progress. In short, the samples of the competition cannot be thrown out with the dregs; one must see what's there, even if the professional conscience puts up a struggle.

The paint that came from Naples, at first glance, did not display any special property: appearance, odor, drying time were those of a common clear acrylic enamel, and the whole business stank of a hoax. I telephoned Di Prima, who was indignant: he was not the type to send samples around just for fun, and that one in particular had cost him time and trouble—the product was extremely interesting and in his market he was having incredible success. Technical documentation? It didn't exist, there was no need for it, the effectiveness of the product spoke for itself. A fishing boat had been coming back with empty nets for three months—they had painted its hull and ever since it had been netting spectacular catches. A typographer had mixed the paint with printing ink: the ink didn't go as far, but the typographical errors had disappeared. If somehow we were unable to use it, we should tell him immediately; otherwise, we should get busy

with it. The price was 7000 lire a kilo, which seemed to him a good profit margin, and he would undertake to sell at least 20 tons a month.

I talked about it with Chiovatero, who is a serious and capable fellow. At first he turned up his nose, then he thought about it, and proposed starting simply; that is, trying the paint on cultures of *E. coli* bacteria. What did he expect? That the cultures would multiply more than the controls or less? Chiovatero was annoyed, and told me that it was not his habit to put the cart before the horse (implying by this that it was my habit, which, for goodness' sake, is absolutely not true), that it remained to be seen, that you had to start somewhere, and that "the load adjusts along the way." He obtained the cultures, painted the outside of the test tubes, and we waited. None of us were biologists, but no biologist was needed to interpret the results. After five days, the effect was obvious: the protected cultures had developed in size at three times the rate of the controls, which we had coated with an acrylic ostensibly similar to the one from Naples. We had to conclude that this paint "brought good luck" even to microorganisms; an irritating conclusion, but, as has been authoritatively stated, facts are obstinate. A more thorough analysis was required, but everyone knows what a complex and uncertain enterprise the examination of a paint is, almost like that of a living organism. All those fantastic modern devices—the infrared spectrum, the gas chromatograph, NMR—are helpful to a point but leave many angles unexplored; and if you aren't lucky enough to have a metal as the key component, all you can do is use your nose, like a dog. But in this case there was a metal—an unusual metal, so unusual that no one in the laboratory knew from experience how it reacted. We had to burn almost the entire sample to obtain a quantity sufficient for identification; but finally we did so and the metal was duly confirmed, with all its characteristic reactions. It was tantalum, a very respectable metal, with a name full of meaning, never before seen in paint, and thus surely responsible for the property that we were looking for. As always happens once you've made a discovery and confirmed it, the presence of tantalum, and its specific function, began to seem gradually less strange, and, finally, natural, just as no one is surprised anymore by X rays. Molino pointed out that the most acid-resistant reaction vessels are made with tantalum; Palazzoni recalled that tantalum is used to make surgical prostheses that absolutely can't be rejected; and so we concluded that it is an obviously beneficial metal, and

that we had been foolish to waste so much time on analyses. With a little common sense we should have been able to think of it right off.

In a few days we got a soap of tantalum, put it in some paint, and tried it on the *E. coli*: it worked, the goal was achieved.

We, in turn, sent a large sample of paint to Di Prima, so that he could distribute it to his customers and give us an opinion. The opinion arrived two months later, and was highly favorable. He, Di Prima, had painted himself from head to foot, and then spent four hours under a ladder, on a Friday, in the company of thirteen black cats, without coming to any harm. Chiovatero also tried it, albeit reluctantly (not because he was superstitious; rather, because he was skeptical), and he had to admit that a certain effect was undeniable: in the two or three days after the treatment, all the traffic lights he came to were green, he never got a busy signal on the telephone, his girlfriend made up with him, and he even won a modest prize in the Lottery. Naturally it all came to an end after he took a bath.

As for me, I thought of Michele Fassio. Fassio is an old schoolmate of mine to whom mysterious powers had been attributed since adolescence. He was blamed for endless disasters, from failed exams to a bridge collapse, an avalanche, even a shipwreck; all due, in the stupid opinion of first his fellow students and later his colleagues, to the penetrating power of his evil eye. I, of course, didn't believe this nonsense, but I confess that I often tried to avoid running into him. Fassio, poor fellow, ended up believing it himself, in a way; he never married and he led an unhappy life, of privation and solitude.

I wrote to him, with all the delicacy I was capable of, that I didn't believe in this type of foolishness, but that he might; that, as a result, I couldn't believe in the remedy I was proposing, but it seemed to me that I owed it to him to mention it just the same, if only to help him recover his self-confidence. Fassio answered that he would come as soon as possible: he was willing to submit to a trial. Before proceeding with the treatment, and at the urging of Chiovatero, we tried to understand in some degree Fassio's powers. We managed to ascertain that in fact his gaze (and only his gaze) possessed a specific effect, noticeable under certain conditions even in the case of inanimate objects. We asked him to stare for several minutes at a particular point on a steel plate, which we then placed in the salt-spray chamber; after a few hours we noted that the point Fassio had stared at was clearly more corroded than the rest of the surface. A polyethylene thread,

stretched tight, consistently broke at the point where Fassio's gaze hit it. To our satisfaction, both results disappeared when we coated the plate and the thread with our paint, or when we interposed between subject and object a glass screen previously coated with it. We were further able to ascertain that only Fassio's right eye was active; the left, like both of my eyes, and like Chiovatero's, exercised no measurable action.

With the means at our disposal, we were unable to carry out a spectral analysis of the Fassio effect except in a crude way; it is probable, however, that the radiation under examination has a maximum in the blue, with a wavelength of around 425 nm. Our comprehensive paper on the subject will be out in a few months. Now, it is known that many of those who wish to cast the evil eye wear blue-tinted lenses, and not dark ones, and this can't be a coincidence but must be the fruit of long experience absorbed perhaps unconsciously and then handed down from generation to generation, as in the case of certain folk remedies.

Considering the tragic conclusion of our tests, I have to explain that the idea of painting Fassio's eyeglasses (they were ordinary reading glasses) was neither mine nor Chiovatero's but came from Fassio himself, who insisted that the experiment be made right away, without even an hour's delay: he was very impatient to be released from his grim power. We painted these glasses. After thirty minutes, the paint was dry. Fassio put them on and immediately fell lifeless at our feet. The doctor, who arrived soon afterward, tried in vain to revive him, and spoke vaguely of embolism, heart attack, and thrombosis: he couldn't have known that the lens over Fassio's right eye, concave on the inside, must have instantaneously reflected that thing which he could no longer transmit, and concentrated it, as if with a burning glass, on a point situated in some unspecified but important corner of the right cerebral hemisphere of the unhappy and blameless victim of our experiments.

Sisters of the Swamp

Gentle sisters, I wouldn't claim the right to address you if I weren't compelled by the gravity of the moment, and by the tenuous authority that comes to me from being the oldest among you and the oldest inhabitant of this swamp.

You know how much Providence has favored us up to now. In my long life I've known very different swamps, solitary and remote swamps, which a warm-blooded creature entered only on occasion and by exception, so that the wretched tenants considered themselves content when they could steal a drop of blood from the frogs or the fish—cold, slimy, thin blood. I've seen other swamps, visited by savage, fierce people, who protested against our bite, even though it's as light as a kiss, and pulled our defenseless bodies off themselves, unconcerned if in doing so they tore them, and perhaps at the same time tore their own skin. It's different here, or until now it has been: don't forget that.

Don't forget the generous and subtle design of Providence, which forces the Peasant to ford these waters twice a day, to reach his fields at dawn and return home in the evening. And remember also that the Peasant's constitution could not be better suited to us, since he has been endowed by nature with a rough, thick skin, insensitive to our prick; a simple and patient mind; and, at the same time, blood miraculously rich in vital nutrients.

It's about this blood that I must speak to you, my silent and pious sisters. Ours, as you know, is a well-ordered republic: to each of us, according to our deserts and our needs, our Assembly has assigned a carefully chosen and limited area of the Peasant's skin, and it has been kind enough to assign to me, your Elder, the hollow of the knees, where the skin

is thinnest, and where the popliteal vein pulses close to the surface. Now, certainly you will not have forgotten what we are taught in the first years of school, and that is that this vein is the most accurate gauge of the blood pressure in a man's body. Well, no more compassionate lies, dear sisters: this pressure is rapidly falling. We, all of us, have overstepped the mark, and it's time to take measures.

Understand me: I do not wish to reproach you, I who have been ahead of you all, the greediest of all; but hear what I have to say. Merciful God has called on me to change my life, and I will change it, I have already changed it; may He do likewise with you.

It's not a reproach, I tell you; only a fool could doubt that it is our natural right to suck blood, from which our race gets, above all, its name and its glory. Not only a right but a clear and strict necessity, given that our bodies, in millions of years of addiction to this essential nutriment, have lost all capacity to search, capture, digest, and assimilate any inferior substance; that our muscles are so weakened as to prohibit the slightest effort; and that our brains—which attain perfection if we turn to the contemplation of the Entelechy, the Paraclete, and the fifth Essence—are, on the other hand, dull and unfit for the trivialities of concrete action.

We are thus incapable of procuring for ourselves any substance more unrefined than blood: all other nourishment, besides, would be poison for us, who, unique in Creation, have been able to free ourselves from the necessity of evacuating daily wastes from our intestinal canal, because our miraculous food neither contains nor generates waste. Isn't this the most eloquent sign of our nobility? Who could refuse to acknowledge in us the crowning achievement and height of Creation?

Our bloodsucking is therefore necessary and good, but it's foolish to overdo it, as every excess is foolish. It has been painful to me to note how some among you are in the habit of gorging yourselves to the point of jeopardizing our envied capacity for swimming halfway out of the water, so that you are reduced to floating inert, with your stomach indecently swollen, until your laborious digestion is completed. And that's not all, for I've learned of some who died from the sudden cracking of the integuments.

Yet this is not what I would speak of. These transgressions, if shameful, are of individual interest, and are followed by natural and hence just sanctions. No, I mean to warn you of a much more serious danger: if we

persist in our error, if we continue to satisfy ourselves today without thinking of our tomorrow, what will become of us? Who or what will we suck when the Peasant becomes bloodless? Will we return to the unpleasant serum of carp and toads? Will we suck one another? Or will we see ourselves forced to pass through an eternity of hunger, darkness, and premature death, waiting, that is, for evolution to renew us (at what cost, sisters!), restoring to us the positive and active faculties that today we detest and mock in the vile species on which we are nourished, such as beavers and men?

Therefore I urge you, meek sisters: revive your sense of proportion and your horror of the sin of gluttony. Never has the survival of the Peasant, and hence our own, been dependent on your restraint as it is today, on the moderation you will learn to display as you exercise your right.

A Will

My beloved son, the signs that my mortal life is coming to an end will not have escaped you: the blood runs pale and slow through my veins, the strength I once had in my wrists is failing. You will find this letter among my papers, together with a holographic will; this, too, is a will. Do not be deceived by its brevity. Every word you read is saturated with experience; I have erased, one by one, the meaningless words, with which I was so prodigal in life.

I have no doubt that you will follow in my footsteps, and become a tooth-puller as I was, and as your forefathers were before me. If you don't, it would be a second death for me, and a mistake for you: no other art in existence comes close to ours in relieving the pain of humans, and in grasping their valor, their vices, and their vileness. It's my intention here to tell you of its secrets.

CONCERNING TEETH. In his wisdom God created man in His image and likeness, as you read in the Sacred Scriptures: observe, in His likeness, not His identity. The human figure differs from the divine in some aspects, and primary among these is the teeth. God has endowed man with teeth more corruptible than any other part of him so that he doesn't forget that he is dust, and so that our profession may prosper. Note, therefore, that the tooth-puller who abandons his office is an abomination to God, in that he gives up a privilege bestowed by Him.

Teeth are made of bone, flesh, and nerve; they are divided into molars, incisors, and canines; a nerve joins the canines to the eyes; in the most recessive molars, which are the wisdom teeth, there often lurks a nasty little

worm. You can find these and other qualities of the teeth described in the lay books, and there's no need for me to dwell on them here.

CONCERNING MUSIC. That Orpheus with his lyre tamed the beasts and the demons of the abyss, and calmed the waves of the stormy sea, you will have learned from your teachers. Music is necessary to the practice of our work: a good tooth-puller must bring with him at least two buglers and two drummers, or rather two bass drum players, and it's good if they all wear splendid livery. The more energetic and robust the fanfare that spreads through the square where you work, the more respected you will be, and by so much your patient's pain will diminish. You must have noticed this as a child, watching my daily work: the cries of the patient are no longer heard, the public admires you devoutly, and the clients who await their turn lose their secret fears. A tooth-puller who works without a brass band is as unseemly and vulnerable as a naked human body.

Now listen to what I tell you in my dying prediction: a day will come when this marvelous quality of music will be rediscovered by the proud and foolish class of doctors, and they will adduce subtle arguments to explain the physical reason. Beware of doctors: in their pride they disdain the fruit of our experience, and barricade themselves as if in a fortress with the sterile dictates of their Aristotle. Avoid them, as they avoid us.

CONCERNING ERRORS. Don't forget, son, that to err is human, but to admit one's error is diabolical; on the other hand, remember that our profession, by its intrinsic nature, is prone to errors. You will therefore try to avoid them, but in no event confess to having extracted a healthy tooth; rather, take advantage of the din of the orchestra, of the stunned patient and his very pain, his cries, and his convulsive agitation, to immediately extract the diseased tooth. Remember that a quick and direct blow to the back of the head quiets the more unruly patient without suffocating his vital spirits and without being perceived by the audience. Remember as well that, in these circumstances or other, similar ones, a good tooth-puller always takes care to have his carriage ready, not far from the stage, with the horses harnessed.

CONCERNING PAIN. May God keep you from becoming insensitive to pain. Only the worst of us are so hardened that we laugh at our patients when they suffer at our hands. Experience will also teach you that pain, though perhaps not the only information of the senses that can be doubted, is certainly the least dubious. It's likely that that French sage whose name escapes me and who declared that he was certain he existed inasmuch as he was sure he was thinking didn't suffer much in his life, because otherwise he would have constructed his edifice of certainties on a different foundation. In fact, often those who think aren't sure they're thinking, their thought wavers between awareness and dream, it slips between their fingers, refuses to be grasped and fixed on the page in the form of words. But those who suffer, yes, those who suffer have no doubts, those who suffer are, alas, always certain, certain they are suffering and *ergo* exist.

It's my hope that you will become a master in our art, and will never have to be the passive object of it; but if ever it should happen to you, as it did to me, the pain of your flesh will provide you with the brutal certainty of being alive—you'll have no need to draw on the springs of philosophy. Therefore hold this art in esteem: it will make you a minister of pain, it will make you the arbiter of bringing an end to a long-term pain of the past by means of a short-term pain in the present, and of preventing a long-term pain of tomorrow, thanks to the ruthless stabbing inflicted today. Our adversaries mock us, saying that we are good at transforming pain into profit. Fools! This is the highest praise of our mastery.

CONCERNING SMOOTH TALK. Smooth talk, also called salesmanship, leads clients who are wavering between current pain and fear of the forceps to a decision. It is of the highest importance: even the most inept tooth-puller manages well or badly to pull out a tooth; excellence in the art is, instead, manifested fully in smooth talk. This should be uttered in a loud, firm voice and with a cheerful, serene expression, as of one who is sure, and spreads assurance around him; but, apart from this, there are no set rules. According to the mood you detect among the bystanders, it can be playful or serious, noble or vulgar, verbose or concise, subtle or crass. In any case it should be mysterious, because man fears clarity, mindful perhaps of the sweet obscurity of the womb and of the bed in which he was conceived. Remember that the less your listeners understand you, the greater the trust they will have in your wisdom, and the more music they

will hear in your words: that's how the common folk are made, and the world is nothing if not common.

Therefore weave into your patter words from France and Spain, German and Turkish, Latin and Greek, no matter if they're fitting or pertinent; if you don't have any ready, get used to coining new ones on the spot, ones that have never been heard before; and don't be afraid that an explanation will be asked for, because that never happens—not even the fellow who climbs confidently onto your platform to have a molar pulled will find the courage to interrogate you.

And never, in your discourse, call things by their name. Don't say "teeth," but "mandibular protuberances," or some other oddity that comes to mind; not "pain" but "paroxysm" or "erethism." Don't call money money, and you certainly won't call the forceps a forceps; rather, don't name it at all, not even by allusion, and don't let either the public or, especially, the patient see it, keeping it hidden in your sleeve until the last minute.

ON LYING. From what you've read up to now, you will be able to deduce that lying, a sin for others, is a virtue for us. The lie is one with our profession: for us it's proper to lie, with our tongue, our eyes, our smile, our dress. Not only to deceive our patients; we aim higher, you know, and our real strength is in our lies, not in our wrists. With lying, patiently learned and piously practiced, if God helps us we will reach the point of ruling this country and perhaps the world; but this will happen only if we learn to lie better and for a longer time than our adversaries. You may see this, not I. It will be a new golden age, in which only in cases of extreme need will we still be persuaded to pull teeth, while pious lying, exercised by us to perfection, will be abundantly sufficient for the governing of the state and the administration of the republic. If we prove capable of this, the empire of the tooth-pullers will extend from east to west, to the most remote islands, and will never end.

PRESENT INDICATIVE

The Sorcerers

Wilkins and Goldbaum had been away from their base camp for two days: they had been trying, in vain, to record the dialect of the Siriono[1] of the east village, on the other side of the river, ten kilometers from the camp and from West Siriono. They saw the smoke and immediately started back; it was a dense black smoke, and it rose slowly into the evening sky, in the very direction where, with the help of the natives, they had built their wood-and-straw huts. They reached the riverbank in less than an hour, forded the muddy stream, and saw the disaster. The camp was no longer there: only smoking embers and scraps of metal, ashes and unidentifiable charred remains.

The village of West Siriono, five hundred meters away, was on a bend in the river. The Siriono were waiting for them, in great excitement; they had tried to put out the fire, drawing water from the river using their crude pots and some buckets, a gift of the two Englishmen, but hadn't managed to salvage anything. Sabotage was unlikely: their relations with the Siriono were good, and, besides, the Siriono weren't that familiar with fire. Probably the generator had backfired—they had left it on during their absence to keep the refrigerator going—or perhaps it had short-circuited. Anyway, the situation was serious: the radio no longer functioned, and the nearest town was a twenty-day walk through the forest.

Up to that point the two ethnographers' contacts with the Siriono had been limited. Only through hard work, and by the corrupting influence of two cans of corned beef, had they managed to overcome the distrust of Achtiti, who was the most intelligent and curious man in the village. He had consented to answer their questions, speaking into the microphone of the

tape recorder. But rather than a necessity or a job, it had been an academic game: Achtiti, too, had taken it that way, and had obviously found it entertaining to teach the two men the names of the colors, of the trees that surrounded the camp, of his friends, and of his women. Achtiti had learned a few words of English, and they a hundred-odd words with a harsh, indistinct sound, and when they tried to reproduce them, Achtiti beat his stomach with both hands in delight.

It was no longer a game. They did not feel capable of following a Siriono guide on a twenty-day march through a forest saturated with putrid water. They would have to explain to Achtiti that he must send a messenger to Candelaria with a letter from them, in which they asked for a motorboat to come up the river to get them, and bring the messenger back to the tribe. It would not be easy to explain to Achtiti even what a letter was. In the meantime, there was nothing to do but ask the Siriono for their hospitality for three or four weeks.

As for hospitality, there were no problems: Achtiti immediately understood the situation, and offered the men a straw pallet, and two of the peculiar Siriono blankets, painstakingly woven from palm fibers and magpie feathers. They put off the explanations till the next day and slept deeply.

The following day, Wilkins prepared the letter for Suarez in Candelaria. He had the idea of drafting it in two versions, one written in Spanish for Suarez and one ideographic, so that both Achtiti and the messenger could get an idea of the purpose of the mission and put aside their evident suspicion. The second version showed the messenger himself walking southwest, along the river; twenty suns were intended to represent the length of the journey. Then came the city: tall huts, and among them many men and women in trousers and skirts and with hats on their heads. Finally, there was a bigger man, pushing the motorboat into the river, with three men on board and sacks of provisions, and the boat going back up the river; in this last image, the messenger was on board, stretched out and eating from a bowl.

Uiuna, the messenger chosen by Achtiti, examined the drawings carefully, asking for explanations with gestures. Was it in the direction that he was pointing to on the horizon? And the distance? Finally he loaded a knapsack of dried meat on his back, took his bow and arrows, and set off barefoot, rapid and silent, with the undulating gait of the Siriono. Achtiti

made solemn gestures with his head, as if to say that they could have confidence in Uiuna: Goldbaum and Wilkins looked at each other in bewilderment. It was the first time that a Siriono had traveled so far from the village and gone to a city, insofar as Candelaria, with its five thousand inhabitants, could be considered a city.

Achtiti had food brought to them: shrimp from the river, raw, four each, two japara nuts, and a big fruit with watery, tasteless juice.

Goldbaum said, “Maybe they’ll be hospitable, and take care of us even if we don’t work. In that case, which would be the most fortunate, they’ll give us the same ration as theirs, in quality and quantity, and it won’t be easy. Or they may ask us to work with them, and we don’t know how to hunt or plow. We have almost nothing left to give them. If Uiuna returns without the boat, or doesn’t return at all, things will go badly. They’ll throw us out, and then we’ll die in the swamp; or they’ll kill us themselves, as they do with their old people.”

“Without warning?”

“I don’t think so, and they won’t be violent. They’ll ask us to follow their custom.”

Wilkins was silent for a few minutes, and then he said, “We have two days’ worth of provisions, two watches, two ballpoint pens, a lot of useless money, and the tape recorder. Everything in the camp has been destroyed, but we might be able to retemper the knife blades. Ah, yes, we also have two boxes of matches—maybe that’s the item that will interest them most. We ought to pay our keep, right?”

The negotiations with Achtiti were laborious. He paid scant attention to the watches, was interested in neither the pens nor the money, and was frightened when he heard his voice come out of the tape recorder. He was fascinated by the matches: after a few failed attempts, he was able to light one, but he wasn’t convinced that it was a real flame until he held a finger over it and got burned. He lit another, and declared with evident satisfaction that if he brought it close to the straw it would catch fire. Then he stretched out one hand with a questioning air: could he take all the matches? Goldbaum quickly retrieved them; he showed Achtiti that the box was already partly used up and that the other, though full, was small. He made a gesture that indicated the two of them. He showed Achtiti a match, and then the sun, and the sun’s path through the sky; he would give him a match for every day of sustenance.

For a long time Achtiti remained in doubt, squatting on his heels and humming in a nasal singsong; then he went into a hut, and came out holding an earthenware bowl and a bow. He placed the bowl on the ground; he picked up some claylike earth, mixed it with water, showed the two men that the paste could be modeled into the shape of the bowl, and, finally, pointed to himself. Then he took the bow and caressed it affectionately along its length: it was smooth, symmetrical, strong. He showed the two a bundle of long, straight branches that were lying a little distance away, and had them observe that the quality and the fiber of the wood were the same. He returned to the hut, and this time came out with two obsidian scrapers, one big and one small, and a rough block of obsidian.

The two observed him with curiosity and bewilderment. Achtiti picked up a flintstone, and showed them that, if he struck with precisely aimed small blows along particular contours of the block, it flaked cleanly, without breaking; in a few minutes of work, he had made a scraper, maybe still needing to be refined, but already usable. Then Achtiti took two branches, each a little less than a meter long, and began to scrape one of them. He worked with purpose and skill, in silence or humming, his mouth closed: after half an hour the branch was tapered at one end, and periodically Achtiti checked it, bending it over one knee to feel if it was flexible enough. Perhaps he perceived a trace of impatience in the attitude or comments of the two men, because he interrupted his work, went off among the huts, and returned accompanied by a boy. He entrusted the second branch and another scraper to him, and from then on they worked together. Indeed, the boy was as skillful as Achtiti; it was evident that for him, too, making a bow was not a new job. When the two branches were reduced to the right size and shape, Achtiti began to smooth them with a rough stone that to Wilkins appeared to be a fragment of a whetstone.

“He doesn’t seem to be in a hurry,” said Goldbaum.

“The Siriono are never in a hurry. Hurry is a sickness of ours,” Wilkins answered.

“They have other sicknesses, though.”

“Of course. But that’s not to say that a civilization without sickness is impossible.”

“What do you suppose he wants from us?”

“I think I understand,” Wilkins said. Achtiti continued to scrape the wood diligently, working around all the sides and testing the surface with

his fingers and his eyes, squinting, because he was a little farsighted. Finally, he tied the two untapered ends together, overlapping them for a short distance, and between the pointed ends he stretched a string of twisted gut: he had a certain air of pride, and showed the two that, if you pinched the string, it resonated for a long time, like a harp. He sent the boy to get an arrow, took aim, and shot: the arrow stuck quivering in the trunk of a palm fifty meters away. Then, with an emphatic gesture, he offered the bow to Wilkins, indicating with a nod that it was his: he should hold it, try it out. Then he took two matches from the open box, offered one to Wilkins and one to Goldbaum, squatted on the ground, wrapped his arms around his knees, and waited, but without impatience.

Goldbaum, with the match in his hand, was speechless. Then he said, “I think I understand, too.”

“Yes,” Wilkins answered. “As a lecture, it’s clear enough: we wretched Siriono, if we don’t have a scraper, we make one; and if we are without a bow, with the scraper we make the bow, and maybe we also make it smooth, because then it’s a pleasure to look at and hold in your hand. You foreign sorcerers, who steal men’s voices and put them in a box, you were left without matches. Come on, make some.”

“So?”

“We’ll have to explain our limits.” With two voices, or, rather, four hands, they tried to convince Achtiti that although it’s true that a match is small, much smaller than a bow (this was a point that Achtiti seemed to consider important), the head of the match contained an ingredient (how to explain it?) that dwelt far away, in the sun, in the depths of the earth, beyond the rivers and the forest. They were painfully conscious of the inadequacy of their defense: Achtiti stuck out his lips at them, shook his head, and said things to the boy that made him laugh.

“He must be telling him that we are bad sorcerers, scoundrels who only know how to talk big,” said Goldbaum. Achtiti was a methodical man: he said something else to the boy, who grabbed the bow and some arrows and stood at a distance of twenty paces with a resolute air; he himself went off and returned with one of the knives found at the site of the base camp, which the fire had warped and severely oxidized. He picked up one of the watches off the ground and held it out to Wilkins. Wilkins, with the pale face of one who shows up unprepared for an important exam, made a sign of impotence. He opened the watchcase and showed Achtiti the minute

gears, the thin balance wheel that never stopped, the tiny rubies, and then his own fingers—impossible! The same, or almost, happened with the tape recorder, which, however, Achtiti didn't want to touch: he made Wilkins pick it up himself, and stopped up his ears for fear of hearing his voice. And the knife? Achtiti seemed to want them to understand that it was a sort of makeup exam, that is, an elementary test, basic enough for any simpleton, sorcerer or no: go ahead, make a knife. A knife, look, isn't a kind of little beast with a beating heart, which is easy to kill but very difficult to bring back to life; it doesn't move, it doesn't make noise, and it's got only two parts—the Siriono themselves had three or four of them, which they had bought ten years earlier and had paid very little for, just an armful of papayas and two caiman skins.

"You answer—I've had enough." Goldbaum displayed less talent for mimicry and diplomacy than his colleague. He waved his arms vainly, in a gesture that not even Wilkins understood, and Achtiti, for the first time, burst into laughter; but it was not a reassuring laugh.

"What are you trying to tell him?"

"That perhaps we would manage to make a knife, but that we need some special rocks, rocks that burn and that aren't found in this country, plus time and a hot fire."

"I didn't understand, but he probably did. He was right to laugh: he must have thought that we just wanted to gain time until they come to get us. It's the number one trick of all sorcerers and prophets."

Achtiti called out, and seven or eight robust warriors appeared. They seized the two men and shut them up in a hut of solid tree trunks. There were no openings; light entered only through the chinks in the roof. Goldbaum asked, "Do you think we'll be here long?"

Wilkins answered, "I fear no; I hope yes."

But the Siriono are not a fierce people. They were content to leave them there to expiate their lies, providing them with plenty of water and a little food. For some obscure reason, perhaps because he felt offended, Achtiti no longer came to see them.

Goldbaum said, "I'm a good photographer, but without lenses and without film . . . Maybe I could make a *camera obscura*. What do you say?"

"That would amuse them. But they are asking us for something more: that we demonstrate, concretely, that our civilization is superior to theirs, that our sorcerers are more powerful than theirs."

“It’s not as if I knew how to make many other things with my hands. I know how to drive a car. I also know how to change a lightbulb or a fuse. Unclog a sink, sew on a button. But here are neither sinks nor needles.”

Wilkins meditated. “No,” he said, “here it would take something more essential. If they let us out, I could try to take apart the magnetic tape recorder. How it’s put together inside I don’t know, but if there’s a permanent magnet we’re in business. We can make it float in a bowl of water and give them the compass, and at the same time show them the art of making a compass.”

“Even though it’s called a magnetic tape recorder, I don’t think there are magnets inside,” Goldbaum answered. “And I’m not even sure that a compass would be very useful to the Siriono. For them the sun is enough; they aren’t navigators, and when they set out into the forest they follow the marked trails.”

“How do you make gunpowder? Maybe that’s not too hard. Don’t you just mix carbon, sulfur, and saltpeter?”

“Theoretically, yes. But where would you find saltpeter here, in the middle of the swamps? And there might be sulfur, but who knows where? And, finally, what use would gunpowder be, if they don’t have an ordinary gun barrel?”

“I have an idea. People here can die as a result of a scratch, from septicemia or tetanus. We could ferment their grain, distill the infusion, and make alcohol for them; maybe they would also like to drink it, even if that’s not exactly proper. They don’t seem to be acquainted with either stimulants or depressants. It would be a fine bit of sorcery.”

Goldbaum was tired. “We don’t have a fermenting agent. I don’t think I would be capable of recognizing one, and neither would you. And then I’d like to see you wrestling with the local potters to get them to build you a still. Maybe it’s not completely impossible, but it’s an undertaking that would require months, and we have only days.”

It wasn’t clear if the Siriono intended to let them die of starvation, or if they wished only to maintain them with the least expense, while waiting for the boat to come up the river or for the two men to develop the final, decisive idea. Their days passed in a torpor that grew ever deeper, a waking sleep made up of damp heat, mosquitoes, hunger, and humiliation. And yet both of them had studied for almost twenty years, knew many things about all human civilizations, ancient and modern, were interested in all primitive

technologies, in Chaldean metallurgy, in Mycenaean ceramics, in pre-Columbian weaving; and now perhaps (perhaps!) they would be able to split off a flintstone because Achtiti had taught them, while they were unable to teach Achtiti anything: they could only tell him by means of gestures about marvels that he didn't believe in, and show him miraculous things that they had brought with them, made by other hands, under another sky.

After almost a month of prison they were short of ideas, and felt worn down to a final impotence. The entire colossal edifice of modern technology was out of their reach; they had to confess to each other that not even one of the inventions of which their civilization was proud could be transmitted to the Siriono. They lacked the basic materials to start with, and, even if these could have been found nearby, the two Englishmen would have been unable to recognize or isolate them; none of the arts that they knew would be judged useful by the Siriono. If one of them had been good at drawing, they could have made a portrait of Achtiti, and, if nothing else, evoked wonder. If they had a year's time, they might perhaps convince their hosts of the usefulness of the alphabet, adapt it to their language, and teach Achtiti the art of writing. For several hours they discussed the idea of making soap for the Siriono: they could get potash from the wood ashes, and oil from the seeds of a local palm. But what use would soap be to the Siriono? They didn't have clothes, and it would not be easy to persuade them of the usefulness of washing themselves with soap.

Finally, they were reduced to a modest project: they would teach the Siriono to make candles. Modest but irreproachable; the Siriono had wax, wax from peccaries, which they used to grease their hair, and there was no difficulty about the wicks—they could use bristles from the same peccaries. The Siriono would appreciate the advantage of illuminating the inside of their huts at night. Of course, they might prefer to learn how to make a gun or an outboard motor; candles weren't much, but it was worth a try.

They were just attempting to get in touch with Achtiti, to negotiate their freedom in exchange for the candles, when they heard a big ruckus outside their prison. Soon afterward the door was opened, amid incomprehensible shouts, and Achtiti gestured to them to come out into the dazzling light of day: the boat had arrived.

The farewell was neither long nor ceremonious. Achtiti immediately stepped away from the prison door; he squatted on his heels, turning his

back to them, and remained unmoving, as if turned to stone, while Siriono warriors led the two men to the bank of the river. Two or three women, laughing and shouting, exposed their stomachs in their direction; all the others in the village, even the children, swung their heads, singing “Luu, luu,” and held out their hands, limp and as if detached, letting them dangle from their wrists like overripe fruit.

Wilkins and Goldbaum had no baggage. They got into the boat, which was piloted by Suarez himself, and begged him to leave as quickly as possible.

The Siriono are not invented. They actually exist, or at least they did until around 1945, but what we know of them leads us to think that, at least as a people, they will not survive for long. They were described by Allan R. Holmberg in a monograph, *Nomads of the Long Bow: The Siriono of Eastern Bolivia*: they lead a subsistence-level existence, which alternates between nomadism and primitive agriculture. They are not familiar with metals, they do not possess terms for numbers higher than three, and although they often have to cross swamps and rivers, they do not know how to build boats. They do know, however, that at one time they were able to do so, and the story is handed down among them of a hero who had the name of the Moon, and who had taught their people (then much more numerous) three arts: to light fires; to carve out canoes; and to make bows. Of these, only the last survives; they have forgotten even the method of making fire. They told Holmberg that in a time not too far back (two, three generations ago, around the time when among us the first internal combustion engines were invented, electric light became widespread, and the complex structure of the atom was beginning to be understood), some of them knew how to make fire by twirling a stick in a hole in a piece of wood. But at that time the Siriono lived in another land, with a desertlike climate, where it was easy to find dry wood and tinder. Now they live among swamps and forests, in perpetual dampness. Since they could no longer find dry wood, the method of the stick in the hole could no longer be practiced, and was forgotten.

Fire itself, however, they kept. In each of their villages or wandering bands there is at least one old woman whose job it is to maintain a live

spark in a brazier of tufo. This art is not so difficult as that of lighting a fire by means of rubbing sticks, but it’s not elementary, either: especially in the rainy season, the flame has to be fed palm flowers, which are dried in the heat of that flame. These old vestals are very diligent, because if their fire dies they are put to death: not as punishment but because they are judged to be useless. All the Siriono who are judged to be useless because they are incapable of hunting, sowing, and plowing with a wooden plow are left to die. A Siriono is old at forty.

I repeat, they are not invented. They were reported on by *Scientific American* in October 1969, and they have a sinister renown: they teach us that not in every place and not in every era is humanity destined to advance.

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1. The Siriono are an Indian people who live in the tropical forests of eastern Bolivia.

The Molecule's Defiance

"I've had it," he said to me. "I need a change. I'll quit, find some ordinary job, maybe unloading stuff at the wholesale market. Or I'll leave, go away—on the road you spend less than you do at home, and you can always find some way of earning money. But I am not ever going to the factory again."

I told Rinaldo to think it over, that it's never a good idea to make a decision in the heat of the moment, that a factory job isn't something to throw away, and that in any case it would be better if he told me the story from the beginning. He is enrolled in the university, but he does shifts at the factory. Shift work is unpleasant—every week your schedule changes, and the rhythm of your life, too, so you have to get used to not getting used to things. In general, middle-aged people manage this better than the young.

"No, it's not a question of shifts. It's that a batch spoiled on me. Eight tons to throw away."

A batch that spoils is one that solidifies halfway through the preparation: the liquid becomes gelatinous, or even hard, like horn. It's a phenomenon that is called by fancy names like "gelatinization" or "premature polymerization," but it's a traumatic event, an ugly sight, not to mention the money that's lost. It shouldn't happen, but sometimes it does happen, even if you're paying attention, and when it happens it leaves its mark. I told Rinaldo that it's useless to cry over spilled milk, and immediately I regretted it—it wasn't the right thing to say. But what can you say to a decent person who has made a mistake, who doesn't know how he did it, and who carries his guilt like a load of lead? The only thing to do is offer him a cognac and invite him to talk.

“It’s not because of the boss, you see, or even the owner. It’s the thing in itself, and the way it happened. It was a simple procedure, I had already done it at least thirty times, so that I knew the formula by heart and didn’t even have to look at it. . . .”

I, too, have had batches spoil in the course of my career, so I know very well what it’s like. I asked him, “Isn’t it possible that’s the problem, the cause of the trouble? You thought you knew it all by heart, but you forgot some detail, or made a mistake in a temperature, or added something you weren’t supposed to?”

“No. I checked afterward, and everything was normal. Now the lab is working on it, trying to figure it out. I’m the accused, but still if I made a mistake I’d like to find out. I really would. I’d prefer it if someone said to me, ‘You idiot, you did this and that which you shouldn’t have done,’ rather than sit here asking myself questions. And then it’s lucky that no one died—no one was even hurt—and the reactor shaft didn’t get bent. There’s only the financial damage, and if I had the money, I swear, I would happily pay.

“So. I had the morning shift. I had come on duty at six, and everything was in order. Before going off, Morra left me the instructions. Morra is an old guy, who worked his way up; he left me the production note with all the materials checked off at the right times, the cards for the automatic scale, so there was nothing out of the ordinary—he’s certainly not the type to leave a mess, and he had no reason to, because everything was going well. Day was just breaking: you could see the mountains, almost close enough to touch. I glanced at the thermograph, which was functioning properly; there was even a bump on the curve at four in the morning, registering fifteen degrees higher. It’s a bump that appears every day, always at the same time, and neither the engineer nor the electrician has ever understood why—as if it had taken up the habit of telling a lie every day, and, just as with liars, after a while no one pays attention anymore. I also glanced inside the reactor through the spyhole: there was no smoke, there was no foam, the mixture was beautifully transparent and circulating as smoothly as water. It wasn’t water; it was a synthetic resin, of the type that is formulated to harden, but only later, in the molds.

“Anyway, I was feeling calm, there was no reason to worry. I still had two hours to wait before starting the tests, and I confess that I had other things on my mind. I was thinking . . . well, yes, I was thinking about the chaos of atoms and molecules inside that reactor, as if every molecule were

standing there with its hands outstretched, ready to grasp the hand of the molecule passing by to form a chain. There came to mind those great men who guessed the existence of atoms from common sense, reasoning on matter and void, two thousand years before we appeared with our equipment to prove them right. And—because when we were camping this summer my girl made me read Lucretius—I also remembered *Corpora constabunt ex partibus infinitis*,[1] and the guy who said, 'Everything flows.' From time to time, I looked through the spyhole, and it seemed to me that I could see them, all those molecules buzzing like bees around a hive.

"So, everything was flowing and I had every reason to be calm, although I hadn't forgotten what they teach you when you're entrusted with a reactor. And that is, that everything is fine as long as one molecule connects to another as if each had only two hands: they're not supposed to make more than a chain, or a rosary of molecules—it can be long, but only a chain. And you have to keep in mind that, among the many molecules, some have three hands, and there's the rub. In fact, they are inserted on purpose: the third hand is the one that is supposed to catch hold later—when we decide, not when they do. If the third hands grip too soon, every rosary joins with two or three other rosaries, and in the end they've formed a single molecule, a monster molecule as big as the whole reactor, and then you're in a fix. Goodbye to 'Everything flows'—nothing flows, everything is blocked, and there is nothing to be done about it."

I was observing him as he talked, and I refrained from interrupting him, although he was telling me things I already know. Talking was doing him good: his eyes shone, perhaps partly because of the cognac, but he was calming down. Talking is the best medicine.

"Well, as I was saying, every so often I glanced at the mixture, and I was thinking about the things I was telling you, and also about others that had nothing to do with this. The motors were humming calmly, the cam was rotating slowly, and the needle of the thermograph was drawing on the face an outline that corresponded to the movement of the cam. Inside the reactor the agitator was turning regularly and you could see that the resin was slowly becoming thicker. Already around seven it was beginning to stick to the walls and make little bubbles: this is a sign that I discovered, and I also taught it to Morra and the guy on the third shift—it's always someone different, so I don't even know his name. Anyway, it's a sign that the

heating is almost done, and that it's time to take the first sample and test the viscosity.

"I went down to the floor below, because an eight-thousand-liter reactor isn't a toy, and it sits a good two meters below the floor; and while I was there, fooling with the discharge valve, I heard the motor of the agitator change tone. It changed just a little, maybe not even by a sharp, but this is a sign, too, and not a good one. I threw away the sample and everything, and in an instant I was upstairs with my eye glued to the spyhole, and it was a really hideous sight. The whole scene had changed: the blades of the agitator were slicing a mass that looked like polenta and was rising right before my eyes. I stopped the agitator, since by now it was useless, and stood there as if spellbound, with my knees shaking. What to do? It was too late to unload the mixture, or to call the doctor, who at that hour was still in bed; and, besides, when a batch spoils it's as if somebody had died: the best remedies come to mind afterward.

"A mass of foam was rising, slowly but relentlessly. Coming to the surface were bubbles as big as a man's head but not round: deformed, in all shapes, with the walls striped as if with nerves and veins; they burst and immediately others appeared, but it wasn't like beer, where the foam subsides, and rarely overflows the glass. This mass kept rising. I called, and several people came, including the head of the department, and they all said what they thought but no one knew what to do, and meanwhile the foam was only half a meter below the spyhole. Every time a bubble burst, bits of spit flew out and stuck under the glass of the spyhole and smeared it; soon you wouldn't be able to see anything. By now it was clear that the foam wasn't going to subside: it would keep rising until it clogged all the cooling pipes, and then goodbye.

"With the agitator off, it was quiet, and you could hear a growing noise, as in science fiction films when something horrible is about to happen: a murmur and a rumbling that kept getting louder, like an upset stomach. It was my eight-cubic-meter molecule, with the gas trapped inside it, all the gas that couldn't get out, that wanted to emerge, give birth to itself. I could neither run away nor stand there and wait: I was terrified, but I also felt responsible; the mixture was mine. By now the spyhole was blocked, all you could see was a reddish glow. I don't know if what I did was right or wrong: I was afraid that the reactor would burst, and so I took the wrench and removed all the bolts on the hatch.

“The hatch rose by itself, not suddenly but gently, solemnly, as when tombs open and the dead rise. A slow thick stream came out, disgusting, a yellow mass full of lumps and nodules. We all jumped back, but it cooled right away on the floor, as if it had sat down, and you could see that the volume wasn’t so great after all. Inside the reactor the foam subsided about half a meter, then stopped and gradually hardened. So the show was over; we looked at one another and our faces were not a pretty sight. Mine must have been the ugliest of all, but there were no mirrors.”

I tried to calm Rinaldo, or at least distract him, but I’m afraid I didn’t succeed, and for good reason. Among all my experiences of work, none is so alien and inimical as that of a batch that spoils, whatever the cause, whether the damage is serious or slight, if you’re guilty or not. A fire or an explosion can be a much more destructive accident, even tragic, but it’s not disgraceful, like a gelatinization. The spoiled batch contains a mocking quality: a gesture of scorn, the derisiveness of soulless things that ought to obey you and instead rise up, defying your prudence and foresight. The unique “molecule,” deformed but gigantic, that is born and dies in your hands is an obscene message and symbol: a symbol of other ugly things without reversal or remedy that obscure our future, of the prevalence of confusion over order, of unseemly death over life.

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1. *De rerum natura*, I:615: “[the smallest] bodies will be composed of infinite particles.”

The Valley of Guerrino

To return on foot or bicycle to a mountain valley, one of those we have passed through quickly dozens of times in a car or by public transportation, is an undertaking so very rewarding, and at so little cost, that you have to wonder why so few decide to do it. Usually, they keep to the upper valley, the high sites of tourism; the lower valley remains unknown, and yet it is here that nature and the works of man bear the clearest and most legible imprints of the past.

In one of these valleys the memory of Guerrino, for those who know how to track him down, is still very much alive: Guerrino, the wandering hermit, who died around 1916, no one ever knew how. Only the old people remember him now, and their memories are faded, thin, often reduced to a single episode or a single quotation, just like the memories the old preserve of those who in their youth were old. But the tangible memories, the ones that Guerrino scattered with regal extravagance throughout that valley, even in its most isolated branches, and in the two neighboring valleys: those are vivid and eternal, accessible to anyone—to anyone, I mean, who still knows how to travel like a pilgrim, and has preserved the ancient talent for looking around and examining things and people with humility and patience. In addition, his name survives in some similes of local usage, which, soon fated to be extinct, are by now clichés and barely understood by the young people. In that valley some still say “ugly as Guerrino,” “poor as Guerrino,” and also “do a Guerrino-style favor,” to indicate a well-contrived and elaborate retaliation; but they also say “free as Guerrino.” And yet among those who still use such expressions few know that the free and poor Guerrino really existed, and even fewer have any concrete memory of him.

No one knows anything about his youth anymore, or whence he had turned up in the valley, because he was Piedmontese but not indigenous. He is recalled as a thickset man, with hollow cheeks and a prominent jaw, and a scruffy, tangled gray beard; he was dirty and unkempt, solid on his muscular legs. He always wore, summer and winter, the same coat, of a vaguely military cut, and a pair of frayed, threadbare black velvet pants, barely held up by the belt that he wore under his obese belly, and which helped to hold that up as well. Like a Cynic philosopher, he carried all his possessions with him: these consisted of the tools of his trade as a painter of Madonnas (jars of oil paints and tempera, brushes, putty knives, scrapers, trowels), an elongated two-wheeled cart that he used to carry this equipment and sometimes to sleep in, and a savage wire-haired farm dog that hauled the cart and was perpetually chained to it. When they relocated, he followed on foot, with his gaze on the sky and the mountains, because he was a stern and hypochondriacal man, but a lover of creation.

His profession was to paint frescoes in churches, chapels, and cemeteries. On occasion, he also did secular decoration and restored plaster, stonework, and roofs, but he agreed to these jobs only if he was hungry or if they kindled his imagination. If he had no desire or need for them, he sat at the tavern drinking in silence, or on the banks of the river smoking his pipe.

There are countless paintings of his in the valley. They aren't signed, but it's easy to identify them by the heavy outlines, the predominance of warm tones, reds and violets, and for a peculiar stylization and symmetry of the figures. He had the blood of a painter: if he had studied, or at least had had the chance to see great works of other times, his name would not be forgotten. Still, at least one of his works should not be forgotten, a *Last Judgment* painted on the pediment of a small church buried amid the larches. It's designed with an expert sense of balance, and a crude, forceful precision, and is crowded with weird, macabre symbols, which, on the border between piety and irony, sprout like monstrous jewels amid the bodies of the innumerable souls who have risen from the burned and devastated earth: lilies and artichokes, small humpbacked skeletons, cannons, phalluses, a big hand with the thumb cut off, a gallows, a sea horse. One of those souls wandering around in desperate search of their own body is a diaphanous phantom, its blind eyes turned to the black sky; it

is donning its newfound skin with the ordinary motions of someone putting on a jacket.

This plain strewn with comic or ribald anecdotes is illuminated by an oblique, livid light, like a petrified lightning flash, and it vanishes in the direction of a stormy horizon over which towers the statue-like figure of the Redeemer. The Redeemer has thick gray hair and beard, staring eyes, and in his hand he grasps a sword that looks more like a knife. It's a self-portrait.

All of Guerrino's pictures contain at least one portrait, and many contain more than one. They are crude but full of expression, some almost caricatures. They stand out from the other faces—which are, instead, stylized, all alike, without life, without creative tension—and each of the portraits has its story.

Like many of his more illustrious fellows, Guerrino drew his clients. If they paid him and treated him well, he gave them a halo and draped them in saints' robes. If they didn't pay much, or made a fuss, or stood watching while he painted and criticized his work, in the blink of an eye he thrust them up on the crosses of the two thieves, or into the garments of the scourgers of Our Lord: but it was them, recognizable from a distance, except that they had a more bestial expression—a nose like a pig, or the ears of an ass. In one cemetery niche there is a *Crucifixion* in which the man who is hammering has the head of King Umberto, and the priest who watches, impassive, has, under the papal tiara, the face of Leo XIII.

There's another painting of his that the old inhabitants of the valley are very proud of. It's a *Nativity*, rather dull and conventional, of the type that can be seen by the hundreds throughout Italy, except that the ox has almost human features; in fact, it's the cruel, ingenious caricature of a physiognomy that is still quite common in the valley. According to the story that's been handed down, it's a portrait of the mayor. He had come to see the finished work; he took the liberty of saying that oxen don't look like that in the least, and he didn't even offer Guerrino a drink, as is customary. Guerrino didn't answer (it seems that he almost never opened his mouth), but in the middle of the night, which was a moonlit night, he got up, barefoot, so that not even a dog barked, and in a few minutes had painted the head of the mayor in place of the ox's muzzle; but he left the horns. In fact the colors and shadings of this head are harsh and clumsy: it couldn't have been easy to distinguish the jars of paint by the light of the moon. And

the mayor must have been a man of spirit, because he left things as they were, and as they are still.

Guerrino loved to represent himself in the guise of St. Joseph; there is even a *Holy Family*, in the upper valley, in which the worker saint holds a brush in his right hand, in place of the hammer or saw, and in the dark background of his shop one can glimpse a trowel—the small wooden board, with a handle on one side, that's used to smooth plaster. Other times, as I've mentioned, he didn't hesitate to give his own features to Christ himself: in a votive chapel there's a sturdy, wrinkled *Christ Mocked*, with broad shoulders and wide cheekbones, wolflike eyes beneath bushy brows, and a thick gray beard. He's firmly planted on the floor, on legs as solid as columns, and looks at his persecutors as if to say: "You'll pay for this."

In truth, if the identification with Joseph is justified only in small measure, that with Christ is offensive. Guerrino must have been a fellow to handle with care: according to all the testimony that has been gathered, he drank, was quarrelsome and vindictive, had a ready knife, and liked women. Of course, this last quality isn't a defect; all great men, of every time and place, have liked women, or at least some women, and a man who doesn't like women, or for that matter doesn't like men, is unhappy and basically a harmful individual. But Guerrino liked women only in a certain way: he liked them too much and liked them all, so that there is no village or neighborhood where one or more of his presumed children are not pointed out to strangers. Then, to speak plainly, he must have liked young girls especially, and this, too, can be read in his murals: his Madonnas (they are his most successful creations, very sweet, solemn yet lively, often precise and clear against formless or unfinished backgrounds, as if all his will and inspiration had been concentrated on their face) are different from one another, but all have surprisingly childish features. In fact, it's rumored that Guerrino condensed into a portrait each of his innumerable encounters, and that none of his female figures are stylized: each was supposedly a *souvenir*, perhaps a reward enjoyed or requested, the gift of a satisfied man; or perhaps, on the other hand, only an item, one more point, a notch in his faun's calendar. Exploring the valley, I noticed that there are often insignificant frescoes, by another artist or some unknown hand, to which a female head has later been added or superimposed, often out of place or off the subject. I found one in a stable in Inversini, by itself in the middle of a moldy wall. Maybe it was the site of the encounter.

In the village of Robatto, at the confluence of two streams, there's a Madonna enthroned with child and saints, against a blue sky that time has faded to green. In this sky four little angels appear, following a well-known and stale model, but one of these has the sensitive face of a girl, her gaze turned downward, her lips sealed in an inscrutable smile that evokes ancient funerary images that Guerrino absolutely couldn't have known. Kneeling in the foreground, in profile, is a muscular saint with a gray beard who holds up a sheaf of grain pointing toward the angel's face: saint and angel, full-bodied against the stylized background, bear the robust sign of Guerrino's hand. Two of the child Madonnas have black faces, like the Madonna of Oropa, which Guerrino might well have known, and that of Częstochowa; this, it is said, is the basis of a remote myth, Etruscan rather than Christian, in which the Mother of God is confused with Persephone, the goddess of the Underworld, signifying the cycle of the seed, which every year is buried, dies, and is resurrected as fruit, and of the Just One, who is sacrificed and resurrected for our salvation. Under the effigy of one of these mournful virgins Guerrino wrote a sibylline saying: "*Tout est et n'est rien*."

The contrast between the sweetness of his works and the barbaric roughness of his ways is astonishing. It is rumored that these encounters, the source of his airy images, were little more than rapes, frightening assaults in the depths of the woods or in high meadows, under the bewildered gaze of the sheep and amid the furious barking of dogs. He was certainly not alone: the ambush of the shepherdess is the dominant motif of popular culture in these valleys; the shepherdess shows up as the paramount sexual object, and at least half the songs sung here develop, in different variants, the theme of the shepherd girl glimpsed, desired, won, or of her seduction by a rich man who comes from the city, or by the stranger who dazzles her with his exotic magnificence.

I was told a poignant story about Guerrino. When he was already in his forties, he fell in love with a beautiful young woman; he fell in love without ever speaking to her, or touching her, or even seeing her close up, only looking at her in the window. The window was pointed out to me, and also the woman: in 1965 she was a serene, wrinkled old woman with delicate features and pale eyes; she wore with tranquil dignity the noble white hair of a former blonde. From the window, she had constantly refused him. She had spent her entire life refusing him, first as a girl, blushing and smiling, then as a bride, finally as a widow, and he had spent his life repeating his

hopeless call. When Guerrino came through that village, he stopped at her window and cried, “Madamina, I’m here again”; she never got angry but answered, “Go away, Guerrino, go on your way,” and he went, taciturn and alone. Many think it was because of that woman, and that obstinate, intractable, undying love, that Guerrino became Guerrino. This woman, his true woman, Guerrino never painted.

As I said, the painter of Madonnas disappeared around the end of the First World War. No one remembers his last name, and even his name is dubious: “Guerrino” could be a nickname, as is common here, so searching in the archives looks like a hopeless undertaking. About his end there exists only one trace. Old Eliseo, formerly a poacher, today a game warden, told me that around 1935, in a cave, or rather in a crevice once frequented by miners of quartz, he had found the skeletons of a man and a dog, and on one of the rock walls an unfinished drawing, which to him seemed to portray a large bird in a fiery nest. He hadn’t reported it, because at that time he was in debt to the law. I went back there with him as my guide, but found nothing.



The Girl in the Book

Umberto was not so young anymore. He had some trouble with his lungs, and the doctor had sent him to the seaside for a month. It was the month of October, and Umberto hated the sea; he hated the in-between seasons, solitude, and, above all, illness. So he was in a vile mood, and it seemed to him that he would never get better, that in fact his illness would get worse, and he would die there, on sick leave, among people he didn't know—die of dampness, of boredom, and of the sea air. But he was an obedient man, who stayed where he was put; if he had been sent to the seaside, it was a sign that he ought to be there. Every so often he took the train and returned to town to spend the night with Eva, but he left again the next morning, sadly, because it seemed to him that Eva was doing fine without him.

When one is used to working, it's painful to waste time, and in order not to waste too much time, or not to feel that he was wasting it, Umberto took long walks beside the sea and through the hills. Taking a walk is not like taking a trip: on a trip you make grand discoveries; on a walk you may make many discoveries, but they are small. Tiny green crabs wandered about the cliffs, not walking backward, as they are said to, but, rather, sideways, in a comical manner: endearing, but Umberto would rather have cut off a finger than touch one. Abandoned mill wheels, around them still visible the circular track where the mule had walked, who knows how many years earlier and for how many years. Two extraordinary inns, where you could get wine and homemade pasta that you wouldn't dream of in Milan. But the most curious discovery was La Bomboniera.

La Bomboniera was a tiny white square two-story villa, perched on a rise. It did not have a front, or, rather, it had four, all identical, each with a

door of polished wood and with intricate decorations and plasterwork in an art deco style. The four corners were topped by graceful little turrets that had the shape of tulips but in fact were bathrooms; this was indicated by four ceramic pipes that, crudely set into the walls, descended to the ground. The windows of the villa were always darkened by black-painted shutters, and the plate on the gate bore an impossible name: HARMONIKA GRINKIAVICIUS. The plate itself was odd, too: the exotic name was surrounded by a triple ellipse on which, from the outside in, were the colors yellow, green, and red, in sequence. It was the only note of color against the white plaster of the villa.

Almost without realizing it, Umberto got in the habit of passing La Bomboniera every day. It wasn't uninhabited; an old woman lived there, occasionally visible, who was neat and spare, with hair as white as the villa and a face slightly too red. Signora Grinkiavicius went out once a day, always at the same time, whatever the weather, but for just a few minutes. She had well-made but old-fashioned clothes, an umbrella, a wide-brimmed straw hat with a black velvet ribbon that tied under her chin. She walked with small, decisive steps, as if she were in a hurry to reach some destination, yet she always took the same route, returned home, and immediately closed the door behind her. She never appeared at the windows.

From the shopkeepers he couldn't get much information. Yes, the woman was a foreigner, a widow for at least thirty years, educated, wealthy. She did many charitable deeds. She smiled at everyone but spoke to no one. She went to Mass on Sunday morning. She had never been to the doctor or even to the pharmacist. Her husband had bought the villa, but no one remembered anything about him anymore—maybe he hadn't even really been her husband. Umberto was curious, and, besides, he suffered from his solitude; one day he got up his courage and stopped the woman, on the pretext of asking her where a certain street was. She answered in a few words, precisely and in good Italian. After that Umberto couldn't think up any other ploys with which to start a conversation. He confined himself to contriving to run into her on his morning round and greeting her; she responded with a smile. Umberto recovered and returned to Milan.

Umberto liked to read. He came across a book that appealed to him: it was the memoir of an English soldier who had fought against the Italians in Cyrenaica, had been taken prisoner and interned near Pavia, but then had

escaped and joined the partisans. He hadn’t been a great partisan; he liked girls better than guns, and described several slight, happy love affairs, and a longer, stormier one, with a Lithuanian refugee. In this episode the Englishman’s story proceeded from a walk to a trot and then a gallop: against the tense, dark background of the German occupation and the Allied bombardments, he depicted wild bicycle flights on shadowy roads, in defiance of patrols and curfew, and daring adventures in the underground of smuggling and the black market. A memorable portrait of the Lithuanian emerged: tireless and indestructible, a good shot when necessary, extraordinarily vital; a Diana-Minerva grafted onto the opulent body (described in detail by the Englishman) of a Juno. The two possessed souls got lost and found in the valleys of the Apennines, impatient with discipline, today partisans, tomorrow deserters, then partisans again; they consumed dinners in huts and caves at dizzying heights, followed by heroic nights. The Lithuanian was depicted as a lover without equal, impetuous and refined, never distracted; polyglot and polyvalent, she knew how to love in her own language, in Italian, in English, in Russian, in German, and in at least two others, which the author skipped over. This torrential love affair rolled on for thirty pages before the Englishman troubled to reveal the name of his Amazon: on the thirty-first he remembered, and the name was Harmonika.

Umberto started and closed the book. The name could be a random coincidence, but that odd surname and the colored circles that surrounded it returned to the screen of his memory; the colors must have a meaning. In vain he looked through the house for some reference book. The next evening, he went to the library, and found what he wanted to know: the flag of the short-lived Lithuanian Republic, between the two world wars, was yellow, green, and red. Not only that: under “Lithuania” in the encyclopedia his eye fell on Basanavicius, the founder of the first newspaper in the Lithuanian language; on Slezavicius, prime minister in the twenties; on Stanevicius, an eighteenth-century poet[1] (where does one not find an eighteenth-century poet!); and on Neveravicius, the novelist. Was it possible? Possible that the taciturn benefactress and the bacchant were the same person?

From that moment on Umberto could think only of finding a pretext for returning to the seaside, going so far as to hope for a mild recurrence of his pleurisy; he couldn’t come up with anything plausible, but he made up

some nonsense for Eva and went off one Saturday, taking the book. He felt cheerful and intent, like a hound on the trail of a fox; he marched from the station to La Bomboniera at a military clip, rang the bell without hesitation, and immediately launched into his subject, with a half lie fabricated on the spot. He lived in Milan but was from Val Tidone: he had heard that the signora knew that area, he felt nostalgic, and would love to talk with her about it. Signora Grinkavicius looked better when viewed close up; her face was wrinkled but fresh and well modeled, and a laughing light shone in her eyes. Yes, she had been there, many years before; but he, where had he heard all that?

Umberto counterattacked: “You are Lithuanian, right?”

“I was born there. It’s an unhappy land. But I studied elsewhere, in different places.”

“So you speak many languages?”

The woman was now visibly on the defensive, and she turned obstinate: “I asked you a question, and you answer me with another question. I want to know where you heard about my affairs. That’s legitimate, don’t you think?”

“From this book,” Umberto answered.

“Give it to me!”

Umberto attempted a parry and retreat, but with little conviction. He realized at that moment that the true purpose of his return to the coast was precisely that: to see Harmonika in the act of reading the adventures of Harmonika. The woman grabbed the book, sat down beside the window, and became engrossed in her reading. Umberto, although he had not been asked, sat down, too. Over Harmonika’s face—still youthful but red, because of all the burst capillaries—he saw the movements of the soul pass like the shadows of clouds on a plain swept by the wind: regret, amusement, irritation, and other, less decipherable sensations. She read for half an hour, then without speaking held the book out to him.

“Is it true?” Umberto asked. The woman was silent for so long that Umberto feared she was offended, but she smiled and answered:

“Look at me. More than thirty years have passed, and I am different. Memory, too, is different. It’s not true that memories stay fixed in the mind, frozen; they, too, go astray, like the body. Yes, I remember a time when I was different. I would like to be the girl in the book; I would be happy also just to have been her, but I never was. It wasn’t I who attracted the

Englishman. I remember that I was malleable, like clay in his hands. My love affairs . . . that’s what interests you, right? Well, they are fine where they are: in my memory, faded, withered, with a trace of perfume, like a collection of dried flowers. In yours they have become shiny and bright like plastic toys. I don’t know which are more beautiful. You choose. Come, take your book and go back to Milan.”

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1. In fact, Stanevicius lived from 1799 to 1848.



Guests

The war wasn't over yet, but Sante's heart was at peace. He descended to the town, and went home to see his father: he wanted to reassure him, the Germans were no longer around, only a few of the rearguard on the plateau and on the Grappa, in the valley almost none, and even the handful who remained had lost their pride; they were more eager to go home than to fight. There was a rumor that the Americans had already reached Padua and Vicenza. He put his gun in the drawer of the credenza; he was just going to the tavern and surely wouldn't need it.

It was a while since he had gone to the tavern without worrying, because to arrive, down a glass, and run out is like not going at all. He stayed for an hour or so, chatting with the usual customers, those who never fail: as in peacetime. When he went out it was dark, the thick, obscuring darkness of moonless nights. He wasn't drunk, only a little happy, in fact only in a good mood, not so much because of the wine as because of the thought that in three or four nights he, too, would be sleeping in his own bed again. Ettore, his younger brother, was already in his, for the first time in more than a year; if he was any later getting home he would find him asleep.

When he arrived in the square he heard a footstep and stopped. Sante had the sharp ear of the smuggler and the poacher, and he realized it was not the footstep of someone from the village: it was heavy and hard, the footstep of legs in boots, and in fact the voice that said, "*Alt*, who goes there?" was a German voice. Sante thought of his gun and called himself a blockhead for

having left it at home; in that darkness, and knowing every corner of the town, he would have been able to take care of a single German. In any case he stopped, and it was a good thing, because a moment afterward another came out, and in the starlight he could see that both had submachine guns over their shoulders.

They asked who he was, if he was from the town, and Sante answered with some nonsense he had prepared a while ago. Then they asked if there were any partisans around, and Sante, thanks to his sharp ear, understood from the tone of voice that that question didn't mean "If there are we'll take care of them" but "If there are, keep quiet and we'll run for it"; he said yes, there were, armed to the teeth, with deadly machine guns. The Germans consulted each other and then one said they were hungry. Sante told them to follow him, to his house: there wasn't much, but he would find some bread and cheese for them.

The house was twenty minutes outside the town, up a winding mule track; Sante went ahead, stopping every so often to wait for the two. Their breath was short and they stopped often; they were not so young, then, he could hear it in their voices as well. Maybe they were from the Territorial Army, and this, given the plan that Sante was elaborating in his head, was a good thing, better not to be dealing with people who were too clever. On the way Sante sought to calm them by every means—that he was afraid of everyone, Germans, partisans, and Fascists, that he had a family, that he was disabled in one arm, that he worked in a factory and was on furlough because of illness, yes, he was convalescent, still rather weak. The Germans understood Italian well enough, and they, too, began to complain; one had asthma but had been declared able-bodied anyway, and the other had been wounded in the Balkans and then sent off to Italy, as if it were a hospital, and instead . . .

The house was dark: the family were all sleeping, and for the moment it was better not to wake them. Sante, in a low voice, invited the Germans to sit down, make themselves comfortable, take off their knapsacks: to take off their knapsacks they would necessarily have to remove their guns. He saw with satisfaction that the two (they really must be not too sharp) had laid their weapons on the floor under the bench, and hadn't removed the safety catches. Sante found bread, cheese, and milk, sat down opposite them, and ate a little himself: to keep them from becoming suspicious, to be polite, and also because he was hungry. He spoke quietly, but the Germans didn't

understand that that was an invitation to do likewise, and answered in loud voices, like people who speak to a foreigner as if he were a deaf mute. What would happen if Ettore and his father woke up? Sante heard some shuffling in the room above and decided it was best to get to work.

He turned, opened the drawer of the credenza, took out the gun and a tricolor flag, and showed the Germans the flag, keeping the gun hidden beneath it. He recounted two or three made-up tales about the flag: they didn't understand very well and stared like a pair of oxen. Suddenly he let go of the flag and had them put their hands up, and immediately took away the guns and carried them to a safe place in a corner of the hearth. Just then he heard the creak of the wooden stairway; first Ettore appeared, rubbing his eyes, and then his father, tall and lean, in his nightshirt, with his mustache disheveled. Sante, calmly and without turning, said that he had taken two prisoners and there was nothing to fear, because he had disarmed them. He told Ettore to carry the knapsacks a little farther away and have a look inside; and to the Germans, who on seeing his father had got up and were standing at attention, but still with their hands raised, he said this was all, they had only to try not to do anything foolish, but if they wanted to finish the bread and cheese they should go ahead, and at this point they could lower their hands.

Ettore began to rummage, but meanwhile he looked at the Germans' boots the way a child looks at cotton candy. At the bottom of one of the knapsacks, amid laundry clean and dirty, he found a beautiful box of compasses. Sante opened it and recognized that they were made in Italy: Ettore should take them, they would be very useful at school, certainly in a few months the schools would reopen, but his father strode barefoot into the middle of the kitchen and said emphatically no.

Sante tried timidly to insist: it was stuff that had been stolen here in the town, he might even know when and from whom, and, besides, what had the Germans done but steal—wholesale and retail—everything, animals, grain, tobacco, even firewood in the forest? But his father would have none of it: "Others can do what they like, but here we are in my house, and you touch nothing; if others are thieves, we are respectable people. They have eaten under this roof: they are our guests, even if they are prisoners. I fought in the Great War, and I know better than you how prisoners are to be treated. Seize their guns, return their knapsacks, and take them to your

command; but first give them a little more bread and that salami that's under the stove, because it's a long journey."

The Germans, who hadn't understood, were trembling. Sante, keeping them covered, told his father that it was all right, he could be calm, and he and Ettore could go back to bed; but first Ettore should run out and get Angelo. Ettore was only seventeen, and for a job like this it was better to have a more practical companion. The command was two hours' walk away, and during the journey Sante had time to regret his choice: Angelo was a brisk type, and Sante had to sweat blood to keep him under control. He had to sweat blood again, maybe more, at headquarters, because everyone, starting with the commander, had accounts to settle with the Germans, and a great desire to shoot the two on the spot. In other words Sante had to make an issue of it, and luckily at headquarters he was respected, and even a little feared, because of certain solo undertakings on the high plateau; and maybe to some degree the Germans saved their own skins, because throughout the negotiations they stood fixed at attention, with such a hangdog look that they didn't even seem like Germans. Finally, it was agreed that they should chop wood for a few days, and not be harmed, until it was possible to deliver them to the Allies. Sante returned home satisfied: not that he considered them his friends, but, first of all, because it didn't seem to him a clean business to shoot people with their hands up, even if they had done it, goodness knows they had done it! And, second, he had captured them, by himself, they were his game, his affair, and it wasn't right that others should decide their fate.

Eight days later the war was over, and Sante, Ettore, and several other villagers were swimming naked in a pool in the Brenta, when they saw passing by on the road a group of partisans escorting five or six prisoners toward Asiago. One was a Fascist—he wore handcuffs and his face was bruised and swollen; behind him were the two Germans, hands free and with an appearance of well-being. Sante jumped out onto the bank, naked as he was, and the Germans recognized him, greeted him, and thanked him. Sante dived back into the clear cold water, feeling pleased to have ended his war that way.

Decoding

On the basis of my conscience and my sensibility as a paint maker, I would prohibit the sale of those fantastic aerosols that spray nitrocellulose enamel and are used for touching up damaged auto bodies. If they were used for that purpose alone, fine; if they were also used (as in fact they were at least once) to paint an arrogant public official yellow, that's fine, too—it may even be defamation, but you have only to wash it off with ethyl acetate and everything goes back to the way it was. But it seems to me unacceptable to allow them to be used to write on walls.

Our grandfathers said, "Walls are the writing paper of the rabble," and perhaps that generalization is too harsh. States of mind, individual or collective, can be imagined—indeed, unquestionably, they exist—in the light of which every judgment on the licit and the illicit has to be suspended, but this is true for, precisely, extreme, tempestuous, extraordinary situations: then all the rules are swept aside, and not only do we write on walls but we build barricades.

All the more reason that, in such a climate, the inconvenience and hard work that the painting involves should go unnoticed. Before the era of spray cans, writing on a wall was an undertaking that required a certain commitment. To walk the streets with a bucket of paint, a dripping brush, and solvent for washing the brush is tiring and uncomfortable, especially at night; the conspicuous and cumbersome equipment does not lend itself to an essentially clandestine operation, and hinders flight; it dirties hands and clothes, which, above all, makes the operator identifiable; finally, a minimum of manual dexterity is needed, if you don't want the letters and marks to come out misshapen and hence self-destructive. In short, it's an

activity that one doesn't undertake without a strong motivation, which is as it should be: it's not right to reach the summit of the Cervino, or sculpt a statue, or cook a dinner without a certain amount of labor. Free fruit was not good, as is well-known, even in the Earthly Paradise; in our current earthly condition, which is no longer paradisiacal, it leads to a harmful leveling of values and judgments, and to a proliferation of handicrafts that, if not exactly harmful, is at least annoying. The arts and sciences should not be encouraged; they should, rather, be discouraged, in order to limit the eruption of *soi-disant* and untalented dilettantes. To store up the wild waters, that is, to store up energy and render it exploitable, dams are needed.

These peevish thoughts and observations came to mind on a late summer afternoon, as I was walking down a hill: their source was a signpost, with the St. Andrew's cross that signals an intersection, to whose four arms four mustaches had been added, at right angles, in dark-green paint, thus transforming it into a swastika. The next sign had undergone the same touch-up; whereas the signs facing in the other direction, that is, visible to those going uphill, were unblemished. It was clear that the illicit painter had come from above. As I continued on down, I found another post with a swastika, and a wall on which the stylized two-headed ax of the far right Ordine Nuovo had been painted, and written next to it: "You Chinese, just a few more months." A little beyond, on the side of a chapel, I read: "W the SS"—"Long Live the SS"—with the two *S*'s in their rigid, runic-chair-like form, the one that was preferred and prescribed by Hitler and Rosenberg, and that the linotype machines and typewriters of the Third Reich were equipped with. Farther on, and in the same dark-green paint, was written: "To Us!"

At this point I would like to clarify my feelings. All writing on walls, not just Fascist slogans, saddens me, because it's pointless and stupid, and stupidity is damaging to human society. Apart from the revolutionary exceptions that I mentioned earlier, it's acceptable only if it's done by children, or by those who have the mental age of children: more generally, those who are unable to foresee the effects of their own actions. In fact, this cumbersome and *untidy** vehicle of propaganda has never led anyone to change his mind, not even the most ingenuous reader, and not even about the excellence of a soccer team; or, if it has, has done so in the opposite sense of the writer's intentions, as happens with the advertisements you're

forced to watch at the movies. I get even more irritated by the writing (though it's rare) of those who think as I do, because they debase ideas that I consider to be serious.

In short, I dislike writing on walls, especially if it's Fascist nonsense. I continued on my way, finding still more swastikas, all of them dextrorotatory, that is, obtained by crossing the initial *N* and *S* of National Socialism. Now, if someone draws swastikas at random, it's likely that he'll do half dextro- and half levorotatory: the fact that they were all to the right was therefore a sign, the symptom of a minimum of historical or ideological training. So much the worse. At the intersection with the state road there was the inscription W SAM,[1] then the trail was lost, either to the right or to the left: maybe here the painter had got back in his car or on his motorcycle.

In town I took care of the business I had to take care of, and went back up the same road. The inscriptions still had a slight odor of solvent, so they couldn't be very old, at most two days. The paint was still soft where it was thickest. As I slowly ascended, I tried to reconstruct from the signs the personality of the painter, which is always a fascinating exercise. Young, undoubtedly, for the reasons mentioned above. Tall, not very: the swastikas on the signposts had been sprayed from bottom to top, one could see from the dribbles. Robust, very likely: everyone knows what the Nazis think of the non-robust, and it can be presumed that among the non-robust (except for aberrations) the sentiment is returned. Intelligent no, certainly. And no expert in spraying paint, as was evident from the lack of uniformity in the strokes, and from the drips and spots corresponding to the change of direction in those strokes. Cultured and educated? Hard to say: there were no errors of spelling, the writing seemed fluent. Let's say first year of high school. To summarize, the image (completely arbitrary) I had come up with was of a student of about fifteen, muscular and stocky, "of good family," emotionally unstable, introverted, tending to bullying and violence. As for the family history, the information was scant: maybe the father, too, was a Fascist, because among the green inscriptions there was a "To Us!" universal during the Ventennio[2] but discredited among the younger generations; and this father must own a greenish-brown car, because someone who buys a can of spray paint just for writing on walls is more likely to choose red or black. The more plausible hypothesis was that the father had bought the green spray paint to touch up the green car, and then given it to his son, or the son had appropriated it.

Mulling over this line of reasoning in a random fashion, as one does while walking, I arrived at the square in B. I immediately discarded the idea of reporting the swastikas to the carabinieri: they are good enough at catching chicken thieves but certain other activities, large or small, do not rouse their reflexes for trapping, hunting, and capture. Instead, I went to the housewares shop, the only place in B. where paint is sold: of course the spray can could have come from far away, but why not try? The housewares lady was efficient (as she is in all her doings; I've known her for some time); without visibly straining to remember, she said yes, she had sold a single spray can, Alfa Green 12004, last Friday, to Signor Fissore, at ten in the morning. Perfect.

In B. we all know one another. Fissore is an insurance agent, a gourmet and a flashy dresser, something of a braggart, skeptical and credulous at the same time, gossipy more from thoughtlessness than from spite; a man out of his time, eighty years late, and in our day he moves uneasily, denies everything, doesn't want to see things, barricades himself on weekends like the pioneers in their forts. He is not a man of swastikas. That's why I hadn't thought of him, or of his Alfa Giulia, which is in fact green. But his children?

Other people's children don't interest me much. They might interest me if I could have contact with them, but that's impossible. They are amoebas, clouds; they are indescribable—every year, every month they change clothes, habits, language, face, and, even more, opinions. To what purpose get friendly with Proteus? You will praise him for his whiteness, and find him before you black as pitch. You will pity his sufferings and he will strangle you.

Fissore has a son and a daughter, but the latter was out of the question: she had been in Scotland for a month. The son is called Piero, and doesn't fit the tentative image I was forming, except in the fact of being fifteen years old. He is thin, timid, and nearsighted, and I don't think he's involved in politics: I can say that because last summer I gave him some algebra and geometry lessons, and those who have tried it know that private lessons are a wonderful tool for investigation, sensitive as seismographs. He isn't even a typical introvert, because he speaks quite a lot; rather, he's a complainer, one of those who tend to see the world as a vast network of conspiracies against them, and themselves at the center of the world, exposed to every sort of injustice. It's hard to be cured of this tendency, which is debilitating,

because injustices exist. I think it's good to teach those who feel persecuted that they're not the only ones exposed to injustice, and, above all, that complaining is no use; we must defend ourselves, individually or collectively, with tenacity and intelligence, and also with optimism. Without optimism the battles are lost, even against windmills.

I ran into Piero a few days later, by chance, because I didn't think it was worth the trouble to follow him, or to stand outside his gate in ambush, like a leopard. I asked him how things had gone at school: first mistake. Badly: he had to retake the exams in October, even in mathematics. He said it with an air of rebuke, as if it had been my fault, not as a former instructor but as other, as not-Piero, and hence a member of the conspiracy against him. I deduced from this a vague distress, consisting of a superficial layer of vexation, and a deeper one that seemed to me remorse, an imprecise remorse, without direction, to analyze later; his evident unhappiness, and the act that I suspected him of, might really be my fault. Giving geometry lessons to an adolescent is not only a diagnostic tool; it is also, or can be, a drastic therapy. It can be the first revelation, in a school career, of the severe power of reason, of the intellectual courage that rejects myths, and of the healthy emotion of recognizing in one's own mind a mirror of the universe. It can be an antidote to rhetoric, approximation, sloth; it can be, for the youth, a joyful verification of his mental muscularity, or the occasion to develop it. Perhaps I had made scant use of this therapy, or none, or it had been unsuitable for him. I looked at him carefully, close up. He is bony rather than thin, the eyes behind the glasses are hesitant, unsteady, as if uncertain what to focus on. I didn't know where to begin my inquiry; in the end, thinking that the straight way was best, I asked him if he had seen the green inscriptions down the road. "I did them," he said simply. "I've had enough, it's got to stop."

"Enough of what?"

"Of everything. Of school. Of being fifteen. Of this town. Of mathematics: what's the use for me? Since I'm going to be a lawyer; rather, a judge."

"Why a judge?"

"To . . . so, to do justice. So that people pay; each one pays his bills."

We were sitting on a wall and Piero was fiddling with one hand in his pants pocket, which bulged oddly. Gradually, mechanically, he took out a Ping-Pong ball, then a piece of candy, a crumpled photograph, two twisted

cigarettes, a red-and-black badge I couldn't identify, a clothespin, a handkerchief with two knots, a hair clip. Silently he arranged the objects on the wall, between me and him: he pretended to be distracted, but I understood that it was a scene, a performance directed at me. Finally he said, "And she dumped me." He took the clip and with an angry gesture threw it into the river that ran deep at the base of the wall, among weeds and broken packing crates.

It didn't seem to me fitting to push the inquiry further. Piero, looking into the void, bit his fingernails; then he threw into the stream, one by one, the other symbols, to me indecipherable, with the exception of the handkerchief, which he put back in his pocket. I thought that, if it depended on him, the Chinese would be able to survive a long time. I thought also of the essential ambiguity of the messages that each of us leaves behind, from birth to death, and of our profound incapacity to reconstruct a person out of them, the man who lives out of the man who writes. Those who write, even if only on walls, write in a code that is theirs alone, and that others do not know; likewise those who speak. Few are able to transmit clearly, to express, to express themselves, to be explicit: some could and don't want to, others would like to and cannot, the majority neither want to nor can.

But I thought also of the misunderstood power of the weak, the unfit: in our unstable world, a failure, even a silly failure like that of the fifteen-year-old Piero, having to retake his exam in October and dumped by the girl, can provoke others, in a chain reaction, one frustration, other frustrations. I thought of how disagreeable it is to help disagreeable men, who are most in need of help. And finally I thought of the thousands of other writings on Italian walls, faded by forty years of rain and sun, often riddled with bullet holes from the war they helped unleash, and yet still legible, thanks to the vicious obstinacy of paints and corpses, which break down in a short time but whose macabre remains endure into eternity: writings that are tragically ironic, and yet perhaps still capable of inciting errors from their error, and failures from their failure.

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* Here, and throughout *Lilith and Other Stories*, an asterisk indicates that the word is in English in the original.

1. "Long Live SAM": SAM is Squadre d'Azione Mussolini (Mussolini's Action Squad).

2. The period from October 30, 1922, when Mussolini took power, to July 25, 1943, when he was deposed.

Weekend

In July of 1942, Silvio and I talked a lot about Monte Disgrazia. For those who, like us, lived and worked in the city, talking about the mountains—making meticulous plans, consulting guides and maps—was a tolerable substitute, and was, besides, not very arduous or costly; it was, in other words, a form of voyeurism that we considered permissible, given the circumstances. The fact that on half the planet a pitiless war was raging, that bombs were raining down on Milan, and that the chains of the racial laws were tightening around us worried us without distressing us, and didn't keep us from taking advantage of being twenty-five. The mountains allowed us to find pleasures that compensated for the many that were forbidden, and to feel equal to our contemporaries with less culpable blood.

A sunny Saturday arrived: we took the laborious local train to Colico, jammed with evacuees, who looked malevolently at our knapsacks, and then we got on the bus that was to take us from Sondrio to Chiesa, in Val Malenco. We had rope, also picks; as for crampons, a lack of funds meant we had only one pair, intended for the lead climber. We had left it vague whether, this time, the prestige and proportionate responsibilities would fall to Silvio or to me: we would decide on the spot. On the spot, but not that time: we later decided, Solomon-style, to put on one crampon each, because there was a long icy traverse across the mountainside. Although heretical, it's a solution that offers practical advantages, but that is another story.

When we got off at Chiesa, it was already almost night. We entered the most modest inn in the place, handed over our documents, and had dinner. Around ten we went to our room and prepared to go to bed, since we were to rise very early, but we heard a nervous knocking at the door. It was the

servant, or maybe the daughter of the owners, a thin, olive-skinned girl, with a Gypsy look, who whispered to us, in terror: “The carabinieri are waiting for you downstairs.”

We went down, more curious than alarmed. In the hallway there was a marshal, and at first sight he seemed to us drunk: more precisely, the type of whom it is said that they are cheerful drunks. He had a pamphlet in his hand and was speaking animatedly to the innkeeper. He greeted us courteously, directed at us a luminous smile, and told us that we were in violation of the law. Then we realized that he wasn’t drunk, I mean not on wine but, rather, on the “exercise of his duties”; it’s well-known that this is an agent at least as exhilarating and intoxicating as alcohol. The pamphlet that he was holding was an issue of the *Official Gazette*, dated some months earlier; he showed it to us with professional enthusiasm, indeed, with tones of gratitude that astonished us, and that we understood only as his speech proceeded. Thanks to us, thanks to our identity cards, which were provided with the stamp “Of Jewish race,” and which the innkeeper had given him, he had been granted the unaccustomed joy of translating into action a rare and precious provision of the aforementioned *Gazette*, a connoisseur’s pleasure. Look here, Italian citizens of the Jewish race are not allowed to stay in border towns; and Chiesa, yes sir, is a border town, the Swiss border is in fact less than ten kilometers away. Very slightly less than ten, we can agree: nine kilometers and nine hundred meters as the crow flies, from the Town Hall to the closest salient, he had checked it himself on the 1:25000 scale maps of the Military Geographic Institute—so less than ten. Now, wasn’t he a conscientious bureaucrat?

It seemed that he expected praise even from us, and he appeared disappointed when he read in our faces opposition rather than admiration. His gaze clouded, and even his face, until then shiny with sweat, seemed to slightly fog up, like a mirror below the dew point. He assured us that he had no personal resentment against us, but that the law—harsh, but the law—did not allow loopholes. We could not stay overnight in Chiesa, it was pointless to insist (in fact, we had not insisted at all), we had to return. And here the conversation became more complicated.

Silvio said, “Return where? There’s no bus at this hour. We could go down on foot to Torre, which is outside the ten kilometers.”

The marshal pondered, and then he said, “But who can assure me that you’ll take the road to the valley? I don’t have men to escort you, and in the

dark of the blackout no one will see you. How shall we proceed?”

I said that we, too, had the greatest respect for the law, but that authority was represented by him: it was up to him, not us, to decide what to do. Apart from everything else, we weren’t even acquainted with the wording of the law. As the matter became annoying for the marshal, it became entertaining for us; he found it irritating and strange that, instead of cooperating, we had gone in search of quibbles. He asked us about our plans for the following day, and we, wary of talking about the Disgrazia, declared that we had come up to Chiesa for the healthy mountain air; the marshal thought about it, and said that the only solution was to take us to the jail, but the innkeeper intervened in our behalf: we were his guests, race or no race, and it was immediately obvious that we were respectable people, since we had paid in advance for our stay. Here Silvio scowled at him so that he wouldn’t let slip that we had done so because we intended to leave for the mountain very early the next morning. The innkeeper was intelligent and dropped the subject; instead he raised another objection, that there was a smuggler in the jail cell, the whole town knew it, and on the plank bed there was room only for two: it would be inhuman.

The marshal made a conciliatory proposal: if we were confined to the inn? If the innkeeper declared himself willing to take the proper precautions so that we would not escape, the law would be safe, and in essence we, too, would achieve our goal of breathing good air, even if only through the window.

Silvio objected that confinement to the inn was equivalent to imprisonment, and that the carabinieri should therefore reimburse us for the cost of the stay; and that in fact the question remained whether it wasn’t also their duty to pay for the dinner, because we had eaten it when the illegal act had already been committed, and if it hadn’t been discovered earlier it was their fault, not ours. The marshal was no longer amused: he said that perhaps, in certain respects, we were right, but that the reimbursement could be discussed a few months from now; he had to make a report to the Lieutenancy, or maybe even (it was a new situation) to the Division in Milan, to wait for the warrant, and so forth. The innkeeper went to the cash box, rummaged in it, and gave us back our money: he said that way it was simpler and more fitting. The marshal said that that was fine with him; we must forgive him, he would send one of his men to make sure

that we in fact got on the first bus the next day, the one at eleven, and we all went to bed.

We woke the following morning rested and refreshed, and further cheered by the fact that we had slept at the expense of the state. Of this adventure of ours in Val Malenco only two documentary photographs remain. In one you see Silvio in his pajamas, sitting on the windowsill, against a background of useless jagged peaks and the belltower clock, which says ten thirty; in the other there's me washing my sleepy face: the time (the same) can be read on my wristwatch, pointed ostentatiously in the direction of our goal.

The Soul and the Engineers

"How long since I've seen you?" Guido asked. We had run into each other three years earlier, at a conference, and maybe also five years earlier, at the thirtieth anniversary graduation dinner; but I continued to see in him, under the encrustation of years and success, the fat, lazy, slow but not stupid boy who had been my deskmate for I don't know how many years. I had shamelessly prompted him during quizzes, and had let him copy my Latin translations.

Contrary to the rule, Guido improved over the years. The fat disappeared, and the laziness evolved, acquiring elegance and style: it became the noble indolence of a confident man, with tranquil nerves and measured reactions. Today, Guido is one of those happy hybrids one finds as much at ease in Torre Velasca as in Monte Carlo or on Fifth Avenue. He ordered two *fritti misti* and continued, "So I still haven't told you what happened to me later? About the divorce from Henriette? My gallbladder? The soul of Miss MacLeish?"

Divorces are all too similar to really interest me, and the gallbladder business couldn't have been serious, or must have turned out all right, given that Guido was consuming the *fritto* with the slow concentration of the gourmet. So I tried to direct him to the story of the soul: his stories are always odd, and I was impatient to know what could have joined an Anglo-Saxon soul and Guido Bertone, mining engineer. Perhaps by digging ever deeper tunnels . . . ?

"Oh no," Guido answered, shrugging his shoulders imperceptibly. "My tunnels, that time, were anything but deep, and the soul was quite far out of the ground. We were in Utah: my company had obtained a concession for

locating and extracting fossil coal. We'd struck it rich, there was coal all over: wherever we drilled, fifty or a hundred meters down we'd reach a vein, and the coal was compact, clean, and soft, so you could practically dig it out with your bare hands; in other words, a mine like butter. The firm began to get an appetite: it bought land full speed ahead, paying very high prices. In a few months all the owners had sold, except one. Right in the middle of the concession there was a tiny plot, half an acre of uncultivated land and woods, a tiny doll's house and a shed roof with an old Ford under it. This belonged to Miss MacLeish, and she had no intention of selling."

"It was her right: she must have had her reasons," I said.

"You take her side, don't you?" Guido answered. "Of course it was her right, but for the firm it was a serious obstacle. Our boss had written to her asking her to name a price herself; she had answered politely, saying it wasn't that she didn't want to sell but that she couldn't. She would happily have accepted the firm's offer, because she was poor and alone, but there were deep—'deep-seated'*—reasons that she couldn't sell the land.

"The boss read the letter, laughed harshly, and told me to go and see what the situation was. The situation was strange: the MacLeish property was reduced to an island, with bulldozers, din, and people busy working on all four sides, but the lady gave no sign of being annoyed by this; rather, she seemed not even to notice it. She was a tall, good-looking old woman, direct, dressed with a modest simplicity: she told me that she was eighty-five, that she had been born on that land, and that she couldn't sell because in the tallest tree lived her mother's soul. She pointed it out to me, and it was a splendid oak, forty meters high, with a leafy cupola—a cathedral of foliage. It made an extraordinary impression of youth and strength, and something like a bond between earth and sky."

"*Robur, roboris*," I said, since I can't resist the vice of quoting. "In Latin it means 'oak,' but also 'strength.'"

"Bravo, but your Latin is of no use to me anymore. And yet the tree wasn't young, it was a hundred and ten years old, the proprietress told me proudly: it had been planted the day her mother was born. I made my report, and I expected another ogreish guffaw from the boss; instead he told me that, if that was how things stood, he would have to resort to the board of directors. He did so, and four months later a committee of experts arrived—a fiduciary accountant from the firm, a man with a degree in forest science, a psychologist, and two experts in the paranormal. Another month

went by in inspections and surveys, and meanwhile the blockade of the mines around Miss MacLeish became tighter and tighter; but she continued to insist that it was morally impossible to abandon the soul of her mother, contained in the oak tree, to its fate.

"I read the experts' report. None of them doubted the legitimacy of the objections raised by the lady, and, as for the possibility that the soul was in the tree, they confined themselves to saying that they had no arguments either to prove the fact or to refute it. They proposed to dig up the oak, with all its roots, and transplant it to a place satisfactory to the owner. After some hesitation, the lady accepted, but only on the written guarantee that the tree wouldn't suffer, and on the drawing up (at the company's expense) of an insurance policy on the survival of the tree; she was helped by a good lawyer.

"The oak was so big, and its roots so strong, that thirty laborers had to dig for a week just to expose them. I was there when the crane began pulling, and I can assure you . . . yes, well, those roots struggled like living things: they put up resistance, they groaned, and then, when they came out of ground, they seemed like hands from which you were tearing something beloved. It's lucky that the company has broad shoulders and long experience in unusual transport; it had to build special machines for lifting the tree and carrying it, stop traffic on the main road, mobilize the police, cut and then reconnect several electrical lines. Now the oak stands on top of a hill: at its foot the firm had to construct a little house and a shed identical to the ones that the lady had to abandon."

"And is the lady satisfied?"

"Her behavior was above reproach. After a few months she wrote us a letter of release, in which she declared that the oak had taken root well, and that in fact it produces more acorns than before. She gave up the land for an extremely modest price."

Brief Dream

The compartment had been empty until Alessandria, and Riccardo got ready for the night: he liked to sleep sitting up in a train, and had long been used to it. But as soon as he turned off the overhead light a girl came in; she was carrying both her coat and her traveling bag so she was coming from another compartment. Evidently from the one next door, from which a confused clamor of masculine voices could be heard. She said, “Good evening,” in a curious singsong, arranged her things, and sat down opposite him.

Riccardo wasn’t sorry about the new situation. Immediately he remembered train episodes in tales by Tolstoy and Maupassant, at least twenty little grotesque or gallant train stories, a fine novel about a train ride by Italo Calvino, and finally a famous scene in which Sherlock Holmes demonstrates to Watson how by examining a pair of hands one can easily trace the past, present, and maybe even the future of their owner. At the same time, he felt conflicted and uncomfortable; a distant (and hopeless) code of behavior prescribed that he not waste that encounter and yet he was sleepy. He answered, “Good evening,” and became engrossed in the attempt to get information from the girl’s hands.

He didn’t get much. They were neither callused nor too well cared for, neither reddened by detergents nor ennobled by cosmetics. They were quite strong and short, with pale, slightly peeling nail polish; maybe the woman came from far away, certainly she was not the type who devotes a lot of time to personal appearance. She wore a windbreaker, and underneath a black polo-neck sweater; her pants were of brown corduroy, fairly worn, with two leather patches on the inside of the thighs. An incongruous place:

what purpose could they serve? To ride a broomstick? But she didn't look like a witch; she seemed a rather domestic type. The rest of the girl was also strong and short; Riccardo calculated that if they both stood up she would barely reach his shoulder. In fact, a little while later she stood up, but it was impossible to check because he stayed sitting.

Anyway, the girl stood up, rummaged in her purse, which was on the luggage rack, and took out a book, at which Riccardo became all eyes, like Argus. It wasn't a mystery or a science fiction novel or a Mondadori classic; it was an old, shabby volume, with a soft faded cover, on which Riccardo read bit by bit, in English, "Catalogue of the Petrarch Collection, bequeathed by . . ." he couldn't decipher by whom the collection had been "bequeathed," and that "bequeathed" intrigued him, but the rest of the title took away any trace of sleepiness. He, too, had a book in his suitcase, but it didn't lend itself to exchanging a message: it was a sex and horror paperback; better to leave it where it was. There came to mind the proofs that he was to deliver to Naples; he took them out and began to correct them ostentatiously, although they were already corrected, but he soon stopped maneuvering, because the girl had fallen asleep. Little by little, as she slept, her hold on the book weakened; the volume closed, slid between her knees, and ended up on the floor. Riccardo didn't dare to pick it up.

She was calm and composed in sleep, and Riccardo took advantage of that for a more extensive and thorough inventory. From her heavy shapeless shoes, it seemed that the girl was English: American no, she seemed too homey. Her face, however, didn't go with that, there was nothing English about it—it was round and olive-skinned, and her hair was brown, with a clean, old-fashioned part. A sleeping face, or anyway a face that isn't speaking, doesn't express much; it can be indifferently coarse or delicate, intelligent or stupid; you can distinguish only when it is animated in speech. Seen thus, one could say only that it was youthful and intelligent; the nose was short and turned up, the mouth wide but well shaped, the cheekbones and eyes of a vaguely oriental shape.

A little later Riccardo, too, fell asleep, and was immediately aware of being a great poet, pious, cultivated, and restless; he was returning from his crowning in Rome, where he had won the Strega Prize, and was traveling to Valchiusa in a special, incredibly sumptuous car, whose upholstery was dotted with bees and the lilies of France. The mattress he was lying on, however, rustled annoyingly, because it was full of dried laurel leaves, and

his suitcase, too, was full of laurel branches. Still, the girl opposite—who, although she didn't at all resemble Laura, generally corresponded to her—didn't care about his triumphs or about him; rather, it seemed that she wasn't even aware of his presence. He felt in some way obliged to speak to her, or at least to offer his hand, but he was prevented by a singular impediment.

It was a material impediment, and almost comic: in other words, to put it plainly, he felt pasted to that mattress, completely pasted, from head to toe, like a fly on flypaper. Things being as they were, he didn't even really want to speak to her. Of all the splendid verses he had in his time written for her, not one came to mind, and, besides, he wasn't completely unhappy to be pasted, because that girl was the wife of a knight with a sinister name (this name, however, he couldn't remember), famous for his jealousy and his cruelty.

There were other reasons to feel glued to his berth: in competition with the young foreigner there existed another young woman of ambiguous identity, in fact, definitely of a dual nature, since she lived in Turin on Via Gioberti in 1966 and simultaneously somewhere in Provence in 1366. He should be able to overlook inconsistencies of this sort, but she was a type who did not admit compromises, and would not have accepted rivals, even in 1366. What to do? Riccardo thrust her into his subconscious: for the moment she was better there.

He then felt a deeper and more serious uneasiness. Was it legitimate, was it decent for a good Christian, to invent a woman, distilling her from his dreams, for the purpose of loving her image for a lifetime, and using this love to become a famous poet, and to become a poet in order not to completely die, and at the same time to see that other woman of Via Gioberti? Wasn't it hypocritical?

Already he felt weighing on him the hypocrite's cap, gilded outside, lead inside, when the train slowed down and stopped at a station. A mechanical female voice, but certainly Tuscan, announced in the shadows that it was the Station of Pisa, Station of Pisa, change for Florence and Volterra. Riccardo woke up; the girl (completely put back into perspective) woke, too: she stretched, yawned politely, gave a hint of a timid smile, and said, "*Pisa. Vituperio de le genti—*." She had a strong English accent. Riccardo, still confused by sleep and by his dream, gasped for a moment,

and then replied, correctly, "*del bel paese là dove il sí suona*,"[1] but he couldn't remember the next line.

He remained astonished by the girl's overture; yet he intended to show her the Capraia and the Gorgona, as soon as the train moved, and if the moon came out from behind the clouds. But the moon didn't come out, and he had to be content with the theoretical explanation: of how, that is, the two harmless islands, seen from Pisa in perspective, could in fact bring to mind, for a slightly angry poet, the elaborate and vicious image of a dam at the mouth of the Arno, so that every person in Pisa would drown. To all appearances the girl, too, was contented by it; she seemed fairly familiar with the business of Count Ugolino but was overcome by sleep. She yawned again, looked at her watch (Riccardo also looked; it was one forty), asked perfunctorily, "May I stretch my limbs?" and, without waiting for an answer, took off her shoes and lay down on the seat, occupying all three places. She wasn't wearing socks; her feet were solid but graceful and young, almost childish.

Riccardo had trouble getting back to sleep. ". . . *dove le belle membra / pose colei che sola a me par donna*."[2] No Italian would ever say *membra*, or "limb"—it's one of those words which can be written but not uttered, because of some mysterious national taboo. There are many of these; who, in speaking, would ever say *poiché* (since), or *alcuni* (some) or *ascoltare* (listen)? No one; he, for example, would be flayed alive before he did so, just as, for that matter, any Piedmontese or Lombard would be flayed alive before using the remote past tense. Out of every five words in the dictionary, at least one is unspeakable, like a dirty word.

At dawn, a little beyond Rome, the girl woke up, or, rather, she reawakened. Riccardo offered her a cigarette, and she lit one for herself and for him. Starting a conversation wasn't difficult; in a few minutes Riccardo had learned the essential facts: that she was studying modern literature; that she was in Italy for the first time, and hadn't much money, but an aunt married to an Italian expected her in Salerno. She had studied Italian pronunciation on records, and the rest in the fourteenth-century writers, especially the *Canzoniere* of Petrarch, which was the subject of her thesis.

Riccardo prepared to recount the griefs and struggles, the disappointments and victories of his life, his recurrent discouragement, and at the same time his deep certainty that someday he would become a famous and respected writer, and the exhausting boredom of his daily job

(but he wouldn’t say that he worked in an advertising agency: that no), but the girl didn’t even let him begin. When she had finished the cigarette, she took out a small mirror, grimaced with a little laugh, and said, “I’m really a fright!” She left the compartment, announcing that she was going to comb her hair and wash her face.

Riccardo, left alone, began to calculate. He, too, could continue on to Salerno: he could act as a guide, he knew the area well, he had some money; but there were the proofs to deliver to Naples, which the client had to approve. Or he could propose to the girl that she, too, get out at Naples. In Naples he would have the home-field advantage; he didn’t remember much more of Petrarch (he regretted it sincerely, for the first time in his life, and they say that a classical education is useless!), but anyway he hoped that he would be more amusing than the aunt in Salerno. Or let her go to Salerno, and propose a meeting in Naples the following day: he would return to Turin a day (or maybe two, why not?) late, but he would find a pretext. A strike: there is always a strike.

But meanwhile the girl had come back, and immediately afterward the train began to brake. Riccardo was not a man of rapid and easy decisions: he rose and took down his suitcase from the luggage rack, opened it, and rearranged the contents, but meanwhile, conscious of the girl’s look of curiosity, was feverishly racking his brains for a formula of farewell that would not commit him too deeply and yet not appear definitive.

When the train stopped in the station at Naples, he turned and found himself confronting the girl’s gaze. It was a firm and gentle gaze, but with an edge of expectation: she seemed to read him clearly, as if in a book. Riccardo asked, “Why don’t you get out at Naples with me?” The girl shook her head no. He stared at her, smiled, and she, too, had the air of racking her brains, of searching for a response that she couldn’t grasp. She bit one finger, in a childish way; then, waving it solemnly, pronounced, “*Quanto piacce al mondo è breve soghno*.”[3] “It’s pronounced *son-yo*,” said Riccardo, and headed into the corridor to get off the train.

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1. “Pisa, scandal of the people of the beautiful land where sì is heard”: Inferno Canto XXXIII:79.
2. “where she, who alone appeared to me woman, rested her beautiful limbs”: Petrarch, Sonnet 126.
3. “All worldly pleasure is a brief dream”: Petrarch, Sonnet 1.

If Not Now, When?

Translated by Antony Shugaar


0 100 200 mi
0 100 200 km
LITHUANIA
Smolensk
Dniepr
East Prussia
Danzig
Minsk
Bryansk
Nivnoye
Valuets
Gomel
Grodno
Lyuban
Lake Cavasovo
Kosava
(Gerbin)
Novoselky
Zhitkowichi
Turov
David-Gorodok
HOLLAND
Berlin
Oder
Vistula
Warsaw
POLAND
Kolki
Sarny
U. S. S. R.
GERMANY
Glogau
Rawicz
Holy Cross Mountains
Lublin
Kowel
Chelmno
Rovno
Kielce
Annopol
Tunel
Opatów
Zbórz
Wolbrom
Chemielnik
Kraków
Lvov
Kiev
Vinnena
Dniepr
BELGIUM
Rhine
LUX.
Luxembourg
Dresden
Neuhaus
Plauen
Prague
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
FRANCE
Danube
Munich
Vienna
Bratislava
Budapest
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
Berne
Innsbruck
Brenner Pass
SWITZERLAND
Odessa
Belluno
Trento
Milan
Verona
ROMANIA
Danube
Belgrade
Bucharest
YUGOSLAVIA
ITALY
BULGARIA
Sofia
Nivnoye • Stops along the band's route
The borders are those of 1939

1

July 1943

“In my village, clocks were a rarity. There was a clock on the belltower, but it hadn’t told time in I don’t know how many years, maybe since the revolution. I never saw it run, and my father used to say that he hadn’t, either. Not even the bell ringer had a clock.”

“So how did he know when it was time to ring the bells?”

“He heard the hour on the radio, and then he reckoned by the sun and the moon. Anyway, he didn’t ring the bells every hour; he only rang the most important hours. Two years before the war broke out, the bell rope broke. It snapped high up, the wooden ladder was rotten, the bell ringer was old, and he was afraid to climb up and tie on a new rope. From then on, he marked the hours by firing his hunting rifle into the air: one, two, three, four shots. That went on until the Germans arrived. They took his rifle away, and the village was left without the time.”

“Did your bell ringer fire his rifle at night, too?”

“No, but he’d never rung the bells at night, either. We slept at night, and no one needed to know the time. The only one who really cared was the rabbi. He had to know the exact time so he could be sure when the Sabbath began and ended. But he didn’t need the bells. He had a pendulum clock and an alarm clock; when the clocks agreed, he was kind, but when they didn’t agree, you could tell right away, because he turned argumentative, and he’d smack the children’s fingers with his ruler. When I got older, he asked me to get the two clocks to agree. Yes, I was a clockmaker; a licensed one, too. That’s why the recruiting board assigned me to the artillery. My chest measurement was just adequate, with not a centimeter to spare. I had

my own workshop; it was small but with everything I needed. I didn't just repair clocks and watches, I was good at fixing everything, even radios and tractors, as long as they weren't too badly broken. I was the mechanic for the kolkhoz, and I liked my work. I repaired clocks on my own, in my spare time. There wasn't much call for that, but everyone had a rifle, and I fixed rifles, too. And if you're wondering what the name of this village is, it's called Strelka, just like who knows how many other villages; and if you want to know where it is, well I can tell you that it's not far from here, or it used to be, because this Strelka no longer exists. Half the villagers fled into the countryside and the forest, and the other half are in a mass grave, and they're not packed all that tight, because plenty of them had already died. That's right, in a mass grave, a grave that the Jews of Strelka were forced to dig themselves; but in that grave are the Christians, too, and there's not much difference between them now. And you should know that I who am speaking to you now, I, Mendel the clockmaker who repaired the tractors of the kolkhoz, had a wife, and she's in that grave, too; and that I consider myself lucky never to have had children. You should know that many's the time I cursed this village that no longer exists, because it was a village of ducks and nanny goats, and because there was a synagogue and a church but no movie house; and now when I think of it, it seems like the Garden of Eden to me, and I'd cut off a hand if that could make time run backward and everything return to the way it was."

Leonid listened, not daring to interrupt. He had removed his boots and his foot wrappings, and had laid them out in the sun to dry. He rolled two cigarettes, one for him and one for Mendel, then he reached into his pocket for matches. They were damp and he had to strike three before the fourth one burst into flame. Mendel watched him calmly. He was of medium height, limbs taut and sinewy rather than powerful; he had smooth dark hair, a tanned oval face, agreeable despite the bristly beard, a straight short nose, and intense, dark, bulging eyes. Mendel couldn't tear his gaze away from them. They were restless, now staring, now evasive, filled with demand. The eyes of a creditor: or at least of someone who feels he is owed something. And who doesn't feel he is owed something?

Mendel asked him: "Why did you stop here of all places?"

"By chance, really: I saw a barn. And then because of your face."

"What makes my face different from others?"

“Well, that’s the point, it’s not different.” The young man ventured an awkward laugh. “It’s a face like many, it inspires trust. You’re not a Muscovite, but if you walked around Moscow out-of-towners would stop you to ask directions.”

“They’d be out of luck if they did: if I was so good at finding my way around, I wouldn’t still be here. You should know that I don’t have much to offer you, for your stomach or your spirit. My name is Mendel, and Mendel stands for Menachem, which means ‘consoler,’ but I never consoled anyone.”

They smoked for a few minutes in silence. Mendel had extracted a jackknife from his pocket, and picked up a small flat stone from the ground. He spat on it from time to time as he sharpened the blade against it; every so often he checked the sharpness of the edge against his thumbnail. Once he was satisfied, he began trimming the rest of his fingernails, manipulating the knife as if it were a saw. Once he had cut all ten nails, Leonid offered him another cigarette. Mendel refused.

“No, thanks. Really, I shouldn’t smoke, but when I find tobacco, I smoke. What can a man do, when he’s reduced to living like a wolf?”

“Why shouldn’t you smoke?”

“Because of my lungs. Or my bronchi, I’m not sure which. As if it matters whether you smoke or not when the whole world is collapsing around you. Come on, give me that cigarette; I’ve been here since last fall, and this might be the third time I’ve had something to smoke. There’s a village about four kilometers away. It’s called Valuets, it’s surrounded by forest, and the peasants are good people, but they have no tobacco; they also have no salt. For a hundred grams of salt, they’ll give you a dozen eggs, or even a chicken.”

Leonid remained silent for a few moments, as if he were undecided, then he stood up and, barefoot as he was, strode into the barn, emerged with his rucksack and began rummaging around in it. “Here,” he said, tersely, showing Mendel two packets of unrefined salt. “Twenty chickens, if your rate of exchange is accurate.”

Mendel held out his hand, took the two packets, and hefted them approvingly. “Where did you get them?”

“From a long way away. Summer came, and I no longer needed my army utility belt, that’s where I got them. Trade never dies, even when the grass and the people die. There are places where they have salt, places

where they have tobacco, and others still where they have nothing. I come from a long way away, too. I've been living day to day for six months now, walking without knowing where I'm headed; I'm walking just to keep walking, I walk because I walk."

"So you come from Moscow?" Mendel asked.

"I come from Moscow and from a hundred other places. I come from a school, where I learned accounting, and I immediately forgot it. I come from the Lubyanka, because when I was sixteen I stole, and they put me in prison for eight months. In fact, I stole a watch, so in a way we're practically colleagues. I come from Vladimir, from the paratrooper school, because when you're an accountant they put you in the paratroopers. I come from Laptevo, near Smolensk, where I parachuted into the middle of the Germans. And I come from the concentration camp of Smolensk, because I escaped: I escaped in January, and since then I've done nothing but walk. Forgive me, brother, but I'm tired, my feet hurt, I'm hot, and I want to sleep. But first I want to know where we are."

"As I told you, we're near Valuets: it's a village three days' hike from Bryansk. It's a quiet place, the railroad is thirty kilometers away, the woods are dense and the roads are muddy, or dusty, or covered with snow, depending on the season. The Germans don't like this sort of place, they only come around to confiscate livestock, and not that often. Come on, let's take a bath."

Leonid stood up and began putting his boots back on, but Mendel stopped him. "No, not in the river. You can never tell, and it's too far away. Here, right behind the barn." He showed Leonid the facilities: a plank hut, a tin tank perched atop the roof where the water could warm in the sunshine, a small stove for use in winter, made of fire-hardened clay. There was even a showerhead, which Mendel had crafted out of an empty tin can with holes punched in the bottom, connected to the water tank by a metal pipe. "All made with my own hands. Without spending a ruble, and without help from anyone."

"Do the villagers know you're here?"

"They know and they don't know. I go to the village as little as possible, and when I go, I always arrive from a different direction. I repair their machinery, I try to say as little as I can, I take payment in bread and eggs, and I leave. I leave after dark: I don't think anyone has ever followed me. Go ahead, take off your clothes. I don't have any soap, at least not for now.

I get by with ashes, right there in that can, mixed with river sand. It's better than nothing, and I hear that it kills lice better than the medicated soap they give you in the army. Now that I mention it . . ."

"No, I don't have lice, don't worry. I've been traveling alone for months."

"All right, take off your clothes and give me your shirt. There's no reason to take offense. You must have slept in a haystack or a barn, and the louse is a patient animal, it knows how to wait. Just like us, if you think about, with all the distinctions between men and lice."

Mendel examined the shirt carefully, stitch by stitch, with an expert air. "Good, it's kosher, you're clean, no question about it. You'd have been welcome anyway, but without lice you're all the more welcome. You can go ahead and have the first shower: I already showered this morning."

He observed his guest's skinny body more closely: "How come you're not circumcised?"

Leonid avoided the question:

"And how did you figure out that I'm Jewish, like you?"

"'You can't wash off a Yiddish accent with ten baths,'" Mendel quoted. "In any case, you're very welcome, because I'm sick of being alone. Stay if you like, even if you're from Moscow, and you've studied, and you stole a watch, and you don't want to tell me your story. You're my guest. And it's lucky that you found me. I should have put four doors in my house, one for each wall, just as Abraham did."

"Why four doors?"

"So that wayfarers would have no difficulty finding the way in."

"Where did you learn these stories?"

"That's in the Talmud, someplace in the Mishnah."

"So, you see, you've studied, too!"

"When I was a boy, I was a pupil of the rabbi I told you about. But now he's in the mass grave with the rest of them, and I've forgotten almost everything. All I remember is the proverbs and the fables."

Leonid fell silent for a while; then he said, "I didn't say I don't want to tell you my story. I only said that I'm tired and I'm hungry." He yawned and walked toward the shower hut.

At four in the morning it was already daylight, but neither of the men woke until two or three hours later. During the night, the sky had clouded over, and it was drizzling; long gusts of wind came out of the west, like ocean waves, heralded at a distance by the rustling of leaves and the creaking of branches. They woke up rested and refreshed. Mendel didn't have much else to hide:

"Certainly. I was separated from my unit, I'm not a deserter. I've been missing since July of 1942. One of a hundred thousand, two hundred thousand missing soldiers: is that something to be ashamed of? Can those who are missing be counted? If they had any choice in the matter, they'd never have gone missing; you can count the living and the dead, but those missing in action are neither living nor dead and cannot be counted. They're like ghosts.

"I don't know if you paratroopers got training in jumping out of a plane. They taught us everything, every artillery piece in the Red Army, from the biggest to the smallest, starting with diagrams and photographs, as if you were back in the schoolroom, and then in real life, huge beasts that'd put fear in your heart. Well, when they sent me up to the front with my company everything was different, nothing made sense: there weren't any two pieces the same. There were Russian guns from the First World War, German guns, Austrian guns, there were even some from Turkey, and you can imagine the confusion over the shells. It was exactly a year ago: my position was up in the hills, midway between Kursk and Kharkov. I was the head gunner, even though I was a Jew and a clockmaker, and the gun wasn't from the First World War, it was from the Second World War, and it wasn't Russian, it was German; that's right, it was a Nazi 150/27 that had been sitting there, who knows why, maybe it had broken down—since October 1941, when the Germans made their big advance. You know, once it's in position, a monster that size is hard to move. They put me in charge of it at the last minute, when all around us the ground was already starting to shake and the smoke was blocking out the sun, and it took courage—I'm not even saying to shoot straight, just to stay there. And how can you shoot straight if no one gives you the aiming coordinates, and you can't ask for them because your field telephone is out of action, and anyway who would you ask, when you can see that everything is lost in confusion, and the sky is so dark that you can't tell if it's day or night, and the ground is exploding all

around you, and it feels as if an avalanche is about to bury you, but no one will tell you where it's coming from, so you don't even know which way to run.

"The three gunners had run away, and maybe they did the right thing, I couldn't say because I never saw them again. I stayed: I didn't want to be captured, but it's a rule that an artilleryman should never abandon his gun to the enemy; so, instead of running away, I stayed by my gun, trying to figure out the best way to sabotage it. No question, breaking a machine is easier than fixing it, but it takes intelligence to break a gun so that you can't fix it, because every artillery piece has its weak point. I just didn't like the idea of running away. It's not that I'm a hero—the idea of being a hero never crossed my mind—but you know how it is, a Jew among Russians has to be twice as brave as the Russians, or they'll immediately tell him he's a coward. And I also thought that if I couldn't sabotage the piece, the Germans would turn it around again, and start shooting at us.

"Luckily, they took care of matters for me. While I was working on the gun, with my head thinking about sabotage and my legs arguing in favor of running away, a German shell arrived, landing in the soft dirt right under the gun barrel, and blew up. The gun leaped into the air and fell over on one side, and I can't imagine anyone will ever get it right side up again. And I believe that the gun saved my skin, because it blocked all the shrapnel fron the shell. Somehow, only one fragment grazed me, right here, you see? on my forehead and right down the middle of my hair. It bled a lot, but I didn't faint, and the wound eventually healed on its own.

"So I started walking—"

"In which direction?" Leonid broke in. Mendel replied with annoyance, "What do you mean 'In which direction'? I tried to join back up with our side; and you're not a military tribunal, anyway. I already told you, the sky was black with smoke, and it was impossible to tell which way you were going. War is chaotic above all, in the field and in a person's head. Most of the time you can't even tell who's won and who's lost—that gets decided later by the generals and the people who write history books. That's what it was like, it was all chaotic. I was confused, too. The shelling continued, and then it got dark. I was half deaf and covered with blood, and I thought my injury was a lot worse than it really was.

"I started walking, and I thought I was going in the right direction, that is, that I was heading away from the front and toward our lines. And in fact

the farther I went, the less noisy it became. I walked all night long, at first I saw other soldiers walking, and then I didn't anymore. Every so often you could hear the whistle of an incoming shell, and I'd throw myself flat on the ground, in a rut, behind a rock. You learn fast at the front, you can make out a hollow where a civilian can see only a field as flat as a frozen lake. Day was dawning, and then I started to hear a new noise, and the ground began to shake. I couldn't figure out what it was—it was a vibration, a continuous rumbling. I looked around for a hiding place, but there was nothing but harvested fields and barren earth, not a shrub, not a wall. Instead of a place to take shelter I saw something I'd never seen before, even though I'd been at war for a year. Running parallel to the way I'd been walking was a railroad, I hadn't noticed it before, and running along the tracks was something that at first I thought was a line of barges, like you'd see on a river. Then I understood, I'd walked in the wrong direction, I was behind the German lines, and that was a German armored train. It was heading for the front, and instead of a train made up of railroad cars it looked to me like a train of mountains; and you may think it strange, you may think it stupid, or you may even think it an obscenity, I don't know how you think about this kind of thing, but what came into my mind was the blessing that my grandfather used to say whenever he heard thunder, 'Your strength and power fill the world.' Eh, these things are impossible to understand, why the Germans made armored trains, but God made the Germans; and why did He make them? Or why did He allow Satan to make them? for our sins? What if a man hasn't sinned? or a woman? And what sins had my wife committed? Or does a woman like my wife have to die and lie in a grave with a hundred other women, and with children, for the sins of someone else, maybe even for the sins of the very same Germans who machine-gunned them down on the edge of the grave?

"Sorry, forgive me, I got carried away, but, you see, I've been chewing these things over for almost a year and I can't get over it; it's been almost a year since I've spoken with another human being, because if you're a missing soldier you're better off not saying anything. You can only talk with another missing soldier."

The drizzling rain had stopped, and from the unsown soil rose a faint scent of mushrooms and moss. The music of peace resounded in the drops of rain falling from one leaf to another, and from the leaves to the earth below, as if there were no war and never had been. Suddenly, over the

music of falling drops a different sound arose: a human voice, a sweet childish voice, the voice of a little girl singing. They hid behind a clump of bushes and saw her: she was lazily driving a small flock of nanny goats before her, she was barefoot and skinny, bundled in a field tunic that hung down to her knees. She had a handkerchief knotted beneath her chin and an emaciated, kind little face, browned by the sun. There was a note of sadness in her singing, in the nasal and contrived style of peasant song, and she was walking aimlessly toward them, following her goats rather than guiding them.

The two soldiers exchanged a glance: there was no way around it, if they left their hiding place the girl would see them; and she'd see them anyway, because she was heading straight toward them. Mendel got to his feet and Leonid followed suit; the girl stopped short, astonished more than frightened, and then broke into a run, overtaking her goats, herding them together, and then driving them back toward the village. She'd never said a word.

Mendel said nothing for a few moments. "That's it; nothing to do about it. This is what it means to live like wolves. It's a shame, when you had just arrived; now, though, it's worse because there are two of us. Nothing like this has happened in months. A child, and it's all over. Maybe she was frightened at the sight of us, even though we're no threat to her. In fact, she's a danger to us: she's a child, and she'll talk. Even if we threatened her and told her to say nothing, she'd talk all the more. She'll talk, and she'll say that she saw us, and the Germans from the garrison will come looking for us: in an hour, or a day, or ten days, but they'll come. And if the Germans never come—or else before the Germans can get here—the peasants will come, or else the bandits. Too bad, comrade. You showed up at the wrong time. Come on, lend a hand, we've got some packing to do. It's a pity, I'd done a lot of work to set this place up. We'll just have to start over. It's a good thing it's summer."

There wasn't a lot to pack; all Mendel's possessions fit comfortably in his military rucksack, including his provisions. But when the packing was done, Leonid noticed that Mendel seemed reluctant to set off: he was dawdling, as if hesitating between two options.

"What's wrong? Did you forget something?"

Mendel didn't answer: he'd sat down again on a tree stump and was scratching his head. Then he stood up with determination, pulled a short

spade out of his knapsack, and said to Leonid: “Come on, follow me. No, we’ll leave our rucksacks here, they’re heavy, we’ll come back for them.”

They set off through the woods, at first following a well-marked trail, and then through heavy underbrush. Mendel appeared to navigate by landmarks known only to him, talking as he walked, without turning to look back, without checking to see if Leonid was following him or listening to him.

“You see, not having any alternative can be a good thing. I have no alternative: I have to trust you, whether or not I want to, and anyway I’m tired of living alone. I’ve told you my story, you don’t feel like telling me yours. All right, you may have very good reasons. You escaped from a concentration camp: I can imagine that you don’t feel like talking about it. To the Germans, you’re a fugitive, besides being a Russian and a Jew. To the Russians, you’re a deserter, and you’re are also suspected of being a spy. Maybe you are a spy. You don’t look like a spy, but if spies all looked like spies, they couldn’t be spies, could they? I have no alternative, I have to trust you, so I’m going to tell you that down there to the left is a big oak tree, the one you can just see in the distance; next to the oak tree is a birch, hollowed out by lightning; and buried amid the roots of the birch are a machine gun and a pistol. It’s not a miracle: I buried them there. A soldier who lets his weapons be taken from him is a coward, but a soldier who carries his weapons with him behind German lines is a cretin. All right, this is the place, you can dig, since you’re younger than me. Oh, and sorry about the ‘coward,’ that wasn’t meant for you; I can imagine for myself what it means to be parachuted behind enemy lines.”

Leonid dug in silence for a few minutes, and the weapons emerged from the soil, wrapped in a piece of oil-soaked tent cloth.

“Should we wait here until it gets dark?” he asked.

“I don’t think we should risk it, someone might come and take our rucksacks.”

They went back to the barn and Mendel dismantled the machine gun so it would fit in the rucksack. They napped until nightfall, then they set off westward.

They halted for a rest after three hours of hiking.

“Tired, aren’t you, Muscovite?” Mendel asked. Leonid denied it, but halfheartedly. “It’s not that I’m tired, it’s just that I’m not used to your pace. In boot camp, we hiked, and they told us how to survive in the forest, how to find our way, moss on tree trunks, the north star, how to dig a foxhole: but it was all theory, the instructors were Muscovites, too. And I’m not used to walking cross-country.”

“Well, this is where you’ll learn. I wasn’t born in the woods, either, but I managed to learn. The only forest in the history of Israel is the Garden of Eden, and you know how that ended. That was it, for six thousand years. Yes, in wartime everything’s different, we have to accept that we’re going to become different, too, and it might not do us any harm. And, after all, in the summer the forest is our friend, it has leaves to conceal us, and can even give us something to eat.”

They resumed their hike, continuing westward. Those were Moscow’s orders, and both of them knew it: soldiers lost behind enemy lines were to avoid being captured, move deeper into German-occupied territory, and hide. They walked and walked, at first in dim starlight, after midnight by the light of the moon. The ground was both firm and yielding; their footsteps made no noise but the footing was solid. The wind had died down, not a leaf was stirring, and there was absolute silence, broken only intermittently by the whirring of a bird’s wings or the melancholy notes of a distant night bird. As dawn approached, the air freshened, saturated with the moist breath of the sleeping forest. They forded two streams and crossed a third over a providential but inexplicable footbridge: all night they had seen no trace of human presence. They found one as soon as day broke. A low milky fog, almost slimy, had arisen: in some places it was barely knee-deep, but it was so dense that it hid the ground, and the two men felt as if they were wading through a marsh; elsewhere it rose over the tops of their heads, and caused them to lose all sense of direction. Leonid stumbled over a fallen branch, picked it up, and was astonished to see that it had been severed cleanly, as if by an ax. A little farther along they noticed that the earth was littered with scraps of bark and pieces of leaves and wood. Overhead, the forest seemed to have been brutally pruned, branches and foliage sliced away as if with a single blow of a gigantic scythe; the farther they walked, the closer the level of the cut was to the ground. They saw saplings cut in half, sheet metal and wreckage, and then the monster itself, fallen from the sky. It was a German bomber, a twin-engine Heinkel, lying

on its side amid the ravaged trees. The plane had lost both wings, but not its undercarriage, and the two propellers displayed blades that were twisted and deformed as if made of wax. Painted in black on the tail was a swastika, proud and horrible, and next to it, stacked vertically, eight silhouettes that Leonid was able to interpret easily: three French fighter planes, a British scout plane, and four Soviet cargo planes, all enemies that the German had shot down before being downed in turn. The plane must have crashed many months ago, because the plants and shrubs of the understory had already begun to sprout in the furrows that it had plowed through the soil.

"This is our lucky star," said Mendel. "What more could you ask for in a campsite? At least for a few days. Once this plane was the master of the skies, now we are its masters." It wasn't hard to pry open the cockpit door; the two men made their way inside, and set about inventorying the contents with cheerful curiosity. There was a rag puppy dog, grease-stained and floppy; someone had wrapped a little collar of dark brown fur around its neck—a failed mascot. A bouquet of artificial flowers. Four or five snapshots, the usual snapshots that soldiers from every nation carry with them: a man and a woman in a park, a man and a woman at a village fair. A German-Russian pocket dictionary: "I wonder why he'd have that if he was flying," Mendel said. "Maybe he had an idea of what was going to happen," Leonid replied, "the parachute is gone, maybe he jumped, and he's somewhere in the vicinity, lost just like us, and the dictionary may have come in handy." But they inspected the dictionary more carefully and saw that it had been printed in Leningrad, not in Germany: odd.

As the inventory proceeded, the plane became odder still. Two of the photographs depicted a slender young man in a Luftwaffe uniform with a short, plump young woman, with dark braids; the three others, in contrast, featured a young man in civilian clothing, stocky and muscular, with a broad face and high cheekbones, and he was with a different girl as well; she, too, was dark-haired, but her hair was cut short, and she was snub-nosed. In one of these three photographs, the young man wore a shirt stitched with with geometric embroidery, and in the background it was possible to make out a town square and a porticoed building with pointed-arch windows, densely arabesqued: it didn't look much like a German setting.

The plane's radio had been ripped out, and there were no bombs in the bomb bay. Instead, there were three stale loaves of rye bread, a number of

full bottles, and a leaflet in Belorussian urging the male citizens of White Russia to enlist in the police divisions being organized by the Germans, and the female citizens to report to the offices of the Todt Organization: they would receive a generous salary in the employ of Greater Germany, enemy of Bolshevism and sincere friend to all Russians. There was a fairly recent issue of *New Belorussia*, the newspaper that the Germans printed in Belorussian in Minsk, dated Saturday, June 26, 1943. The newspaper carried the schedule of Masses at the cathedral and a series of decrees concerning the dismantling of kolkhozes and the redistribution of land to the peasants. There was a chessboard, the work of rough, patient hands, carved out of a broad piece of birch bark: the dark squares had been made by scraping away the white surface layer of bark. There was also a pair of boots, made in a similarly crude manner, which Leonid and Mendel turned over and over, trying to figure out what material they were made of: no, they weren't leather; the inhabitant of the wrecked airplane had cut away the imitation-leather upholstery from the seats and had then sewn them with oversized stitches, using electrical wire found in the wreckage. It was nice work, Mendel acknowledged, but what to do now, given that their new home was already occupied? "We'll hide and wait for him: we'll see what sort of person he is, and then decide."

The tenant returned toward nightfall, treading cautiously; he was the muscular little man in the photographs. He was wearing military trousers, a sheepskin jacket, and the white-and-black square cap of an Uzbek. Hanging from his powerful shoulders was a rucksack, from which he extracted a live rabbit. He killed the rabbit with a chop of the side of his hand to the nape of its neck, then he gutted it and began to skin it, whistling. Mendel and Leonid were so close that they didn't dare speak for fear they would be heard. Leonid, who had taken off his knapsack, opened the flap and pointed to the packets of salt; Mendel understood immediately, and in turn pointed to the machine gun—they could reveal their presence.

The Uzbek, when he saw them emerge from the bushes, gave no sign of surprise. He put down the rabbit and the knife and welcomed them with ceremonious caution. He wasn't as young as he appeared in the photographs; he must have been forty or so. He had a pleasant bass voice, gentle and courteous, but he spoke a halting and ungrammatical Russian, and at a maddeningly slow pace. It wasn't that he hesitated, searching for the correct word: he stopped the conversation at the end of every sentence,

or half-sentence, without tension or impatience, as if the conversation itself had ceased to interest him and he felt no need to bring it to a conclusion; then, disconcertingly, he'd start talking again. Peyami was his name: Peyami Nazimovich. Pause. A strange name, to be sure, but his country was also strange. Pause. Strange for the Russians, and the Russians were strange for the Uzbeks. Long pause, that gave no sign of ending. A missing soldier? Certainly, he, too, was missing, a soldier in the Red Army. He'd been missing for more than a year, for almost two years. No, he hadn't been in the airplane the whole time: moving around from one peasant *izba* to another, sometimes working in the kolkhozes, sometimes with this or that group of deserters, sometimes with a girl. The girl in the picture? No, that was his wife, far, so far away, three thousand kilometers away, on the other side of the front, beyond the Caspian Sea, beyond the Aral Sea.

Was there room in the plane? They could judge for themselves: there wasn't a lot. For a night, yes, if they crowded in; maybe even two, out of courtesy, out of hospitality. But three people couldn't stay there comfortably. Leonid spoke rapidly to Mendel in Yiddish: there was a quick way to settle the matter. No, Mendel replied without moving his head or changing his expression: he wasn't willing to kill the man, and if they kicked him out, he could report them. And for that matter, a downed airplane was hardly an ideal or long-term place to stay.

"I've already done too much killing. I'm not going to kill a man for a seat in an airplane that won't fly."

"Would you kill him if the plane could fly? If it could take you home?"

"What home?" Mendel replied. Leonid said nothing.

The Uzbek hadn't understood the conversation, but he had recognized the harsh music of Yiddish:

"Jews, right? It's all the same to me, Jews, Russians, Turks, Germans." Pause. "One man doesn't eat more than another when he's alive, and he stinks no worse than another when he's dead. There were Jews where I come from, too, good at business, a little less good at waging war. The same is true of me, for that matter; so what reason would there be for us to make war on each other?"

By now the rabbit had been skinned. The Uzbek set aside the skin, split open the animal with his bayonet, placing it on a stump, and then began browning it on a piece of sheet metal from the plane that he'd rudely fashioned into the shape of a pan. He'd added neither grease nor salt.

“Are you going to eat the whole thing?” asked Leonid.

“It’s a skinny rabbit.”

“Could you use some salt?”

“I could use some.”

“Here’s the salt,” said Leonid, pulling a packet out of his backpack, “salt in exchange for rabbit: a good deal for all of us.”

They haggled for a long time over how much salt half a rabbit would buy. Peyami, without ever losing his temper, was a tenacious negotiator, always with some new argument at the ready: he enjoyed bargaining for its own sake and it thrilled him as an exercise in jousting. He pointed out that a rabbit was nourishing with or without salt, while salt was nutritionally worthless without rabbit. That his rabbit was lean, and therefore more valuable, because rabbit fat was bad for the kidneys. That he was temporarily out of salt, but that the price for salt in the region was low, and there was plenty of it, because the Russians were air-dropping it by parachute to the partisan bands: that the two of them shouldn’t try to exploit the shortage that he happened to be suffering just now, because if they continued in the direction of Gomel, they’d find salt in all the *izbas*, at disastrously low prices. Last of all, purely out of cultural interest and curiosity about how others did things, he inquired:

“So you eat rabbit? The Jews in Samarkand don’t eat it—they consider it to be like pork.”

“We’re special Jews; we’re hungry Jews,” said Leonid.

“I’m a special Uzbek, too.”

Once they’d struck their bargain, out of a hiding place came apples, slices of roast turnip, cheese, and wild strawberries. The three men ate together, bound by the surface friendship that springs out of haggling; when they were done Peyami went inside the plane to get the vodka. It was *samogon*, he explained: wild vodka, homemade, distilled by the peasants; much more potent than state vodka. Peyami made a point of explaining that he was a special Uzbek because, even though he was a Muslim, he liked vodka very much; also because, even though the Uzbeks are a very bellicose people, he had no desire to make war:

“If no one comes looking for me, I’ll just stay here trapping rabbits until the war ends. If the Germans come, I’ll go with the Germans. If the Russians come, I’ll go with the Russians. If the partisans come, I’ll go with the partisans.”

Mendel would have liked to know something more about the partisans and the bands for whom the Russians were air-dropping salt. In vain he tried to pry more information out of the Uzbek, but by now he'd had too much to drink, or he'd decided it was unwise to talk about the subject, or he really didn't know anything more about it. For that matter, the *samogon* really was powerful, practically a narcotic. Mendel and Leonid, who weren't big drinkers, and who hadn't had any alcohol in a long while, stretched out in the cabin of the airplane and fell asleep before it got dark. The Uzbek stayed outdoors longer; he washed the dishes (that is, his nonregulation frying pan), first with sand and then with water, he smoked his pipe, he had some more to drink, and at last he lay down, too, shoving aside the two Jews, who didn't wake up. At eleven o'clock, the sky in the west was still faintly luminous.

At three in the morning, it was already light: a profusion of sunlight poured in, not only through the two portholes but also through the cracks in the sheet metal that had been smashed by the plane's impact against the trees and the ground. Mendel was painfully awake: his head hurt and his throat was dry. The *samogon*'s fault, he thought, but it wasn't just the *samogon*. He couldn't get his mind off the bands hiding in the woods that the Uzbek had mentioned. Not that this was really news to him: he'd heard people talk about them, and more than once; he had seen German posters, in two languages, tacked to cabins in the villages, offering a cash reward to anyone who turned in a bandit, and threatening punishment to anyone who abetted them. He had also seen, more than once, the frightful victims of hanging, young men and women, their heads brutally twisted by the jerk of the noose, eyes glassy and hands tied behind their backs: they had signs on their chests written in Russian, "I've gone back to my hometown," or other mocking words. He knew all this, and he also knew that a Red Army soldier, which is what he was, and which he was proud to be, if separated from his unit had the duty to take to the woods and go on fighting. At the same time, he was tired of fighting: tired, hollowed out, stripped of wife, town, and friends. He no longer felt in his chest the vigor of a young man and a soldier; instead, he felt weariness, emptiness, and a yearning for a blank, untroubled nothingness, like a winter blizzard. He had felt a thirst for vengeance, he had not satisfied it, and the thirst had dwindled until it died out. He was sick of war and sick of life, and he could feel running through his veins, instead of the red blood of a soldier, the pallid blood of the people

from whom he knew he descended, tailors, shopkeepers, innkeepers, village violinists, mild-mannered prolific patriarchs, and visionary rabbis. He was also tired of walking and hiding, tired of being Mendel: which Mendel? Who is Mendel, the son of Nachman? Mendel Nachmanovich, as he was listed, in the Russian style, on his platoon's roster, or Mendel ben Nachman, as the rabbi with the two clocks had written, when he was born, in 1915, in the village registry of Strelka?

And yet he felt that he couldn't go on living like this. Something in the Uzbek's words and gestures made Mendel guess that he knew more about the partisans in the woods than he chose to let on. He did know something, and Mendel felt deep in his soul, in some relatively unexplored corner of his soul, an urge, a twinge, something like a compressed spring: something he needed to do, and do immediately, before the end of that day whose light had already pried him out of his *samogon*-induced sleep. He needed to hear from the Uzbek just where these bands were and who was in them, and he had to make up his mind. He had a choice to make, and it was not an easy one: on the one hand there was his thousand-year-old weariness, his fear, his revulsion at the weapons he'd admittedly buried and carried with him; on the other hand there wasn't much. There was that small, coiled spring, which might be what *Pravda* referred to as a "sense of honor and duty," but which he might more appropriately describe as a mute need for decency. He discussed none of this with Leonid, who had woken up in the meantime. He waited for the Uzbek to wake up and, when he did, he asked him some very specific questions.

The Uzbek's answers were not very specific. Sure, there were bands: or there had been; bands of partisans or bandits, he couldn't really say which, no one really could. Armed, certainly, but armed against whom? Ghost bands, cloud bands: here today blowing up a railroad line, tomorrow forty kilometers away, plundering the silos of a kolkhoz, and never the same faces. Faces of Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, and Mongols come from who knows where; even Jews, yes, a few; and women, and a pinwheel array of uniforms. Soviets dressed as Germans, wearing police uniforms; Soviets in rags, in the uniform of the Red Army; even a few German deserters. . . . How many? Who knows! Fifty here, three hundred there, groups forming and dissolving, alliances, quarrels, and the occasional bursts of gunfire.

Mendel kept pushing: Peyami did know something after all. He knew and he didn't know, Peyami replied; these were things that everyone knew.

He’d had only a single contact, months earlier, with a band of relatively respectable people. In Nivnoye, surrounded by marshes, on the border with White Russia. It was for business: he’d sold them the airplane’s radio, and, as far as he was concerned, he’d gotten the better of the deal, because the equipment was in pieces and he doubted those people would be able to get it working again. They’d paid generously, with two wheels of cheese and four boxes of aspirin, which he needed because it was still winter and he suffered from rheumatism. He’d made the trip a second time in April: this time with the dead German’s parachute. That’s right, when he first found the plane, the pilot was still there, who knows how many days he’d been dead, already chewed up by crows and mice; it had been nasty work to clean up the cockpit and restore a little order. He’d taken the parachute with him, but this time he ran into different people in Nivnoye, different faces, different leaders, who weren’t that interested in fair dealing, they’d taken the parachute and paid him in rubles. That was a joke; what was he supposed to do with a handful of rubles? And to think: you could have made at least twenty shirts out of that parachute. In short, a disastrous deal, not to mention the trip itself: because it was a good three- or four-day hike to Nivnoye. No, he’d never gone back; and in part it was because they’d told him they were moving out, he had no idea where, they hadn’t even decided themselves, or they’d preferred not to let him know. They were the ones who’d given him the German dictionary: they had a whole box of them, evidently more than enough had been printed in Moscow.

There, that was everything he knew about the bands, along with the matter of the salt, of course. They had plenty of salt, salt was air-dropped to them by parachute, and not just salt; in fact, that’s exactly why they assigned so little value to the German’s parachute, even if it was made of a finer fabric. No doubt about it, going into business is always a risk, but it becomes a serious risk when you know nothing about market conditions; and what kind of market is a forest, where you don’t even know whether you have neighbors, and, if so, what kind of people they are, and what they need?

“In any case, you’re my guests. I doubt you’re interested in continuing your march right away; stay here, make your plans, and you can start again tomorrow without haste. That is, as long as you have no reason to be in a hurry. Spend the day with me: you can get some rest, and for a day I won’t be alone.”

He took them on a tour of the forest, along barely marked trails to check his traps, but there were no rabbits. There was a weasel, half throttled by the noose but still alive; in fact, so convulsively alive that it was hard to keep from being bitten. The Uzbek took off his trousers, rolled them up to double the thickness of the cloth, and slipped his hands into the legs as if into a pair of gloves, and set the creature free: it shot away through the underbrush, wriggling like a snake. “If you’re really hungry, then you can even eat weasels,” Peyami said sadly. “Where I come from, we never had these problems; even the poorest of us had plenty of cheese to eat, at least, every day of the week. We never experienced famine, not even during the darkest years, when in the cities people were eating rats. But it’s different here, it’s hard to get enough to cut your hunger; depending on the season, you can find mushrooms, frogs, snails, migratory birds, but not all seasons are plentiful. Sure, you can go into the villages, but not empty-handed; and you have to be careful, because they’re quick on the trigger.”

A hundred meters or so from the airplane he showed them the German’s grave. He’d done a good job, he’d dug a hole a little more than a meter deep, no rocks because you couldn’t find them in this part of the country, but a layer of small logs to cover the grave, a mound of pounded earth, and even a cross with his name carved into it, Baptist Kipp: he’d copied it off his dog tags.

“Why so much effort to bury an infidel? And, worse, a German?” Leonid asked.

“To keep him from coming back,” the Uzbek replied. “And also because the days are long, and I need something to fill my time. I like to play chess, and I’m pretty good at it. Back home, no one could beat me. Well, here I’ve carved myself all the pieces out of wood, and a chessboard in birch bark, but it’s no fun to play against yourself. I make up chess problems, but it’s like making love by yourself.”

Mendel said that he, too, liked to play: there were still many hours of daylight ahead, why not have a game? The Uzbek accepted, but once they got back to the airplane he said that he’d like the two of them, Mendel and Leonid, to play the first game. Why? Courtesy of the host, said Peyami, but it was obvious that what he wanted was to get an idea of how his two future adversaries played. He was the kind who play to win.

Leonid got the white pieces, and they were white in fact, and aromatic with the scent of fresh wood. The black pieces, in contrast, were various

shades of brown, scorched, smoke-darkened; both white and black pieces were unsteady on their bases, in part because the board was not very level, and in fact was undulating and full of rough surfaces and bumps. Leonid began the game with a queen's pawn opening, but it quickly became clear that he had no idea how that opening was supposed to proceed, and before long he was floundering, down one pawn and his remaining pieces poorly deployed. He muttered something about the game under his breath, and Mendel replied in the same hushed tone, but in Yiddish: "You keep an eye on him, too, you never can tell. The submachine gun and the pistol are in the cabin. Check." It was a treacherous check, with the white king awkwardly caught among pawns. Leonid sacrificed a bishop in a futile attempt at self-defense and Mendel announced checkmate in just three moves. Leonid lowered his king in a sign of surrender and homage to the winner but Mendel said, "No, let's play through to the end." Leonid understood: they ought to gratify Peyami, there was no risk of him leaving the game, he was watching with the bloodthirsty and professional attention of an aficionado at a bullfight—they had better not deprive him of the spectacle of the kill. Once the kill had occurred, the Uzbek challenged Leonid, who accepted reluctantly.

The Uzbek opened insolently with his queen's bishop's pawn. His eyes, whose whites were of such a pure white that they verged on pale blue, were more insolent still. He played with showy, grotesque gestures, hunching shoulder and arm forward at each move as if the piece he were lifting weighed a dozen kilos at least; he slammed the piece down on the board as if he were trying to drive it through the bark, or else he twisted it, pressing down as if to screw it in. Leonid immediately found himself in some discomfort, both because of these gestures and because of his unmistakable superiority: it was clear that Peyami wanted nothing better than to dispense with him as quickly as possible so he could take on Mendel. He moved with contemptuous speed, without stopping to consider his moves, and displaying rude impatience every time Leonid hesitated. He called checkmate in less than ten minutes.

"Now for the two of us," he said immediately to Mendel, in such a resolute tone of voice that his opponent was both amused and unsettled. This time, Mendel, too, was playing to win, as if the stakes were a mountain of gold, or a safe life, or eternal happiness. He vaguely sensed that he was playing not for himself but as the champion of something or someone. His

opening was careful and cautious, and he willed himself not to allow his opponent's behavior to make him nervous. For that matter, the other man soon abandoned his annoying gesticulations and began to concentrate on the chessboard. Mendel played thoughtfully, Peyami in contrast tended to play recklessly and lightning-fast: Mendel had a hard time guessing whether hidden behind each move was a well-thought-out plan, or the desire to astonish, or the fanciful audacity of an adventurer. After twenty moves or so, neither man had lost any pieces, the situation was well balanced, the chessboard was in a state of frightful confusion, and Mendel realized that he was enjoying himself. He deliberately lost a tempo, purely to force the Uzbek to reveal his intentions, and he saw that he'd put his opponent on edge: now he was the one who was hesitating before each move, looking Mendel in the eye as if he were trying to read a secret. The Uzbek made a move that immediately proved to be disastrous, asked if he could take it back, and Mendel allowed him to; then he got to his feet, shook himself like a dog coming out of the water, and without a word headed inside the airplane. Mendel gestured to Leonid, who understood, followed him closely, and stepped into the cabin right behind him; but the Uzbek wasn't thinking about weapons, he'd only gone to get the *samogon*.

All three drank, as the sky was already starting to darken and a cool evening breeze sprang up. Mendel felt strange, out of time and out of place. That focused and serious game of chess was linked in his memory to intensely different times and places and people: to his father, who had taught him the rules, who had beat him easily for two years, with growing difficulty for two more, and thereafter accepted his defeats easily; to his friends, both Jews and Russians, who with him had trained themselves over the chessboard to be cunning and patient; to the quiet warmth of his lost home.

The Uzbek had probably had too much to drink. When he sat down at the chessboard again, he began an interminable series of exchanges that led to a lightened, decanted situation: he with one pawn less, and Mendel the master of the grand diagonal and solidly defended. The Uzbek went on drinking, contrived catastrophe for himself with an absurd attempt at counterattack, and, finally, conceded defeat, declaring that he demanded a rematch; he'd been a weakling, he knew that when you play chess you can't drink, he'd given in to the temptation like a child. By now it was too dark, but he wanted a rematch: tomorrow morning, first thing, as soon as it was

daylight. He said good night, climbed stumbling up the ramshackle rung ladder leading to the cabin, and five minutes later was snoring.

The two men remained silent for a few moments. Against the rustling of wind-tossed branches, less familiar sounds could be heard: the stirring of insects or small creatures, cracklings, a distant chorus of frogs. Mendel said, “This isn’t exactly the traveling companion we were looking for, agreed?”

“We weren’t looking for a traveling companion,” said Leonid, still smarting from his defeat.

“That remains to be seen: in any case, it’s time to get going again, before it’s the middle of the night.”

They waited until the Uzbek’s snoring had become regular, gathered their knapsacks from the cabin, and set off. As a precaution, they headed south first, then abruptly changed direction and headed northwest: but the ground was dry and impervious to footprints.

2

July–August 1943

Mendel wanted to go to Nivnoye, in pursuit of the vague reports he'd dragged out of the Uzbek; Leonid didn't want to go anywhere, or, to be exact, didn't know where he wanted to go, and didn't even know whether he wanted to go anywhere, or do anything. It wasn't that he rejected Mendel's suggestions, or rebelled against his decisions, but he exerted a subtle passive friction against every active push: like dust in a watch, Mendel thought. He must have gotten dusty, even if he's young: it's stupid to say that young people are strong. You can understand many things better at thirty than at twenty, and so they're easier to put up with. In fact, if someone had asked Mendel himself how old he was, and if he'd been willing to answer in complete honesty, how should he have responded? Twenty-eight according to the records, a little older to judge from his joints, his lungs, and his heart, but on his back he carried a mountain, more years than Noah and Methuselah. Yes, more than them, considering that Methuselah was fully a hundred and eighty-seven years old when he fathered Lamech, and Noah was five hundred when he brought Shem, Ham, and Japheth into the world, six hundred when he built the ark, and even a little older when he got drunk for the first time; and in the opinion of the rabbi with the two clocks, on that occasion Noah had meant to father a fourth child, if it hadn't been for that unfortunate mishap with Ham. No, he, Mendel, watchmaker wandering through the woods, was older than either of them. He no longer had any desire to father children or plant vineyards or build arks, not even if the Lord were to order him to do so; but it didn't

seem to him that the Lord, so far, had shown much interest in saving him or his family. Perhaps because he wasn't as just a man as Noah.

Leonid's silences were beginning to weigh on him. Instinctively, he liked Leonid: he seemed like someone you could trust, but his passivity annoyed him. When a watch is dusty, it's a sign that it's very old, or that the case isn't airtight; then you have to disassemble the whole thing and clean it piece by piece with light oil. Leonid wasn't old; so there must be cracks in his case. What kind of benzene would it take to clean Leonid's gears?

He'd tried to get him to talk more than once. He'd managed to tease out shreds, tiles in a mosaic to be patiently reassembled later, fitted together as in certain children's games. The German concentration camp: fine, it can't have been pleasant, but he hadn't been there long and it hadn't broken his health; if anything, he'd been lucky, why wouldn't he admit it? If the Germans had figured out that they had laid hands on a Jewish paratrooper, things would have gone differently for him. Being lucky is a good thing, it's a guarantee for the future; to reject your own good luck is sacrilegious. The stolen watch and the prison: Lord God, he'd sinned, and he'd paid for his sin. If only all sinners were lucky enough to expiate their sins, to settle their accounts. There must be something else, in Leonid, some inner scar, a bruising, perhaps a halo of grief around a human face, a portrait. Mendel was reminded of the large oval photographs of the previous century, with the solemn images of ancestors at the center of a blurry gray circle. It had something to do with his family, Mendel was sure of it, not on the basis of Leonid's answers, which were terse and irritated, but on the basis of his silences. In fact, the mosaic to be reassembled was made up for the most part of black tiles: evasive, nonexistent, or even insolent answers. It required patience; little by little the picture would take shape. Now, Mendel was a patient man. He mulled it over, night after night, as they walked, frustrated by the rebuffs and the angry convulsive parrying of his traveling companion. No doubt, he, Mendel, was not a man of many virtues, but patience was something he possessed; well, if you have patience you use it.

It took longer to get to the marshes of Nivnoye than the three days the Uzbek had mentioned. For Mendel and Leonid the trip took six days, or, rather, six nights, because they preferred to stop and rest during the day. They crossed deserted roads and paths, a railroad line (it must have been the Gomel–Bryansk branch, Mendel calculated), clearings, shallow streams with clear water, offering relief for their thirst and their aching feet. They

avoided farms and villages: this forced them to make lengthy detours, but it wasn't as if they were in a hurry.

By traveling only in the dark and shunning populated places, they encountered few people—shepherds, farmers in their fields, dawdling wayfarers—and none gave them a second glance. But there was one encounter they couldn't escape. On the fourth day, in the early light of dawn, as they were following a cart track, they found themselves descending into a cut that ran through a rise in the terrain; coming toward them from the far end of the cut was a cart drawn by a weary old horse, and driven by a middle-aged man. Mendel gripped his pistol. The driver wore the light-blue armband of the Ukrainian auxiliary police. Mendel asked him:

"What are you transporting?"

"Flour, can't you see?"

"Where are you taking it?"

"To the Germans. To the warehouse in Mglin."

"Get down and go. That's right, go, just keep walking."

The Ukrainian shrugged his shoulders; this must not be the first time something of the sort had happened to him. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Whatever you like. That bandits robbed you."

The Ukrainian left. There were six sacks of flour and a bundle of newly scythed grass on the wagon. Mendel had put away his pistol and had a puzzled look on his face.

"Now what are you planning to do?" asked Leonid.

"I don't know. I don't know what we're going to do, but what I wanted to do was the right thing. I wanted to do something decisive, as when a man destroys a bridge behind him, and, whether it's right or wrong, once he knows the bridge is no longer there and he has no other choices, he can no longer go back. Come on, let's unhitch the horse and see how many sacks it can carry."

"Why don't we keep the wagon, too?"

"Because from now on they'll be looking for us, and we'll have to keep off the roads."

The horse didn't look as if it would prove very useful. It held its head and ears low, and there were open sores on its back covered with flies and horseflies. With lengths of rope they'd found in the cart, they managed to hang two flour sacks on it: more than that would have been unwise. Atop

the sacks, which dangled dangerously against the animal's fleshless ribs, they arranged the bundle of grass.

"What about the cart? And the other sacks?"

"We'll hide them, as best we can."

It wasn't easy, but they finally managed to do it, before day had fully dawned: the cart in a gorge filled with thornbushes, and the sacks of flour under the cart. Then they set off again, staying far from the road, leading the horse, which was lazy and recalcitrant, and further hindered them because of the clumsily loaded sacks, which kept getting caught in the low-hanging branches. They walked in silence for a long time, then Leonid said, "I don't know what I want, but I know that I don't know. You don't know any more than I do, but you're convinced that you do."

Mendel, who was in front and was pulling on the horse's bridle, didn't turn around or say anything, but shortly Leonid lit into him again, "In your town you didn't have a movie house. Didn't you have horses, either?"

"There were horses, but I never had to take care of them. I was in a different line of work."

"I was in another line of work myself, but a horse like this can't carry a load like that, or it can't carry it for long. Anyone can see that."

There wasn't much to argue with, and besides it was too light out to go any farther. They stopped in the dense woods by a stream, let the horse drink, tied it to a tree trunk, gave it the grass to eat, and fell asleep. When they woke up, in midafternoon, the bundle of grass had been finished, and the horse had nibbled the few shrubs that were within reach, and was pulling on the rope to get the ones farther away; it must really have been hungry. Too bad the sacks contained flour, not grain: they tried giving the horse a little flour, but the animal got flour all over its muzzle up to the eyes, and then started coughing until it seemed it might suffocate. They had to rinse its mouth and nostrils in the stream, and then they set off again. There was a new, sweetish, fresh smell in the air: the marshes must not be far away.

Half a day's march from Nivnoye they ran into an elderly peasant woman and they decided to strike up a conversation. What about the horse? The woman looked it over with an expert eye:

"Eh, poor old beast. It's certainly not worth much, it's old, tired, hungry, and it looks sick to me, too. The flour's another matter, but I can't offer you anything because I have nothing to offer."

She was probably no fool. She looked the two of them up and down with an equally expert eye; then, as if in response to a tacit question, she added:

“Don’t be afraid, there’s plenty of folk like you around here. Maybe even too many, but there aren’t many Germans and they aren’t very dangerous. As for the horse and the flour, I already told you, I have nothing to offer you, but I could talk to the village elder about it, if you’re in agreement.”

Mendel was in a hurry to get rid of the animal; it was of little or no use to them, and if anything, its mere presence seemed to darken Leonid’s mood, his critical spirit, and his desire to quarrel. He consulted briefly with him. No, no intermediaries, it was obvious that the woman would try to rake something off the top of whatever deal, small or large. But they were both reluctant to venture into the village.

“All right,” said Mendel. “Try to arrange a meeting with this elder, midway, in some isolated place: is that possible?” That would be possible, said the woman.

The elder showed up on time, at sunset, in a hut that the peasant woman had told them about. He was about sixty, a man of few words, white-haired, and sturdy. Yes, he, or, rather, the village, was solvent: they had eggs, lard, salt, and apples, but the horse wasn’t worth much.

“The horse isn’t all there is,” said Mendel. “There’s also a cart and six sacks of flour; two are here and the other four are hidden not far away, with the cart.”

“The deal isn’t clear,” said the elder: “The horse and two sacks of flour are here for us to see, but what is a cart and four sacks of flour worth, if they’re hidden in the woods, and you don’t know where, and you don’t really even know if they exist? What is a treasure worth if it’s on the moon?”

Leonid took a step forward and broke in harshly:

“They’re worth our word and our self-respect, and if you don’t . . .”

The elder looked at him without losing his temper. Mendel placed his hand on Leonid’s shoulder and intervened:

“Reasonable people can always come to an understanding. Look, the goods are close to the road, sooner or later someone will find them, they’ll take them away without paying, and it will be a loss for us and for you; and

if it starts raining again the flour won’t last long. And we’re just passing through; we’re in a hurry to be on our way.”

The elder had small, cunning eyes. He turned them successively to the horse, the sacks of flour, and Mendel, and said, “It’s not good to be in a hurry and to be forced to go slowly. If you keep the horse, you’ll go as slow as it goes. If you sell it, and you don’t sell the two sacks of flour, with fifty kilos of flour each on your backs, you won’t go fast or far: at worst you’ll have to haggle with someone else. You don’t have a lot of choices.”

Mendel caught a glance from Leonid, swift but overflowing with malevolent delight: it was his revenge for his defeat at chess. The elder’s arguments were powerful, and he would have been wiser not to mention their haste. He had no option but to retrench:

“That’s fine, old man. Let’s get to the point. How much will you give us for what you see? For a hundred kilos of flour and the horse?”

The old man scratched his head, pushing his hat forward over his eyes:

“Hmm, we’d best not talk about the horse. It’s worthless, you couldn’t even butcher it for meat. Maybe just the hide, if you tanned it properly. As for the flour, we don’t know where it comes from. You never told me, though you could tell me now, and I might believe you or I might not; people who do business have the right to tell lies. It could be Russian or German, bought or stolen. I don’t want to know anything about it, and I offer you in trade eight kilos of lard and a piece of pigtail tobacco, take it or leave it; it’s stuff that doesn’t weigh much, you can carry it without difficulty.”

“Let’s make it ten,” said Mendel.

“Ten kilos, but without the tobacco, then.”

“Ten kilos, and the tobacco for the horsehide.”

“Nine kilos and the tobacco,” said the old man.

“Fine. And how much will you give us for the stuff you can’t see? Two hundred kilos of flour and the wagon?”

The old man pushed his hat forward still further:

“I won’t give you a thing. The stuff you can’t see might as well not exist. If it does, we’ll find it even if you won’t tell us; and even if you do tell us, and you tell us the truth, we still might go and find it’s not there anymore. There’s lots of people wandering around the forest, and not just people but foxes, mice, and crows: you said it yourself, someone could find it. If I made you an offer, they’d laugh at me in the village.”

Mendel had an idea:

"Let me make you a proposal: one piece of information for another, something you can't see for something else you can't see. We'll tell you where the wagon is and you tell us . . . well, how to put this, along the way we heard certain rumors, that in Nivnoye, or near Nivnoye, or in the marshes, there are or were certain people. . . ."

The old men lifted the visor of his hat and looked Mendel right in the eye, something he hadn't once done until then. Mendel persisted:

"It's a good deal, isn't it? It doesn't cost you a thing. It's as if we'd given you the wagon and the flour outright; because it's all there, I'm not trying to trick you, you have my word as a soldier."

To Mendel and Leonid's surprise, the village elder loosened up, becoming almost talkative. Yes, there was a group, or there had been: a band. Fifty men, or perhaps even a hundred, from the area and from elsewhere. Some of them, half a dozen or so, were young men from his village—better to go into hiding than wind up in Germany, right? Armed, yes, and pretty clever, sometimes a little too clever. But they'd left, a few days ago, taking their weapons, baggage, and a few head of livestock with them. And it was better for everyone that they were gone. Where had they gone? No, that he couldn't say with certainty, he hadn't seen anything; but a few people had seen them marching away, and it seemed that they'd been heading toward Gomel or Zhlobin. If the two of them took the path to Zhurbin, it was a shortcut; they might be able to catch up with them. He left, and returned half an hour later with the lard, the tobacco, and a steelyard scale, so that the two men could see that the weight was fair. When they'd checked everything, Mendel explained exactly where the wagon was hidden. Unexpectedly, the old man pulled a dozen hard-boiled eggs out of his rucksack: he said that it was an extra, a gift he was giving them, because he liked them; and also in compensation for the fact that he ought to have extended hospitality to them and offered them a place to sleep, but the village council had opposed it. He led them to the path and waved goodbye, leading away the horse with the two sacks of flour.

"If they hadn't recognized us as Jews, we would have slept in a bed tonight," Leonid grumbled.

"Maybe so, but even if he'd made the offer, it's not obvious that we would have been wise to accept it. We don't know anything about this village, about the people who live there, their views on things, whether

they're just afraid or if they work for the Germans. I don't know, it's only an impression, but I'd have trusted the little old lady more than I do this elder: more than a friend, he struck me as half a friend. He was in a hurry to get rid of us; that's why he gave us the eggs and told us which way to go. And anyway, by now we've made a decision, haven't we?"

"What decision?" asked Leonid in a hostile voice.

"About catching up with the band, no?"

"That's a decision you've made. You never asked me a thing."

"There was no need to ask. We've been talking about it for days, and you never said a word."

"Well, now I'm going to say something. If you want to go join the band, you'll do it on your own. I've had my fill of war. You have the weapons and I have the lard: and that's fine with me. I'll head back to the village, and I'll find a bed there, and not for just one night."

Mendel turned and stopped short. He wasn't ready to deal with a burst of wrath, much less the wrath of a weakling, and in Leonid he sensed weakness. Nor was he ready for the storm of words that Leonid, until then so silent, was blowing into his face.

"Enough, enough! I may have met you in the forest, but I'm not married to you. I thought that you were as sick of war as I am. I was wrong, too bad. But I've had it, I'm not taking another step. You go into the marshes: you were afraid to sleep in the village, and now you want to take me off with people even though you don't know what language they speak, whether they want us around, where they come from and where they're going. I'm from Moscow, but I have strong arms and my head screwed on straight; I'm not going to starve to death, I'll go work on a kolkhoz first, or in the German factories. I'm not taking another step or firing another shot, never again. It's not right, it's not right that someone . . . And after all, even you don't know what you want: I already told you, you think you know, but you don't. You act like a hero, but you want the same thing I do, a house, a bed, a woman, a life that makes some sense, a family, a town to live in that's your town. You want to go with the partisans, or you think you do, but you don't know what you want or what you're doing, I realized it after what happened with the horse. You're someone who's telling himself lies. You're just like me. You're a nebbish, a loser, and a *meshuggener*." Leonid slowly folded over and sat down on the ground, as if he'd spat out his soul and no longer had the strength to stand upright.

Mendel stood there, more curious and surprised than angry. He realized that he had been expecting this outburst for a while now. He gave Leonid time to calm down a little, then he sat down next to him. He touched his shoulder, but the young man recoiled as if he'd come into contact with a piece of red-hot metal. A nebbish is a good-for-nothing, helpless, useless, a man to be pitied, almost a non-man, and a *meshuggener* is a lunatic, but Mendel didn't feel offended, nor was he in the mood to return the insult. Instead, he was wondering why Leonid, whose mother tongue was Russian, had used Yiddish, which he barely spoke, on that occasion. But Yiddish, of course, is an immense reservoir of insolent remarks, picturesque, ridiculous, or bloody, each with its own specific nuance: that might be an explanation. "A Jew will punch you in the nose and then cry help," he thought, but he kept the proverb to himself. Instead, he said, in a voice so calm that even he was surprised, "Understandable: it wasn't an easy decision for me, either, but I think it's the right one. A man should consider his decisions carefully." And he added, with meaning: ". . . as well as his words." Leonid said nothing.

It was almost dark; Mendel would have preferred to walk by night, but that path was rough and poorly marked. He suggested camping on the spot, since it was a warm evening and the night would be short; Leonid accepted the suggestion with a nod. They wrapped themselves in blankets, and Mendel was practically asleep when Leonid suddenly started talking, as if he were continuing a conversation begun some time ago:

"My father was a Jew, but he wasn't a believer. He worked for the railroad, and then he was accepted into the Party. He fought in the 1920 war against the White Russians. Then he brought me into the world, then they sent him to prison, and from there to the Solovetski Islands, and he never came home. That's the way things stand. He'd already been in the tsarist prisons, before I was born, but from there he came home. Then they sent him to the Solovetski Islands because they claimed that he'd sabotaged the railroad: that it was his fault the trains weren't running on time. There you have it."

After saying all this, Leonid rolled over on his other side, turning his back on Mendel, as if the subject were finished. Mendel thought that was an odd way of apologizing, and immediately decided in his mind that all the same it was a way of apologizing. He let a few minutes go by, and then he timidly asked Leonid, "And what about your mother?" Leonid grunted,

“Now leave me alone. Please leave me alone. That’s enough for now.” He fell silent and lay motionless, but it was clear to Mendel that he wasn’t sleeping; he was just pretending. To go on trying to get him to talk would be useless, and even harmful, like picking a freshly sprouted mushroom. You keep it from growing, and you don’t take anything home.

They walked for two weeks, sometimes by day and sometimes by night, in the rain and in the sun. Leonid had just stopped talking, and he neither told stories nor argued: he grimly accepted Mendel’s decisions, like an unwilling servant. They met few people, saw a burned village, and found increasingly abundant traces of the band that was moving ahead of them: the ashes of campfires alongside the track, footprints in dried mud, leftovers from cooking, the occasional shard and the occasional rag; those people weren’t taking many precautions to avoid notice. On the site of one stopping place they even noticed a tree riddled with bullets: someone must have done some target practice, perhaps they even held a contest. Only rarely were they forced to ask the locals for directions; yes, they’d come through here, heading in that direction. They were stragglers, or deserters, or partisans, or bandits, depending on the point of view; in any case, and according to everyone, they were people who went their way without causing too much trouble or demanding too much from the peasants.

They caught up with them one night: they saw them and they heard them at practically the same time. Mendel and Leonid found themselves atop a hill: they saw the lazy meanders of a big river, no doubt it was the Dnieper, and not far from the riverbank, three or four kilometers away, the glow of a fire. They started downhill, and heard shooting, chaotic pistol and rifle fire; they saw red flashes, followed by the more muffled thuds of hand grenades. Was it combat? If so, against whom? And then why the fire? Or was it a brawl, a feud between two factions? But during a break in the shooting they were able to make out the sound of an accordion, and happy shouts and exclamations: this was no battle, this was a party.

They approached cautiously. There were no sentries; no one stopped them. Around the fire were thirty or so bearded men, some young, some less young, dressed in many different styles, but unmistakably armed. The accordion was playing a song with a lively rhythm, and some were clapping

along, while others danced furiously, with all their weapons, spinning on their heels, standing up and squatting down. Someone must have seen them. A slurred but thunderous voice called out, absurdly, “Are you Germans?”

“We’re Russians,” the two men replied.

“Then come ahead. Eat, drink, and dance! The war is over!” There followed, serving as an exclamation mark, a long burst of heavy gunshots, strung out against the sky reddened by fire and smoke. The same voice, suddenly irate, was aimed in the opposite direction, resuming: “Styoh-oh-opka, you idiot, you son of a crow, bring bottles and mess kits, can’t you see we have guests?”

It was dark by now, but they could make out that the encampment, rudimentary as it was, was arranged around three focal points: the fire, where there was a noisy coming and going of men celebrating; a large tent, in front of which two horses tied to stakes were dozing; and, off to one side, three or four silent young men who were busily working on something.

The man with the booming voice came toward them with a bottle of vodka in one hand. He was a fair-haired young colossus, with a crew cut and a curly beard extending halfway down his chest. He had a handsome oval face with symmetrical features, but deeply marked, and he was so drunk he could barely stay on his feet. There were no signs of rank on the Red Army uniform he was wearing.

“To your health,” he said, taking a swig from the mouth of the bottle. “Good health to you, whoever you may be.” Then he handed the vodka to the two men, who drank, toasting his health in turn. “Styopka, you fool, you old slug, are you coming with this soup?” Then he went on, turning to them with a candid and radiant smile: “You must forgive him, perhaps he’s had a little too much to drink, but he’s a good comrade. He’s courageous, too, considering that he’s a cook; but he’s not quick on the uptake, oh no, he’s none too quick. Ah, here he is now. Let’s just hope that the soup hasn’t got cold on the way. Come on, eat up, then we’ll go find out if there’s any more news.”

In contrast with the colossus’s opinion, Styopka seemed neither all that slow nor all that foolish. “No, Venyamin Ivanovich, we can’t get it to work. Just about everybody’s taken a turn at it, but the voice keeps getting fainter and fainter. You can’t understand a thing, all you can hear is static.”

“Those good-for-nothings, to hell with the lot of them! Today of all days they decide to break the radio! You tell me: the war ends, any minute

now we're expecting Stalin to come out and say that everyone can go home, and these sons of bitches pick this moment to make the radio go kaput. . . . What, you haven't heard the news? The Americans have landed in Italy, we've retaken Kursk, and Mussolini is in prison. He's in prison, that's right, like a blackbird in a cage; the king put him in prison. Come, comrades, take another drink. To peace!"

Leonid drank, Mendel made a show of drinking, then they followed Venyamin to the radio. "This is definitely the Uzbek's radio!" Mendel said to Leonid; by the light of the lanterns he'd seen the plates on the device. "But it's clear that with batteries like these it couldn't go on working for very long. It's a miracle that it lasted up to now." Mendel managed to get between Venyamin, who continued to rain down insults and empty threats, and the three young men in charge of receiving messages. A chaotic technical argument arose and dragged on for many long minutes, frequently interrupted by the heated outbursts of Venyamin and other bearded men who'd come to watch and give their opinions. "I don't know much about radios, but these guys definitely know nothing," Mendel muttered to Leonid. In the end, the idea took shape of replacing the batteries' electrolytes with water and salt. Venyamin immediately adopted it as his own, summoned Styopka, and issued confused orders: the water and salt were brought, the operation was carried out before rapt faces and in an atmosphere of religious expectation, and the batteries were once again hooked up, but the radio broadcast only a stupid piece of popular music for a few seconds, and then fell silent for good. Venyamin was now in a bad mood and took it out on everyone. He turned to Leonid, and addressed him as if he'd never seen him before:

"And the two of you, where do you come from? Russians? You hardly strike me as Russians; but for today we can let that ride, even if you broke the radio, because today we're celebrating." Mendel said to Leonid: "We'll see how things look tomorrow, when he's sobered up, but it doesn't look too promising to me right now."

They were awakened the next morning by the peaceful sounds of the camp. Horses were grazing along the riverbank, naked men were washing or splashing in the shallow water, others were mending or washing clothes, still others were stretched out in the sunlight, and no one seemed to be paying the two of them any mind. For the most part, they were Russians,

but shouts and songs could also be heard in languages that Mendel was unable to identify.

Late that morning, Styopka came looking for them: “Would you help me? There’s a man who’s sick, over there, in that tent; he’s moaning, he has a fever, and I don’t know what to do. Will you come with me?”

“But neither of us is a doctor. . . ,” Leonid objected.

“I’m not a doctor, either, I’m not even a nurse, but I’m the oldest member of the band; and then I lost my weapons when we attacked the Klintsy station, so now they let me do just about everything, but they won’t send me into battle anymore. I’m a guide, too, because I know this area well, better than anyone else, better even than Venya himself; I was a guide back in 1918, too, for the Red partisans, in this same area, and there’s not a trail, a ford, or a road that I haven’t traveled dozens of times. In short, they let me take care of the sick, too, and I need you to help me: he has a fever, and his belly’s as hard as a wooden board.”

Mendel said, “I don’t understand why you keep insisting on us helping you. I don’t know any more about it than anyone else.”

A look of embarrassment came over Styopka’s face.

“It’s because . . . they say that you people, from ancient times, have always been clever about . . .”

“We people are no different from you people. Our doctors are just as good as your doctors, no better and no worse, and a Jew who’s not a physician but sets out to care for a sick man is as likely to kill him as a Christian. All I can tell you is that I’m a gunner, and I’ve seen more than my share of people with their bellies split open, after bombardments, and someone with a belly split open shouldn’t drink anything. But that’s another matter.”

Leonid broke in:

“It seems to me that your leader is a capable sort—why don’t you let him take care of it? There must be a town or a village around here; take the sick man there, he’ll certainly do better than here in the camp, and eventually you’ll find a doctor.”

Styopka shrugged his shoulders.

“Venyamin Ivanovich is capable when it comes to other things. He’s courageous as a demon, he knows plenty of tricks and can come up with more of his own, he knows how to inspire respect and even fear, he never loses heart, and he’s strong as a bear: but all he’s good for is battle. Plus, he

likes to drink, and when he drinks his mood changes from one moment to the next.”

They followed Styopka to the sick man’s pallet, to placate him. The man was a Tartar who had deserted from the German police, and he was still wearing the uniform. He didn’t look so sick to Mendel: he did have a slightly taut belly, but he showed no pain when it was palpated, and his fever couldn’t have been very high. He looked well fed; Mendel tried to reassure Styopka, and recommended having him fast for a day, and giving him no medicine.

“No danger of that,” said Styopka. “There isn’t any. We had some aspirin, but we used it up.”

As they left the tent, they ran into Venyamin. He was unrecognizable: he was no longer either the glib host, drunk on vodka and victory, or the overgrown child disappointed over the broken radio. He was a specimen of humanity to be feared, a youthful warrior with prompt, precise movements, an intelligent face, and an intense but inscrutable look in his eye. A sharp one, Mendel thought. Be on your guard.

“Come with me,” said Venyamin, with calm authority. He took them over to a corner of the tent and asked them who they were, where they came from, and where they were going; he spoke with the soft, confident voice of someone who expects to be obeyed.

“I’m an artilleryman, and he’s a paratrooper. We’ve been separated from our units, we happened to run into each other in the woods of Bryansk. We heard about your band, we came looking for you, and we caught up with you.”

“Who told you about us?”

“The Uzbek who sold you the radio.”

“Why did you follow us?”

Mendel hesitated for a moment:

“Because we want to join your band.”

“Are you armed?”

“Yes: a submachine gun, a German pistol, and some ammunition.”

Without any change in his tone of voice, Venyamin spoke to Leonid: “And you, why don’t you ever say anything?”

Leonid replied with some embarrassment that he tended to let Mendel speak because he was older, and because the weapons belonged to him.

“The weapons don’t belong to him,” said Venyamin. “The weapons belong to everyone: the weapons belong to those who know how to use them.” He fell silent for a moment, as if he were waiting for a reaction; but Leonid and Mendel remained silent, too. Then he went on:

“Why do you want to join the band? Answer me separately. You?”

Leonid, caught off guard, was tongue-tied. He felt as if he were suddenly back in school being quizzed; worse still, he was reminded of the humiliating interrogation he’d been subjected to when he was arrested and locked up in the Lubyanka. He mumbled something about a soldier’s duties and his wish to rehabilitate himself after being separated from his unit.

“You were held prisoner by the Germans,” said Venyamin.

“How do you know that?” Mendel broke in, surprised.

“I’ll ask the questions. But you can see it in his face. And you, gunner: why do you want to join us?”

Mendel felt himself being weighed as if on a scale, and was irritated at being weighed. He replied, “Because I’ve been wandering for a year. Because I’m sick and tired of living like a wolf. Because I have my own scores to settle. Because I believe that the war we’re fighting is just.”

Venyamin’s voice sank even lower:

“You saw us yesterday on a strange day, both good and bad. A good day, because the news that you heard is true, the radio repeated it twice, Mussolini has fallen. But that doesn’t mean the war will soon be over; last night that’s what we were shouting into one another’s ears, each of us talking the others into it, because hope is as contagious as cholera. Last night, we were on vacation, but we know the Germans all too well: last night I thought it over, and I believe that the war will go on for a long time. Also, yesterday was a bad day, because our radio stopped working. That’s much more serious than you can imagine: a partisan band without a radio is an orphaned band, deaf and mute. Without the radio, we don’t know where the front is, and in Moscow they don’t know where we are, and we can’t call the aircraft to do parachute drops: everything comes from the radio, medicine, wheat, weapons, vodka. The radio news even brings us our courage. And since you can’t live without wheat, when we run out of it we have to take it from the peasants, and so a band without a radio becomes a band of bandits. It’s just as well that you know all these things, and that you think them over carefully before making up your minds. It’s also just as well that you know something else, too. That eight months ago there were a

hundred of us, and now we're less than forty. That in our war there's never one day like another: we're sort of rich and sort of poor, one day we're well fed and the next day we're starving. And that this isn't a war for those with weak nerves: we come from a long way away and we're going a long way, too, and the weak ones are dead or else they've left. Think it over: and before giving you an answer I'll think it over, too."

A metallic sound rang out. The midday soup was ready, and Styopka had sounded the assembly bell by pounding a rock against a length of railroad track hanging from a branch. Everyone lined up in front of the stockpot, including Venya, Mendel, and Leonid, and Styopka ladled out the soup. Almost everyone had finished eating, and many were already stretched out in the sun smoking when they heard a voice shouting from the riverbank, "Logs are coming!" And in fact here they came, sailing slowly down the middle of the stream: large branchless tree trunks, scattered, a few at a time. Venyamin approached the water and turned suddenly attentive. He asked Styopka, "Where do they come from?"

"They usually come from the wharf in Smolensk, three hundred kilometers upstream; that's the way it's always been done, it costs less than the railroad. They go down into Ukraine, to reinforce the mine shafts."

"That's the way it's always been done, but now the mines are working for the Germans," said Venyamin, stroking his chin. Just then, at the bend in the river, something bigger came into view: it was a convoy of rafts roped together in single file, perhaps a dozen, coming into sight one after the other from behind a spit of wooded land. "We've got to get them," said Venyamin.

"That's a kind of work I've never done myself, but I've seen it done," said Styopka. "Downstream, a kilometer or so, there's a dead branch of the river; if we move fast, we can get there in time. But we're going to need some poles."

In an instant Venya was master of the situation. He left ten men to guard the camp, he sent ten more with axes to cut down some saplings and strip the branches off, and then he headed fast downstream along the bank with the rest of the men, Leonid and Mendel among them. They reached the dead branch of the river before the lumber, and shortly after them the ten men with the poles arrived, but the convoy was already
in sight. "Hurry, who's the best swimmer here? You, Volodya!" But Volodya, whether it was a genuine hindrance or a lack of determination,

was unable to get his boots off in time: he was hunched over in the dirt awkwardly twisted, red-faced with effort, and Venya lost patience. “Good-for-nothing, lazy bum! Come on, give me that pole.” In no time he was barefoot and naked. Half wading, half swimming with one hand, he made it across the dead water, but by the time he got to the grassy point of land that separated the two branches of the river, the convoy of lumber rafts was already floating past. He could be heard cursing and then he was seen to plunge back into the current; other men followed him with poles. He swam swiftly toward the rafts, missed the first few, managed to clamber onto the last one, and immediately busied himself with the pole to drive the raft onto the grassy point, where it ran aground in the muck, but it was immediately clear that it wouldn’t remain there long. The other lumber rafts, drifting languidly with the current, were dragging on the anchoring raft, and a single man couldn’t hold firm. Out of breath, Venya shouted to the other men to climb onto the rafts, one man to each raft; by poling hard against the muddy riverbed, they managed to push the convoy away from the bank, back upstream, and around the point, finally, triumphantly, pushing the lumber into the still water of the dead branch of the river. “That’s good,” said Venyamin as he got dressed again. “We’ll see, maybe we’ll haul it on shore and set fire to it; the important thing is to keep it from going to the mines. Let’s head back to camp.”

On the short return march, Mendel walked beside him and congratulated him. “I know very well that it doesn’t amount to much harm to the Germans,” Venyamin replied. “But for people like this there’s nothing worse than doing nothing. And nothing better than a good example. Get dried off, you two, and then come see me in my tent.”

In the tent, Venyamin got right to the point: “I’ve thought it over, and it’s no simple matter. You see, in our way, we’re specialists: we know this area, we’re trained for it. To have you with us would be a big responsibility. I’ll admit that you’re good fighters; but you see, more than fighters we’re rearguard operatives, we’re saboteurs, we create diversions. Each of us has his assigned tasks, and they’re not the kind of thing you learn in a few days. And then—”

“That’s not what you were saying this morning,” Mendel said. Venya lowered his eyes.

“No, that’s not what I was saying this morning. Listen, I don’t have anything against you people; I’ve had Jewish friends since I was a child, I

had other Jews as comrades in Voronezh, at the training center, and I know that you're no different from anyone else, no better and no worse, in fact, if anything, a little more—"

"That's enough for me," said Leonid. "If you don't want us, we're glad to go, and that might be better for everyone. We're not going to get down on our knees and—"

Mendel interrupted him:

"No, I want to hear you say what it is that changed between this morning and now."

"Nothing. Nothing happened, nothing concrete. It's just that I heard people talk, and that . . ."

"We're soldiers, you and I. We wear the same uniform, and I want you to tell me who talked and what was said."

"I won't tell you who had something to say. And it wasn't just one person. If it were up to me, I'd gladly take you both in, but I can't keep my men from talking; and I'm not sure you wouldn't have to watch your backs. There are people with all sorts of ideas here, and they're quick to act."

Mendel insisted. He wanted to know, word for word, exactly what Venyamin had heard, and Venyamin repeated it, with the expression of someone spitting out a mouthful of food gone bad. "They say they don't like Jews much, and they like them less when they're armed."

Leonid broke in: "We can leave, and you can tell those men of yours that in Warsaw, in April, armed Jews held out longer against the Germans than the Red Army in 1941. And they weren't well armed, either, and they were starving, and they were fighting in the midst of their own dead, and they had no allies."

"How do you know these things?" asked Venyamin.

"Warsaw isn't all that far away, and news travels even without a radio."

Venyamin stepped out of the tent, spoke in an undertone with Styopka and Volodya, then came back in and said:

"I ought to take away your weapons, but I'm not going to. You've seen who and where we are, I shouldn't let you leave, but I'm going to let you leave: one day with us wasn't much time, but maybe what you've seen will prove useful. Leave, keep your eyes peeled, and go to Novoselky."

"Why Novoselky? Where's Novoselky?"

"In the oxbow bend of the Ptsich River, a hundred and twenty kilometers west of here, in the middle of the Pripet marshes. Apparently,

there’s a village of armed Jews there, men and women. The forest rangers told us about them; they get around all over the countryside, they know everything, they’re our telegraph and our newspaper. Maybe your weapons will be useful there. But you can’t stay with us.”

Mendel and Leonid took their leave, crossed the Dnieper on a raft made of several logs bound together, and continued on their way.

They walked for ten days. The weather had turned bad; it rained frequently, sometimes a sudden downpour, other times a fine penetrating drizzle that was almost a fog. The trails were muddy, and the woods gave off a pungent scent of mushrooms that was an early presage of autumn. Their provisions started to run short; they often had to stop at night at one of the scattered farms and dig up potatoes and beets. In the forest there were plenty of blueberries and strawberries, but after an hour or two of picking berries they were hungrier than before—hungrier and, in Leonid’s case, more irritated.

“This stuff is good for schoolkids on a camping trip. It tickles your belly instead of filling it.”

Mendel pondered the news he had heard at Venyamin’s camp. What weight should he assign to it? Given as it was, without comment, without a more comprehensive assessment, the information was as irritating as the blueberries, leaving the mind equally hungry. Mussolini in prison, the king back in power. Just what is a king? A sort of tsar, narrow-minded and corrupt, something out of bygone times, a fairy-tale character with gold frogging, a plume in his cap, and a rapier, arrogant and cowardly; instead, this king of Italy must be an ally, a friend, if he’d ordered the arrest of Mussolini. It was too bad that there was no more Kaiser in Germany, otherwise perhaps the war would really be over, as Venyamin had claimed in his drunken spree. The fact that fascism had fallen in Italy was undoubtedly good news, but what importance could it have? It was hard to get a clear idea: in the articles in *Pravda*, Fascist Italy had been described variously as a dangerous and deceitful enemy, and as a despicable jackal in the shadow of the German beast; certainly, the Italian soldiers on the Don hadn’t held out long, they were poorly equipped and poorly armed and they

had no real interest in fighting, that much was clear to everyone. Perhaps they, too, had had their fill of Mussolini, and the king had complied with the wishes of his people, but in Germany there were no kings, there was only Hitler: better not to get your hopes up.

If a king was a fairy-tale character, a king of Italy was a fairy-tale character twice over, because Italy itself was a fairy-tale kingdom. It was impossible to come up with a clear picture of the place. How can you condense into a single image Mt. Vesuvius and the gondolas, Pompeii and the Fiat plant, La Scala and the caricatures of Mussolini that were published in *Krokodíl*, that street thug, with a hyena's jutting jaw, a tasseled fez, the belly of a capitalist fat-cat, and a dagger in his hand? And yet it was that very same king who . . . well, impossible to figure out. Mendel would have given a fortune for a radio, but that was strictly a manner of speaking: they had nothing to barter, except for his machine gun and his pistol, and wisdom suggested he hold on to those.

He wondered if there were Jews in Italy. If there were, they must be strange Jews: how could you picture a Jew in a gondola or on the summit of Mt. Vesuvius? But there had to be, there were Jews even in India and China, and there was no reason to think they were unhappy there. It remained to be seen whether the Zionists of Kiev and Kharkov were right when they preached that Jews could be happy only in the land of Israel, and that they should all leave Italy, Russia, India, and China and go live there, growing oranges, learning Hebrew, and dancing the hora all together in a big circle.

Whether out of weariness, or perhaps the humidity, the scar under Mendel's hair had begun to itch. Leonid's boots had come unstitched, and his feet were wallowing in water and mud. Mendel could feel Leonid's negative presence behind him, the weight of his silence: they hindered his progress more than the mud. It was no longer just the mud from rainfall, the fertile mud that comes from the sky, and which must be accepted in its season; as, little by little, they advanced westward, they increasingly often came upon a different kind of mud, a permanent mud, which reigned everywhere, and which came from the earth, not the sky. The forest had thinned out, and they encountered extensive clearings, though without any sign of human activity. The earth was no longer black or clayey but instead as ashen as a corpse; though damp, it was also meager, sandy, and seemed to ooze water from its very womb. Even so, it wasn't sterile: it supported stands of cane, succulent plants that Mendel had never seen before, and vast

hummocks of sticky-leaved bushes, stretched out on the ground as if bored with the sky. You'd sink into the soil, or really into the rotten leaves, up to your ankle. Leonid took off his boots, by now useless, and soon Mendel did the same; his boots were still holding up fine, but it seemed a pity to wear them out.

By the seventh day of walking, it had become a challenge to find a stretch of dry land where they could spend the night, even though the rain had stopped. By the eighth day, it was hard even to keep moving in the right direction: they had no compass, the sky cleared only occasionally, and it was increasingly common for the path to be interrupted by pools of water that were shallow but forced them to make aggravating detours anyway. The water was still and clean and smelled of peat, and floating on the surface were thick round leaves, fleshy flowers, and the occasional bird's nest. They looked in vain for eggs; there were none, only shards of shell and sodden feathers. What they did find was frogs, and plenty of them: adult frogs the size of your hand, tadpoles, and sticky garlands of frog eggs. They easily captured several frogs, roasted them on spits, and ate them, Leonid devouring them with the feral greediness of a ravenous twenty-year-old, Mendel astonished to sense deep within himself a hint of the ancestral repulsion for forbidden flesh.

"Just like in Egypt in Moses' day," Mendel said, simply to start a conversation. "But what I've never understood is how they could be a plague: the Egyptians could have eaten them, just as we're doing."

"Frogs were a plague?" Leonid asked as he chewed.

"The second plague: *Dam*, *Tzfardeia; tzfardeia* are the frogs."

"Then what was the first?"

"*Dam*, blood," Mendel replied.

"Well, we've already had blood," Leonid said, pensively. "What about the others? the plagues that came afterward?"

To aid his memory, Mendel started reciting the nursery rhyme that was used on Passover to amuse the children: "*Dam, Tzfardeia, Kinim, Arov . . .*" Then he translated into Russian: blood, frogs, lice, wild animals, plague, boils, hail, locusts . . . But he broke off before finishing the list to ask Leonid: "When you were a child, didn't you celebrate Passover?"

He was immediately sorry that he had asked the question. Though he kept on eating, Leonid had turned his face away from him, and his gaze had become fixed and sullen. After a few minutes, in an apparent non sequitur,

he said, “When they sent my father to the Solovetski Islands, my mother didn’t wait for him. She certainly didn’t wait for him long. She put me in an orphanage, she went to live with another man, and she stopped caring about me. She came to see me two or three times a year, with that other man. He worked on the railroads, too, and he always spoke in an undertone. Maybe he was afraid of being sent to the islands, too; he was afraid of everything. As far as I know, they’re still together. And now I’ve had enough. I’ve had enough of walking toward who knows what. I’ve had enough of blood and of frogs, and I’d like to stop, and I’d like to die.”

Mendel said nothing: he realized that his companion wasn’t one of those people who can be healed with words; perhaps no one burdened with a story like his could be healed with words. And yet he felt he was in debt toward him, at fault, had failed, as if he were seeing someone drowning in shallow water, who fails to call for help, and because he doesn’t call for help you let him drown. To help him, he needed to understand him, and to understand him, he needed him to talk, and Leonid practically never talked, just a few words and then silence, his eyes refusing to meet Mendel’s. He was quick to wound and quick to be wounded. What if Mendel were to try to force the situation? That could prove dangerous: as when you set a screw off-kilter into a bolt and you can sense the resistance; if you force it with a screwdriver, it strips the thread and the screw is no good anymore. But if you’re patient and you start over, then you can screw it into the bolt easily, and it remains good and tight. Patience is what’s required, even with someone who lacks it entirely. Especially with someone who lacks it entirely. Someone who’s lost patience. Someone who never had it in the first place. Someone who never had the time and the clay to shape it for himself. He was about to respond, “If you really want to die, you’ll have plenty of chances”; but instead he said, “Let’s sleep. At least tonight our bellies are full.”

By the ninth day the trail had almost completely vanished: it was possible to see it here and there, on the sand spits that wound around the ponds, which were becoming more and more extensive and flowing into one another. The forest had dwindled to isolated patches here and there, and the horizon that surrounded them had never been so vast, in all their journey. Vast and dreary, steeped in the intense and funereal odor of the reed beds; the round, white, motionless clouds in the sky were reflected clearly in the motionless water. At the sound of the two men’s splashing

footsteps the occasional duck would fly, quacking, out of the reed beds, but Mendel refused to shoot, reluctant to waste ammunition or to give away their location. A wooden building came into view. When they reached it, they saw that it was a water mill, abandoned and partly in ruins; the rusted waterwheel dipped into a pool of slimy water that meandered through the marshes. It must be the Ptsich: Novoselky couldn't be far away.

On the other side of the river the earth was firmer: they could make out in the distance a small rise covered with dark trees, oaks or alders. They found an old woodsman's trail, overgrown with thornbushes and covered with dead leaves. Mendel put his boots back on, Leonid remained barefoot, with nothing but foot wraps to protect his feet from thorns. After another half hour of walking, he exclaimed: "Hey! come see this!" Mendel turned and saw him with a doll in his hand: a miserable little pink doll, naked, missing one leg. He held it up to his nose, and caught a whiff of childhood, the odor of camphor, of celluloid; for an instant, it evoked with brutal violence his sisters, his sisters' friend who would one day become his wife, Strelka, and the mass grave. He fell silent, swallowed, and then said to Leonid in a low voice: "These aren't things you find in the forest."

To the right of the track there was a clearing, and in the clearing they saw a man. He was tall, thin, pale, and narrow-shouldered; when he noticed them he awkwardly tried to run away or hide: they called out to him and he let them come closer. He was dressed in rags and on his feet he had a pair of sandals made of automobile tires; in one hand he held a bundle of herbs. He didn't look like a peasant. They asked him:

"Is this the town of the Jews?"

"There's no town here," the man replied.

"But aren't you a Jew?"

"I'm a refugee," he said; but his accent gave him away.

Leonid showed him the doll: "And this, where does this come from?"

The man's gaze shifted slightly, a minimum angle: someone was coming toward them, behind Leonid's back. It was a girl, dark and tiny; she took the doll from his hands, saying very seriously, "She's mine. I'm glad you found her."

3

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It really wasn't a town: it was a "republic of the marshes," the man explained to Mendel, not without a certain pride. It was, rather, an encampment, a shelter, and a fortress, and the two of them would certainly be welcome, because there were never enough strong arms willing to work, and there were even fewer men who knew how to use weapons. His name was Adam; because night was falling, he called to the children who were out looking for herbs along the edge of the clearing, and he invited Mendel and Leonid to come with him. There were a dozen children, boys and girls, ranging in age from five to twelve, and each had gathered a small bundle of herbs split up into sheaves. "Around here, everyone has to do his part, even the children. There are herbs to cure illnesses, there are others that are good to eat, raw or cooked: herbs, berries, and roots. We've taught them to tell the difference; eh no, we don't teach them much else here."

They began walking again. The children watched the two soldiers with mistrustful curiosity: they asked them no questions, nor did they even talk among themselves. They were shy, feral little animals, with uneasy eyes; without Adam telling them to, they fell spontaneously into double file and started walking toward the hillock, following a path they seemed to know well. They, too, were wearing sandals made from rubber tires; their clothing consisted of old military uniforms, tattered and oversized. The little girl who had been reunited with her doll held it pressed to her chest as if to defend it, but she neither spoke to it nor even looked at it: she glanced to either side, with nervous birdlike jerks of her head.

Adam, on the other hand, was only too eager to talk and to listen. He was fifty-five, the oldest man at the camp, which was why he was assigned to taking care of the children: there were women, but they were few, and capable of doing harder work; one of them was his daughter. Before answering questions, he insisted on learning the history of the two new arrivals. Mendel satisfied him willingly and expansively, while Leonid got off with a few words. He, Adam, came from far away: he'd been a textile worker in Minsk, he'd been active in the Bund, the Jewish labor organization, ever since he was sixteen. He had had an opportunity to get a taste of the tsar's prisons, though that hadn't spared him the front during the First World War. But a Bundist is a Menshevik, and as a Menshevik he had been put on trial and once again imprisoned, in 1930: that hadn't been pretty, they'd put him in icy cells and other, overheated cells, without water; they wanted him to confess that he'd been corrupted by foreigners. He'd withstood two interrogation sessions and then he'd slit his wrists. They'd stitched him back up again because they wanted him to confess: they'd kept him two weeks without letting him have an hour's sleep, and then he'd confessed everything the judges asked him to. He'd served another couple of years in prison and three more after that in exile, at Vologda, midway between Moscow and Arkhangelsk: it was better than being in prison, he worked on a kolkhoz, and in fact that was where he had learned to recognize edible plants. There are many more of them than city folk generally know: and so you see that something good can come even out of exile. In the summer, it's important to get plenty of greens, they've got some nutritional value, even if you eat them plain. Of course, winter is another matter entirely: best not to think about winter.

When his term in exile expired, he was sent home, but then the war came and the Germans reached Minsk in just a few days. Now here Adam felt a weight on his conscience because he, and veterans like him who had known the Germans in the last war, had done their best to reassure the others: the Germans were good soldiers but civilized people, why should they go into hiding or run away? At most, they would give the land back to the peasants. But, instead, in Minsk *these* Germans did something that he couldn't talk about. He couldn't and he wouldn't and he shouldn't. "It's the first rule of our republic. If we kept on telling one another the things we've seen, we'd lose our minds, and instead we necessarily have to be clearheaded, all of us, even the children. Along with recognizing herbs, we

teach them to tell lies, because we have enemies all around us, not only the Germans."

As he went on talking like that, they reached the encampment. Actually, it would have been hard to describe the place with a single word, because it was unlike anything Mendel had ever seen, nor would he have believed such a thing possible; in any case, it was much more of a nursery school than a fortress. On the hilltop that they had glimpsed from a distance, and which rose no more than twenty meters or so above the surrounding plain, stood an ancient monastery, concealed in a dense stand of trees. It consisted of a brick building enclosing a square on three sides and rising two stories above the ground; at the two corners stood two stubby turrets, one of which supported the remnants of a belfry, while the other, ruined and rebuilt in wood, must have been used as a guard tower. At a little distance, facing the open side of the square, was the monastery's shed, a structure built of rough-hewn logs, with a broad carriage gateway and tiny windows.

The monastery was not so much concealed by the trees as, it seemed, besieged by them. Of its three wings, only one was intact; the other two bore signs of destruction both ancient and recent. The roof, originally covered with terra-cotta tiles, had collapsed in more than one place and had been roughly repaired with reeds and straw; the outer walls, too, displayed large gaps through which it was possible to see the rubble-cluttered interiors. The whole place must have been abandoned for dozens of years now, perhaps ever since the civil war, because alders, oaks, and willows had grown up against the walls, and some were even growing inside, sinking roots into the piles of rubble and seeking the light through the holes in the roof.

By now it was practically dark. Adam told the two men to wait outside, in the courtyard overrun by trampled weeds. After a short while he came back and escorted them into a dormitory whose floor was covered with straw and sunflower stalks; a great many people were already waiting, some sitting, others lying down. The children came in, too, and in partial darkness everyone was served a soup of greens. There were no lights; two women got the children ready for bed; then Adam came back and told the two new arrivals to remember not to light matches. Mendel and Leonid felt safe and cared for. They were tired; only for a few minutes were they aware of their neighbors' quiet whispering, then they dropped off into the oblivion of sleep.

Mendel woke up the next morning with the happy-unsettled impression of finding himself in another world and another time: perhaps in the middle of a desert, marching for forty years toward the promised land, perhaps within the walls of Jerusalem under Roman siege, or perhaps even in Noah's ark. There was no one left in the dormitory, aside from the two of them, two men, and a woman, all three of them middle-aged and apparently sick: they spoke neither Russian nor Yiddish, but instead some dialect of Polish. Children, perhaps the same ones as the night before, poked their heads in the door, inquisitive but silent; a young woman came in, small and thin, with a submachine gun slung around her neck, saw the two outsiders, and immediately left without a word. All around them they could hear a subdued rustling, like the sound of mice in the attic: voices calling out briefly, the banging of hammers, the creaking of a chain in a well, the raucous song of a bantam rooster. The breeze that pushed in through the open windows, along with the damp breath of marshes and forest, dragged other harsh and unaccustomed scents with it, of a grocer's shop, something burned, storerooms, and poverty.

Adam came in a short while later and told them to follow him: Dov, the leader, was waiting. He was waiting for them at Headquarters, Adam specified with pride, that is, in a little room whose walls were lined with fir planks, half the space occupied by a masonry stove, in the heart of the oversized shed that had been the monastery's barn. On the stove and next to it stood three pallets, next to the door was a table nailed together out of rough boards: there was nothing else. Even the chair Dov was sitting in appeared solid but crude, the work of skilled hands that lacked adequate tools. Dov was middle-aged, short, but strong-boned and broad-shouldered: although he wasn't actually hunchbacked, his shoulders were bent and his head hung low as if he were carrying a heavy burden, and so he looked up at his visitors from below, as if peering over the rims of nonexistent glasses. His hair, which must once have been blond, was almost white but still thick: he wore it carefully combed, with a straight part. His hands were large and powerful; when he spoke he held them motionless, dangling from his forearms, and looked down at them now and again as if they belonged to somebody else. He had a square face, unwavering eyes, and honest, worn, energetic features, and he spoke slowly. He invited the two men to take a seat on the pallet next to the stove and said:

“I would have welcomed you in any case, but it’s a good thing you’re soldiers: we already have far too many who’ve come to us seeking protection. They come from great distances, in search of safety. I can’t blame them, this is the safest place a Jew can find for a thousand kilometers in all directions, but that doesn’t mean it’s a particularly safe place. In fact, it’s not safe at all: we’re weak, we’re poorly armed, and we’re in no condition to put up a defense against any real attack. And there are too many of us; in fact, we don’t even know how many, at any given moment. Every day people arrive and others leave. Today we’re fifty or so; not all are Jews, there are also two or three families of Polish peasants—the Ukrainian nationalists stole their provisions and their livestock and burned their houses. They were terrified and came to us. The Jews come from the ghettos, or else they’ve escaped from German labor camps. Every one of them has a horrifying story to tell; there are old people, women, children, and invalids. Only a dozen young people know how to use weapons.”

“What kind of weapons do you have?” asked Mendel.

“Nothing much. A dozen hand grenades, a few pistols and submachine guns. A heavy machine gun with enough ammunition to fire for about five minutes. Lucky for us, so far the Germans haven’t been seen around here much; their best troops have been pulled off to the front, which is hundreds of kilometers away. In this area there are only a few scattered garrisons, requisitioning provisions and workers and patrolling roads and railroads. The Ukrainians are more dangerous; the Germans drafted them and armed them, and they’ve indoctrinated them, too: as if they needed indoctrinating! They’ve always considered Poles and Jews to be their natural enemies.

“The best protection the camp has is the marshes. They stretch for dozens of kilometers, in all directions, and you need to know your way if you want to get through them: in some, the water’s knee-deep, but in others you’d be in over your head, and the shallows are few and hard to find. The Germans don’t like them, because they can’t launch a blitzkrieg in the marshes. Even tanks get bogged down in them; the heavier they are the worse it is.”

“. . . But in the winter they’ll freeze over!”

“The winter is terror. In the winter, forest and marsh become our enemies, the worst enemies for people in hiding. The trees lose their leaves, and it’s as if we’d been stripped naked: reconnaissance planes can see everything that happens. The marshes freeze over and no longer serve as a

barrier. They can track our footprints in the snow. And the only thing that can protect us from the cold is fire, but every fire makes smoke, and smoke can be seen from miles away.

"And I haven't even told you about food. We live in uncertainty where food is concerned, too. We get a little something from the peasants, cadged with good manners, or otherwise; but the villages are poor and distant, and both Germans and bandits take care of ransacking them. We get a little something from the partisans, but in the winter they have the same problems we do: still, they sometimes have supplies dropped by parachute, and then something comes to us. Last of all, we get a little something from the woods: herbs, frogs, carp, mushrooms, berries, but only in the summer; in the winter, nothing. The winter is terror and starvation."

"Isn't there any way of establishing better communications with the partisans?"

"Till now we've had only irregular contacts. For that matter, what could be more irregular than the *partizanka*? I was with them until last winter: then they deemed me unfit, because they thought I was too old, plus I'd been wounded and I couldn't run anymore. The bands in this district are like so many drops of mercury: they merge, they split up, they reunite; they're destroyed and new ones spring up. The biggest and most durable ones have radios and stay in contact with the Great Land—"

"What's the Great Land?"

"That's what we call it, too: it's all the Soviet territory on the far side of the front, the land not occupied by the Nazis. The radio is like blood; through the radio they are able to receive orders, reinforcements, instructors, weapons, and provisions. And not by parachute alone; when possible, airplanes from the Great Land set down on partisan territory, unload men and cargo, take on the sick and the wounded, and take off again. Here things go much better in the winter, because for airplanes you need an airport, or at least a strip of clear flat land; but land like that is plainly visible from the air, and as soon as the Germans see it, they waste no time dropping bombs and rendering it useless to us. In the winter, on the other hand, any lake or marsh or river will serve the same purpose, as long as the ice is sufficiently thick.

"But don't think that there's any reliable service. Not all the drops and landings are successful, and not all the partisan bands are willing to share with us. Many partisan leaders consider us useless mouths to feed because

we don’t fight. That’s why we have to make ourselves useful, and there’s lots of ways to do that. In the first place, here anyone who can walk and shoot must be considered a partisan, contribute to the common defense, and, if requested, go and fight with the partisans. In fact, there’s a constant exchange between the bands and the monastery, and the monastery itself, as long as the Germans don’t find it, is a good shelter for wounded or tired partisans, too. But there’s more that can be done, and we make sure we do it. We patch their clothing, we wash their linen, we tan hides with oak bark, and we use the leather to make boots. That’s right, that smell is from the tanning vats. And we make birch-bark tar to keep the boot leather soft and waterproof.” He turned to Mendel. “Do you have a trade?” he asked.

“I was trained as a watchmaker, but I worked as a mechanic on a kolkhoz.”

“Good, we can find you work immediately. What about you, Muscovite?”

“I studied accounting.”

“That’s of less use to us.” Dov laughed. “I wish we could keep accounts here, but that’s out of the question. We can’t even count the people who come and who leave. Here we get Jews who’ve miraculously survived SS massacres; we get peasants in search of protection; we get questionable types we have to keep an eye on. They could even be spies, but what can we do about it? We can’t rely on their faces, the way I trust yours now: we don’t have an intelligence service of our own. Many come here, others leave or die. The young people leave, with or without my permission: they’d rather join the partisans outright than waste their days in this republic of hunger and fear. The old and the sick die off; but healthy young ones die, too, of despair. Despair is worse than any disease: it descends upon you in the days of waiting, when there is no news, no contacts, when you hear about movements of German troops or Ukrainian and Hungarian mercenaries. Waiting can be as fatal as dysentery. There are only two defenses against despair, working and fighting, but they aren’t always enough. There’s also a third, which is to tell one another lies: we all fall into it eventually. Well, my little speech is done; it’s a fine thing that you showed up armed, but if you’d brought a working two-way radio it would have been even better. Too bad, you can’t have everything, not even at Novoselky.”

They were immediately assigned shifts standing guard; it was the most important duty in the community, and the monastery's two old turrets served that purpose well. As a rule, every able-bodied refugee was required to perform twelve hours of work, eight hours of rest, and four hours of guard duty, split up into two two-hour shifts; this led to complications, but Dov had an exacting schedule and he expected it to be followed. That very night Mendel stood guard with the slight young woman he'd glimpsed in the dormitory, each of them in one of the turrets; she told him that her name was Line, but not much more. At the end of their shift, he asked her, "I have a rip in my trousers. Could you please mend it for me?" Line answered dryly, "I'll give you needle and thread, and you can do it yourself: I don't have time." She raised her lantern and peered into Mendel's face, with an attention that verged on insolence: "Where did you get that scar?" Mendel replied, "At the front." Line asked nothing more and went off to sleep. Leonid, on the other hand, shared his shift with Ber, bespectacled and still childlike, likewise parsimonious with words.

Work in the tannery, to which they were both assigned, took place in the midst of disgusting fumes, and a silence broken only by the sloshing of the basins and brief whispers. With grim faces, men and women scraped the pelts to eliminate scraps of flesh and hair: they were the skins of rabbits, dogs, cats, and goats. Nothing could be wasted, the fleshy residue from the most recent pelts was carefully set aside for use as grease. Other workers boiled tree bark or stretched the skins on wooden frames.

They soon adapted to that way of life and the obsessive, paradoxical neatness, which was maintained by each with the effort and determination of every minute. There were no community meals: at midday and in the evening they lined up in front of the kitchen cook pots, then each went to a secluded corner to eat what had been given in silence: it was usually a meager herb soup with the occasional chunk of potato, more rarely a scrap of meat or cheese, a spoonful of blueberries, a glass of milk.

Adam, perhaps because he was the eldest, was the only one who had not forgotten the pleasure of telling stories:

"Dov? He's one who never shirks his duty. We'd be in trouble if he weren't around to settle arguments and disputes. He's seen his share of things, Dov has, and he comes from far away. He comes from a village in the middle of nowhere in the highlands of central Siberia, I never remember

the name: his nihilist grandfather was deported there, back in the days of the tsars, and his father was born out there, and so was he. When war broke out, he was drafted into the air force. He was taken prisoner immediately, in July of 1941; the Germans locked them up in a prison camp that was nothing more than a couple of hectares of bare ground surrounded by barbed wire, and nothing else, no barracks, no shelters, just ten thousand exhausted, wounded soldiers, starving and thirsty. In the chaos, no one noticed he was a Jew, so he wasn't killed. After a few days they loaded him with a thousand others onto a freight train; he realized that the boards that made up the floor of his boxcar were rotten, he kicked through them and dropped out the bottom of the moving train: he was the only one, none of the other eighty men in his car had the nerve to follow. He broke a leg, but he still managed to make it away from the tracks and get to a farmhouse where the peasants hid him for months without reporting him, and they splinted his leg for him, too. As soon as he was able to walk, he went to join the partisans, but last winter he was wounded in the knee, and since then he's limped. The partisans helped him, and he came here with a handful of other Jews. He's a hardheaded Siberian, and in just a few months he and the others transformed this monastery, which was just a pile of rubble, into a place that's livable."

For the whole month of August, nothing noteworthy happened in the republic of the marshes. Nine Red Army soldiers who'd been separated from their units arrived from Ozarichi; on their own initiative they'd burned and looted a German warehouse. They were leading two mules loaded with sacks of potatoes, four Italian rifles, twenty hand grenades, and a piece of news that was worth all the rest put together: the Russians had retaken Kharkov. An impassioned argument immediately broke out among the residents of Novoselky about how far they were from Kharkov: some said five hundred kilometers, others six hundred, still others eight hundred. The latter accused the former of naïveté; the former considered the latter defeatists, in fact, traitors.

The men from Ozarichi had even brought a doctor with them, and a doctor, for Novoselky, would have been invaluable; but this one, a Jewish captain, about forty years old, was very sick. He had a fever, and for the last few legs of the trip he'd barely been able to drag himself along, and now and again they'd had to let him ride the mule. As soon as he reached the monastery, he had to lie down, because he could no longer stay on his feet;

purplish patches had appeared on his face, and he was scarcely able to speak, he could only move his lips, as if his tongue were paralyzed. He diagnosed himself: he said that he had epidemic typhus fever, that he was about to die, and that the only thing he wanted was not to infect anyone else and to die in peace. Dov asked him what treatment he could be given, and he replied that there was no treatment; he asked for a little water, then he stopped talking. They stretched him out on the ground, outside the building, and covered him with a blanket. The next morning he was dead. They buried him, taking care to avoid all contact; Ber, the young man with glasses, who had been a student in a rabbinical academy, came to say Kaddish over his grave. What could be done to prevent the disease from spreading? Or perhaps typhus was only transmitted by lice? No one knew; to avoid all risk, Dov had all the objects that had come into contact with the sick man burned, including the precious blanket.

September came, the first rains fell, the first leaves began turning yellow. Mendel realized that something was changing in Leonid. At the beginning of their stay in Novoselky he hadn't strayed from his customary behavior, which consisted of long glowering silences and explosions of wrath directed exclusively against him: as if it had been Mendel who signed the pact with the Germans, who started the war, who unleashed terror across the country. As if Mendel and no one else had enrolled him in the parachute corps and had then hurled him into the midst of the swamps. But now Leonid came looking for Mendel less and less frequently; indeed, it seemed as if he were avoiding him entirely, and when he was unable to avoid him he was careful not to look him in the eye. The day came when Mendel no longer saw him working around the tanning vats: he was told that Leonid could no longer stand the smell, and had asked Dov to transfer him to the building where Line and two other girls distilled birchwood to turn it into tar. Another day came when Dov complained to Mendel that his friend hadn't showed up for work, and this was a serious transgression, which Dov couldn't understand. Mendel replied that he wasn't responsible for what Leonid did or didn't do, but as he spoke he noticed something like an itch around his heart, because he'd realized that the words that had come out of his mouth were the ones that Cain said to the Lord when He asked him about Abel. What foolishness! Was Leonid his brother? He was no brother: he was an unfortunate like him and like all of them, a foundling picked up off the street. Of course not, Mendel wasn't his keeper, much less had he

spilled his blood. He hadn't killed him out in the field. And yet the itch wouldn't go away: maybe that's the way it really is, perhaps each of us is the Cain to some Abel, and murders him out in the field without even knowing it, by the things that we do to him, the things that we say to him, and the things that we ought to say to him but don't.

Mendel told Dov that Leonid had had a hard life, but Dov replied with a single syllable, looking him straight in the eye: "*Nu*?" At Novoselky that wasn't a justification. Who didn't have a hard life behind him? There were no excuses for *partisanzchina*, Dov said harshly. What was *partisanzchina*? Partisan anarchy, Dov explained: the lack of discipline. A serious danger. Being outlaws doesn't mean that you have no laws. To save yourself from Fascist death, it was necessary to accept a discipline even stricter than that imposed by the Fascists themselves: stricter, but also more just, because it was voluntary. Anyone who is unwilling to accept it is free to leave. Mendel and Leonid should think it over. In fact, they'd have to think it over immediately, because there was a job for them to do: an urgent, important job, and it wasn't even all that dangerous. The order had come down to sabotage a railroad line. Well, that was the perfect job for them, a way to gain citizenship in the republic; for that matter, that was the partisan way, to ask new arrivals to do a trial job, just as when you start work at a factory.

The next day Dov summoned Leonid, too, and went into the details:

"The Brest–Rivne–Kiev line has been disrupted, the line that supplied the German front in southern Ukraine. From now on, all the wartime traffic will be funneled through Brest–Gomel: now, that line runs just south of Novoselky, about thirty or so kilometers away; it runs on a single track. We need to disrupt that line as quickly as we can. That's the job you'll have to do: do you have any ideas?"

"Do you have any explosives?" asked Mendel.

"We do, but not much, and not particularly suitable: we extracted it from a few mortar shells that landed in the marshes without exploding."

Leonid interrupted him, shooting Mendel an insolent glance:

"Excuse me, chief: for this type of work, explosives do more harm than good. Sabotaging railroads is a job I know about: they explained all the methods during my paratrooper training. A wrench is much better for the job—it's safer, it makes no noise, and it leaves no traces."

"During your training course," Mendel asked with some annoyance, "did they teach you practice, or only theory?"

“I’ll take full responsibility for this operation. For once, why don’t you mind your own business.”

“Fine,” Mendel replied, enunciating the words carefully, “I have nothing against that. I’m better at fixing things than at blowing them up.”

Dov listened as if he were amused at the skirmishing.

“Hold on a minute,” he said, “it would be a good idea not only to sabotage the tracks but also to derail a train; damaged tracks can be repaired in just a few hours, while an overturned train is not only a complete loss but also blocks the line for several days. Of course, the Germans know this, too: for some time now, if it’s an important train, they’ve had a pilot engine running ahead of it.”

There followed a short technical discussion between Dov and Leonid, which resulted in the final plan. It would have been reckless to sabotage the railroad line near Koptsevichi, that is to say, the stretch directly to the south of Novoselky: it would be like giving the Gestapo a useful hint to the camp’s location. Better to work farther away; not far from Zhitkovichi, which lay fifty kilometers to the west, the railroad runs over a bridge spanning a canal: there, the best location would be there.

“Get ready,” said Dov, “you’ll leave in two hours. You’ll have a guide who’s familiar with that area. Don’t bring weapons. As for how you sabotage the line, you’ll have to come to an agreement yourselves; Leonid, if you’ve learned some particular form of mischief, all the better. But I’m warning you, no arguments on the mission. They’re making the wrenches at the forge: two of them, just the right size.”

Mendel would gladly have done without a guide like this one, but there was no question: the man really did know the area, especially the fords. His name was Karlis, he was Latvian, he was twenty-two years old, tall, skinny, and fair-haired, and he moved with noiseless agility. How on earth should he, born so far away, know the Pripet marshes so well? He’d got to know them under the Germans, Karlis replied; he spoke pretty bad Russian. In his country they preferred Germans to Russians, and he had felt the same way, at least at the beginning. He’d gone over to the German side, and they had taught him how to hunt partisans. That’s right, here, in this territory: he’d been here for almost a year, and he knew every inch of the land. But he

wasn’t stupid, after Stalingrad he’d understood that the Germans were bound to lose the war and he’d deserted a second time: he gave a half-smile, in search of complicity. It’s always better to be on the winning side, isn’t it? But now he had to take care not to fall into the hands of either Hitler or Stalin. Was that why he had taken refuge at Novoselky? Leonid asked. Sure, that’s why: he, personally, had nothing against the Jews.

“We need to be careful ourselves,” Mendel whispered to Leonid, “this fellow has on his hands *Dam Israel*, the blood of Israel.”

Karlis smiled his off-kilter smile again: “It won’t do you any good to speak Yiddish: I understand it, and I understand German, too.”

“So you think that the Jews of Novoselky will be victorious?” asked Mendel.

“I didn’t say that,” the Latvian replied. “Look out, the water gets very deep right there. Let’s keep more to the right.”

They emerged from the marshes at dawn, and continued walking for several hours through pastures and barren land. They rested until the early afternoon, and reached the railroad in the middle of the night. According to Karlis they would have to follow the tracks westward for eight or ten kilometers before reaching the canal; prudence dictated that they not walk on the track bed, but instead stay parallel to the tracks at a distance of several hundred meters, while still keeping them within sight. The moon was out: it made the march easier, but without it the three men would have been less apprehensive. By now they were tired; all the same, Leonid forced his pace and tended to take the lead. In contrast, the Latvian maneuvered to be last in line; this irritated Mendel, who finally told him curtly, “You get moving, I’ll be last.”

Leonid spotted the bridge at sunrise. It wasn’t the ideal time to start work, but not a soul could be seen, and the bridge—which was after all only a few meters long—wasn’t guarded. It was clear that Leonid was eager to direct the operation: he gave orders in a voice that was subdued but also excited and anxious. With Mendel’s help, he unbolted the fishplates right at the junction of the two sections of track, practically at the beginning of the bridge, and then all the screws that fastened the plates to the ties; the wooden ties were rotten and the screws were easy to loosen. Karlis had made a bland offer to help, but was happy to stand watch and make sure no one approached. Once the two rails were unfastened, Leonid, instead of moving them, tied them together with a rope laid laterally, about thirty

meters in length: unfortunately, that was the longest rope to be found in Novoselky. The free end of the rope was buried under clods of dirt and brush. Done, Leonid announced proudly; now all they had to do was wait for the next train. Let the pilot engine go by and then, right before the engine ran over the track, pull hard on the rope and jerk the rails out of line. Not too soon, or the engineer would be bound to notice the sabotage.

They spent the rest of the day sleeping in shifts: toward nightfall, the sound of a train could be heard in the silence of the countryside. All three of them got a good grip on the end of the rope and lay down under the bushes to keep from being seen. There was no pilot engine; the train consisted of thirty or so locked boxcars, and it was moving along rapidly, but when it came within view of the bridge it started to slow down. Mendel suddenly felt an intense urge to pray, but he suppressed it because none of the prayers from his childhood were suited to the situation, and for that matter he couldn't be sure that the Eternal One, blessed be He, had jurisdiction over railroad lines. The train was moving slowly by the time it came even with the dismantled section of track. "Now," Leonid ordered: the three men leaped to their feet and jerked hard on the rope. They encountered much stiffer resistance than they expected, then something gave and the rope obeyed their frenzied efforts: but not far, no more than a handsbreadth.

The locomotive screeched as the engineer jammed on the brakes, and sparks sprayed from the wheels: he must have seen something and reversed steam, but it was too late. The front wheel truck tumbled off the rails and onto the gravel of the roadbed, the engine and cars moved another dozen meters or so, propelled by the momentum, in a deafening clatter and a cloud of dust, then everything was still. Only the front truck of the locomotive was stuck on the bridge, and the engine was slightly tilted; it must have hit the parapet, and a jet of steam was issuing from a broken pipe somewhere, with an ear-splitting hiss, so loud that the three men were unable to exchange a word. Leonid, pale as a corpse, gestured to the other two men to follow him toward the first car: perhaps in search of prey. This was crazy! Up and down the length of the train, they could see human figures scurrying back and forth. Mendel stepped in; with Karlis's help, he dragged Leonid away toward the nearest grove of trees. They stared at one another, panting: a partial derailment, a partial success. The locomotive was damaged, but not destroyed; the line was cut, but it would be repaired in a few days; the bridge and the rail cars were practically untouched. Leonid swore at

himself, he should have foreseen that the train would slow down when it got to the bridge. If they'd sabotaged the line a kilometer farther along, they would have done ten times as much damage.

The security detail, no more than half a dozen men, were busying themselves around the locomotive, without bothering to go in search of the saboteurs. The three men waited for nightfall, then they headed back, in no hurry. Leonid seemed depressed, and Mendel did his best to bolster his spirits: it wasn't his fault, he assured him, they lacked proper equipment, and to some extent they had in fact stopped the train. Leonid said nothing for a long time, with his back turned; then he said:

"You don't get it. It was supposed to be a gift."

"A gift? For who?"

"For Line: the girl with the submachine gun, that's right, the one who stands guard with you. She's my woman, and has been since the other night. The train was supposed to be a gift for her."

Mendel felt like laughing and crying at the same time. He was about to tell Leonid that Novoselky wasn't the place for a love story, but he restrained himself. They continued in silence; in the middle of the night they realized that Karlis had fallen behind and they stopped to wait for him. An hour went by and Karlis didn't appear: he'd gone his own way. The two men continued back through the thickening shadows.

When they reached the camp, they made their report, and Dov listened without commenting or passing judgment: he knew how those operations went. Karlis's departure was a problem, but there had been no way to predict or prevent it, and, for that matter, it wouldn't be the first time; Novoselky wasn't a concentration camp, and anyone who wanted to leave was free to do so. Would Karlis talk? The reward offered by the police was attractive, ten rubles a head for every Jew reported: the Germans are generous people. On the other hand, Karlis had accounts to settle with the Germans himself, and what's more they'd always treated him well at the monastery, and he had other ways of making a living. Whatever the case, there was nothing to be done about it: they could only stay alert, especially in the next few days and, if there was an attack, defend themselves.

But no attack came; what did come, around the middle of September, brought by Dov's mysterious informers, was the news that Italy had capitulated, and the camp was quickly in an uproar. War news, invariably triumphant in nature, was a fundamental feature of life at Novoselky. Not a

week passed without the Allies landing in Greece, or Hitler killed by assassins, or the Americans routing the Japanese with some terrifying new weapon. Every new rumor was passed around in feverish excitement, embroidered on, embellished with new details, and served for days at a time as a bulwark against fear; the few who refused to believe in it were looked upon with contempt. Then it would vanish, forgotten without leaving a trace, so that the next piece of news could be accepted uncritically.

But this time was different, and the announcement of Italy's capitulation was confirmed by two different sources. It was reported on Radio Moscow, and confirmed by Dov in person, who was usually skeptical. The comments were frenzied, and no one talked about anything else. This meant that the Axis forces had been cut in half. Surely now the war would be over within a month, at most two. It was impossible that the Allies would fail to take advantage of the situation: Hadn't they already landed in Italy? For their armies, Italy would be no more than a step along the way, in three days they'd reach the border and then drive straight into the heart of Germany. But which border? The geography of Europe was passionately reconstructed, through dim memories of school and legendary scraps. Pavel, the only citizen of the marshes who had actually been to Italy, sat like an oracle at the center of a constantly changing knot of listeners.

Pavel Yurevich Levinski was very proud of his patronym, and less so of his inconveniently eloquent surname: he was a Jewish Russian, not a Russian Jew. At the age of thirty-five, he already had a varied career behind him: he'd been a weight lifter, then an actor, both amateur and professional, a singer, and even, for a few months, an announcer on Radio Leningrad. He liked to play cards and dice, he liked wine, and, when necessary, he could swear like a Cossack. In the emaciated community of Novoselky he stood out for his athletic appearance: no one could understand how, on the starvation rations, Pavel was able to find nourishment for his muscles. He was of average height, tough, ruddy. He shaved regularly, and the blue-black shadow of his beard extended up his cheeks almost to his eyes. Only hours after shaving, it was already darkening his face again. His hair and eyebrows were black and bushy. He had a true Russian voice, soft and deep and resonant, but once he finished talking or singing his mouth snapped shut, like a steel trap. His face was made up of sharp contrasts, so many mountains and valleys; his cheekbones were pronounced, the groove that ran from the center of his nose to his upper lip was deep, and two fleshy

elevations marked its juncture with the lip itself. He had strong teeth and the eyes of a mesmerist. With those eyes, and with his short, massive hands, he could eliminate various joint pains, backaches, and sometimes, for a few hours, even hunger and fear. He had no inclination for discipline, but he enjoyed a tacit indulgence at the monastery.

His listeners peppered him with questions about Italy.

"Why, of course, I've been there. Years and years ago, on the famous tour of the Jewish Theater of Moscow. I was Jeremiah, the prophet of misfortune: I came onstage with a yoke on my shoulders, prophesying the deportation of the Jews to Babylon, lowing like an ox. I wore a purple wig, and lots of padding to make me seem even bigger than I am, and a pair of shoes with soles a handsbreadth high, because prophets are tall. We performed in Hebrew and Yiddish: the Italians, in Milan, Venice, Rome, and Naples, couldn't understand a single word we said and clapped like mad."

"So you've seen Italy with your own eyes?" Ber, the student rabbi, asked him.

"Of course: from the train. The whole length of Italy is the distance from Leningrad to Kiev, you can go from the Alps to Sicily in a day: now that the Italian Army has surrendered, the Allies will be at the German border in the blink of an eye. For that matter, even before they surrendered, the Italians were never serious about being Fascists; in fact, Mussolini himself invited the Theater of Moscow to Rome, and in Ukraine the Italian soldiers didn't put up much resistance. Italy is a beautiful country, with seas and lakes and mountains, all green and flowering. The people are courteous and friendly, well dressed but given to thieving: in short, it's an odd country, very different from Russia."

But what about the borders? How far north would the Allies get? Here it became clear that Pavel Yurevich was on shaky ground; he vaguely remembered a place called Tarvisio, but he no longer knew whether it bordered Germany or Yugoslavia or Hungary. When he did remember was a dark-eyed girl he'd spent a night with in Milan, but that episode did not interest his audience.

October went by; you could feel the cold coming on, and the community's spirits began to sink. Contradictory reports came in: the Russians had retaken Smolensk, but the German front had not collapsed. There was fighting in Italy, but not at the border, not along the Alps: there

was talk of Allied landings in countries nobody had ever heard of. Could it be that the British and the Americans, with all their oil and all their gold, were unable to give the Germans the final clubbing? And the Eternal One, blessed be He, why was He remaining hidden behind the gray clouds of Pripet instead of coming to the aid of His people? “You chose us from all the peoples”: why us in particular? Why do the wicked prosper, why are the helpless slaughtered, why hunger, mass graves, typhus, the SS flamethrowers in lairs packed with terrified children? And why should Hungarians, Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Tartars rob and massacre the Jews, tear their last weapons out of their hands, instead of joining with them to fight the common enemy?

Now winter arrived, friend and ally of the Russian armed forces but a cruel enemy to the trapped inhabitants of Novoselky. The gusting Siberian wind had already drawn a sheet of transparent ice over the black face of the marshes; soon that ice would thicken until it could support the weight of manhunters. The tracks of footsteps in the snow would become legible from the air, or even from the ground, just as clearly as one can read the scrolls of the Holy Scriptures. There was no shortage of firewood, but every hearth was a giveaway; the columns of smoke rising from the monastery chimneys would be visible for dozens of kilometers in all directions, signaling like a forefinger pointing to the ground: “The sacrificial victims are here.” Dov ordered that by day all the citizens exempt from work details should live gathered in a single room and that at night they should all sleep in the same dormitory. That meant lighting only one fire; the chimney pipe was to be extended into the branches of a large oak tree growing close to the wall, thus assuring that the soot would cling to the branches instead of blackening the snow all around. Would all this serve any purpose? Would it be enough? Maybe it would, or maybe it wouldn’t, but the important thing was to make sure that everyone was doing something for the common good, that everyone should have the impression that something was being decided and done. Tanners and cobblers began making boots of all sizes, using all the hides that the peasants were willing to hand over, even dogskin and catskin: rough barbaric boots stitched with twine, furry side in. They were not limited to local consumption; Dov sent a mission to Rovnoe, a village inhabited by Ukrainians of the Baptist faith, to barter an assortment of boots in exchange for provisions and wool. Baptists, too, were despised and

persecuted, both by the Germans and by the Russians; they were on good terms with the Jews.

The envoys returned from Rovnoe a few days later, with a substantial cargo of goods and a message for Dov. It was signed by Gedale, the legendary partisan commander, the one who had led the revolt in the Kosava ghetto, and whose life had been saved by a violin. Dov, who by now thought of Mendel as his lieutenant, read him the message and talked it over with him. It contained two points: first of all, Gedale informed Dov that in the Salihorsk ghetto, by now decimated, the Germans had posted a decree of "amnesty," drafted in their cynically euphemistic jargon: the *Umsiedlungen*, or forced transfers (they called them transfers!) had been suspended for an unspecified period; the Jews who were hiding in the area, and especially the artisans, were invited to return to the ghetto, they would not be punished for running away, and would receive ration cards. And that Dov, with the onset of winter, should therefore do as he thought best.

Second, Gedale was inviting Dov to a hunting party. They would be hunting the hunters: it was a unique opportunity. Count Daraganov, a former large landowner, had returned to his landholdings in the wake of the German invasion, and he was holding a hunting party for the Germans on his estate, on the shores of Lake Chervonoe, just a day's walk from Novoselky. A dozen high-ranking Wehrmacht officers would be attending; the report was reliable—it had come from a Ukrainian who collaborated with the partisans and who had been chosen as a beater. The band to which Gedale temporarily belonged was powerful and well organized, made up for the most part of volunteers from the winter of 1941, which is to say, the aristocracy of Soviet partisans. Gedale thought that Jewish involvement in the hunting party would be welcome, advantageous, and possibly rewarded with weapons or something else.

Concerning the first point, Dov chose to put off the decision until later; as for the second, his decision was immediate. It was important to show the Russians that Jews, too, knew how to fight and were eager to do so. Mendel volunteered to go: he was a soldier, he knew how to shoot. Dov thought it over briefly; no, neither Mendel nor Leonid, precisely because they were experienced fighters. The action that Gedale was proposing might be important in propaganda terms, and was really a prank, but militarily speaking it was relatively meaningless, and it was dangerous. Partisan logic was pitiless, and it demanded that the best men be held in reserve for the

more serious operations, for diversions, for offense and defense. Instead, he would send Ber and Vadim, two nebbishes, two greenhorns: precisely because they were beginners. “Do you think I get my hands dirty? I do; just like everyone who has to make decisions.”

Ber, the bespectacled young man who stood guard with Leonid, and Vadim set off in high spirits; Vadim, a reckless young man, talkative and giddy, even boasted happily: “We’ll punch holes in those medal-spangled chests!” All they carried with them was a pistol and two hand grenades each. Vadim came back alone, two days later, ashen-faced and exhausted, with a bullet hole in his shoulder, to tell the story. It hadn’t been a game at all, it was a massacre, pure chaos. Everyone was shooting at everyone else, bullets were whistling in from all directions. The Russian partisans, well hidden among the bushes, had been the first to shoot; with a single salvo they had killed four German officers, he couldn’t say whether colonels or generals. Then he’d seen the Ukrainian auxiliary police come out into the open, firing at the partisans, firing into the air, and even firing at one another; one of them, right before his eyes, had killed a German officer with the butt of his rifle. Ber had been killed immediately, impossible to say by whom, perhaps just by accident: he was on his feet, looking around; his eyesight wasn’t particularly good. He, Vadim, had hurled his grenades into the group of Germans, but instead of scattering they had drawn together and closed ranks; one grenade had exploded and the other had not.

Dov sent Vadim to get some rest, but the young man got none. He was shaken by violent bouts of coughing, and he spat a bloody foam. During the night he developed a fever and he lost consciousness; by morning he was dead. Dead why? He was twenty-two years old, Mendel said to Dov, and he couldn’t keep a note of reproof out of his voice. “There’s no saying that we won’t envy him later for the way he died,” Dov replied.

Vadim was buried at the foot of an alder tree, in the middle of an unexpected blizzard. Dov had a cross planted on his grave, because Vadim was a converted Jew; and because no one knew the proper Orthodox prayers, Dov himself recited the Kaddish. “It’s better than nothing,” he said to Mendel. “It’s not for the dead man but for the living who believe in it.” The sky was so dark that the snow, both the drifts on the ground and the flakes whirling through the air, looked gray.

Dov sent a messenger to Rovnoe, to find Gedale and his band and ask them to send reinforcements immediately, but the messenger returned with

no answer. He'd been unable to find anyone; instead what he had seen were the peasants of Rovnoe, men and women alike, hands tied, in the town square. He'd seen an SS platoon, weapons leveled, ordering them into a wagon. He'd seen the men of the auxiliary police, Ukrainians or Lithuanians, taking armfuls of shovels from a hut and loading them onto the wagon, and he'd seen the wagon set off to the valley south of the town, followed by the SS troops, bantering and smoking. There was no more to tell.

There wasn't a soul in Novoselky, and in all the occupied territories, who did not know the significance of the shovels. Dov told Mendel that he was sorry to have sent Ber into combat:

"If the mission had gone well, with a clear victory, then I would have been right to risk the lives of two men. Instead it turned out pretty badly, and now I am in the wrong. Ber is a Jew, even dead: anyone can see that. I was wrong to choose him. Certainly, his corpse will fall into the hands of the Gestapo. Our participation in the hunt may perhaps improve our standing in the eyes of Gedale's Russians, but it will also bring a German reprisal down upon us. Karlis running away, the shovels of Rovnoe, Ber: they're three menacing signals. The Germans won't take long to find us. The miracle of our immunity is over."

That's what the old people of the camp must have thought, when Dov told them about the "amnesty" promised by the Germans. They wanted to return to Salihorsk: they asked to leave, to be taken back to the ghetto. They preferred to cling to Nazi promises rather than face the snow and certain death of Novoselky. They were artisans, they'd have work in the ghetto, and in Salihorsk were their homes, and near their homes was the cemetery. They preferred servitude and the scant bread offered by the enemy: and how could you blame them? A terrible voice from three thousand years earlier came into Mendel's mind, the lamentations that the Jews pursued by Pharaoh's chariots had brought against Moses: "Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness." The Lord our God, the Master of the World, divided the waters of the Red Sea, and the chariots were overturned. Who would divide the waters before the Jews of Novoselky? Who would appease their hunger with quails and manna? What was falling from the dark sky was not manna but cruel snow.

Let each one choose his own fate. Dov had three sledges prepared to take back to Salihorsk the twenty-seven citizens who had no military duties and had chosen the way of the ghetto; among them were all the children, but Adam had chosen to stay. There were only two mules, brought by the men from Ozarichi: one mule was therefore forced to pull two sledges. They left in silence, without a word of farewell, bundled up in rags, straw, and blankets, obeying their miserable hopes for a few more weeks of life. Thus, instantly hidden from sight by the curtain of snow, they vanish from this story.

Dov ordered three bunkers dug, or, really, three burrows in the bare dirt, which, despite the cold, was not yet frozen solid. They were situated about two hundred meters from the monastery, in the direction from which they expected the Germans to arrive. The Germans had established a garrison in the partially destroyed village of Rovnoe. Each burrow could hold two men, and it was camouflaged with brush that was rapidly covered over with snow. “We, too, know how to use shovels,” he said, and sent another team to dig a square pit, two meters deep, across the broadest track that ran from Rovnoe to the monastery. He had them cover it with light boards, and atop those boards he had them lay brush up to the level of the snow on the surrounding terrain: after one night of continuous snowfall, the depression was barely noticeable. Along the track, and over the trap that they had thus laid, he had two men walk back and forth repeatedly, each of them pulling behind him a shovel weighed down with rocks, so as to create the appearance of two recent wheel tracks. He distributed weapons to all, and he positioned the heavy machine gun on the intact turret.

The manhunters showed up two days later. There were more than fifty of them, so someone must have overestimated the strength of the defenders. They heard the clattering of the caterpillar tracks before anything could be seen through the veil of snow, which continued to fall heavily. A light half-track led the column, following the track that Dov had prepared: it advanced slowly, reached the edge of the trap, teetered on the rim, and fell in, crushing the boards, which cracked loudly. Dov climbed up to the turret, where Mendel was ready with the machine gun. He told him to wait:

“Conserve your ammunition, fire only when you see someone trying to get out of the pit.” But no one emerged; perhaps the vehicle had overturned.

Behind the light half-track came another, heavier one, and behind it a squad of men on foot fanned out across the track and among the trees. The heavy half-track skirted the pit and opened fire; at the same instant, Mendel, too, began to fire short bursts, in the grip of battle fever. He saw a few Germans fall, and at the same time heard two violent explosions beneath him: a pair of anti-tank rockets had hit the monastery’s roof, which collapsed and caught fire. Other direct hits destroyed the building’s outer walls at numerous points. In the midst of all the noise and smoke, Dov shouted into his ear: “Fire full out, now. Don’t try to save ammunition. We’re fighting for three lines in the history books.” Dov, too, was firing downward, with one of the Italian rifles. Suddenly, Mendel saw him stumble; he fell backward, but immediately got up. At the same time, he heard more light-arms fire coming from the bunkers: in accordance with Dov’s orders, the fighters in the bunkers were attacking the Germans from behind. Caught off guard, the Germans broke and ran, turning their backs to the monastery. Mendel rushed down the steps with Dov, amid the rubble in flames. He saw people moving, and shouted at them to follow him; they emerged into the open on the opposite side of the building and were among the trees. Safe, he thought, absurdly. On the other side, fighting had resumed. They heard the sound of mortar shells and commands shouted through a loudspeaker, they saw men and women emerge from the breaches in the walls, arms raised. They saw the manhunters laugh as they searched them, interrogated them, and then lined them up against the wall; but what happened in the courtyard of the monastery of Novoselky will not be recounted. It is not to describe massacres that this story is being told.

They counted their number. They were eleven: Mendel himself, Dov, Leonid, Line, Pavel, Adam, another woman, whose name Mendel didn’t know, and four of the men from Ozarichi. Adam was losing blood from a wound in his upper thigh, so high up that there was no way to bind it; he stretched out on the snow and died in silence. Dov wasn’t wounded, only stunned. He had a contusion to the temple, perhaps a ricocheting bullet or a rock hurled by one of the explosions. The Germans lingered until nightfall, blowing up what remained of the monastery; they didn’t follow the tracks of the fugitives, already covered by the falling snow, and left, taking with them their dead and the machine gun.

4

November 1943–January 1944

They had few weapons, little ammunition, and nothing to eat. They were dazed and listless, in the grip of the leaden passivity that follows action, that binds both spirit and limbs. The war would go on forever; death, hunting, flight would never come to an end, the snow would never stop falling, day would never dawn. The patch of red blood around Adam's body would never be washed away, no one would ever again glimpse peace, the gentle happy season, the works of men. The woman whose name Mendel didn't know, with a sweet fair face and a solid peasant body, sat in the snow and wept quietly. Mendel learned that her name was Sissl and that she was Adam's daughter.

The first to recover was Pavel. "*Nu*, so we're alive and the Germans have left. We can't spend the night here. Let's go down into the cellars: they can't have blown them all up." Dov, too, began to recover; certainly, beneath the monastery there was a network of underground corridors of several hundred meters. There were some provisions, and in any case those tunnels could serve as a temporary shelter. There were two trapdoors leading down, but the larger one was covered with a daunting heap of rubble. The smaller one, in the kitchen floor, was almost clear. They felt their way down the ladder, found straw and firewood, and lit a fire. They also found bundles of fir branches; by the light of jury-rigged torches they saw that the supplies of potatoes and corn remained intact, as did the munitions storeroom. They held a meeting.

"We can stay here for a few days, rest, and eat: then we'll see," said Pavel, but Dov and Mendel were opposed. Dov said:

“The Germans have established a garrison in Rovnoe, and they suffered several dead here. They’ll be back, no doubt about it. They never do things by half. And we have no heavy weaponry, we’re few in number and exhausted, and we can’t live in a cellar like this; we’d die either of cold or of smoke.”

“We need to join forces with Gedale,” said Mendel. “Where is Gedale?”

“I don’t know,” Dov replied. “From the last reports I have about him, he was working with a well-organized band, made up of older and experienced partisans: he was the deputy commander. And precisely because they’re experienced, they won’t leave any traces, and it will be hard to find them.”

“But they must have informants in Rovnoe; they must have heard about the German attack on the monastery, and will send someone to find out what happened,” said Line, who hadn’t spoken until that moment. Mendel turned to look at her, in the flickering torchlight. She was sitting on the ground next to Leonid, small and slender, with dark eyes, black hair cropped short, the gnawed fingernails of a schoolgirl. She’d spoken in a voice that was subdued but firm. Not an easy woman to read, he thought to himself: neither simple nor direct. For Leonid, an unexpected companion; they could either draw strength one from the other, or destroy each other. Then he looked at Sissl and felt all at once the silent burden of solitude: pity the man alone. With a woman at his side, any woman, the road ahead would have been different.

Pavel agreed with Line’s observation, and added, “And if they do send someone, they’ll do it quickly.”

The next morning, in fact, they heard a dog barking. Pavel crept out into the open, and through a crack in the wall he saw that Oleg, the old forest ranger, was wandering around the monastery’s ruins. He was a trustworthy person; he’d given proof of that on other occasions, taking advantage of his tours of inspection to maintain contacts among the bands and convey information. Yes, he’d been sent by Ulybin, the commander of Gedale’s band: the band was wintering in a camp near Turov, seventy kilometers west of there. Ulybin was willing to take in trained people in good condition, but no one else; it shouldn’t be hard to catch up with him.

“Take the forest trails and avoid the roads. It’ll be rougher going, but you won’t run the risk of bumping into a patrol.”

They followed the forest ranger’s advice, but the march was miserable. The snow was deep and soft. The first in line sank in to his knees, and

occasionally stumbled into snow piled deeper by the wind, and then sank in up to his hips; they took turns leading, but even so they couldn't cover more than two or three kilometers an hour, in part because they were weighed down by the provisions and munitions they'd found in the cellars, and because Dov was forced to stop frequently.

It was no longer snowing, but the sky was still lowering and ominous, so opaque that there was no way to tell directions: as night fell, there was the same dull gray light to east and west. They did their best to travel in the direction indicated by Oleg by observing the moss on the tree trunks, but the forest consisted mostly of birches, and moss doesn't grow on the white birch bark. In fact, trees of any kind were becoming rarer; sloped clearings alternated with increasingly vast flatlands, evidently frozen ponds or lakes. None of them were very familiar with the area, and they soon found themselves relying on Pavel. Pavel proved to be strong and confident. He was protective of Dov, who was exhausted by the long march on his wounded knee, and still weakened by the blow he'd taken during the German attack. Pavel helped him walk, supported him, took on most of his load. At the same time, he tended to replace him in making decisions and issuing orders: "This way, right, Dov?"

Pavel claimed that he could sense north, without knowing how, the way a dowser can feel water. The others displayed mistrust and even annoyance, but in fact the few times they happened on an oak tree the moss was on the side that Pavel had predicted: however approximate, the direction he chose was accurate. They were not only weary; they were thirsty, too. They were all well enough acquainted with the Russian winter to know that eating snow is useless and dangerous: long before you've satisfied your thirst, you'll have an irritated mouth and a swollen tongue. To quench a thirst you need water, not snow or ice; but to get water you need fire, and for fire you need firewood. They found firewood fairly often, piles of it, abandoned by the peasants, but Pavel refused to let them touch it; or, more precisely, he set forth in the form of a command an exchange of views that had taken place among Mendel, Dov, and him.

"No fires during the daytime, says Dov. Tough it out, tolerate the thirst, you can't die of thirst in a single day. Smoke can be seen from a long way in the daytime. We'll start a fire when night falls; you can see fire from a long way off, too, but we'll build a shelter around it, by piling up snow, or with our own bodies, so that we can also get warm ourselves. But I think

we'll find a shelter before long. In countryside like this, we ought to find an *izba*."

Whether it was intuition, second sight, or some charlatan's trick, it turned out that Pavel had guessed right. Around evening, they saw a hump on the desolate plain; the spikes of an enclosure emerged from the snow, black and shiny with asphalt, along with the roof of a hut. They cleared the snow away from the door and went in, all of them crowding into the small space. There was nothing inside save for an earthenware stove and a zinc bucket; under the snow was a healthy supply of firewood, stacked against the rear wall. They were able to roast potatoes in the embers of the stove and to melt snow in the bucket. They lit a fire behind the cabin, in a hole dug in the snow, and they boiled corn in their mess kits; they obtained an unpleasant, tasteless gruel, but it warmed them up and eased their hunger and thirst. Then they stretched out to sleep, the men on the floor, the women on the pallet atop the stove; they all fell asleep instantly, except Dov, who was starting to suffer from the old wound in his knee and his shattered bones. He moaned as he drifted into and out of slumber, tossing and turning in search of a position that wouldn't make the pain worse.

In the middle of the night, Mendel woke up, too, with a jerk: no sound could be heard, but an intense beam of light shone in through a small window, moving from one corner of the *izba* to the other, as if exploring it. Mendel drew closer to the window: the beam of light caught him full in the face for an instant and then went out. Once he'd recovered from his dazzlement, he made out three figures in the pale glow of the snow: they were men in white overalls, on skis, and armed. One of them held a submachine gun with a flashlight bound to the barrel: just then, both barrel and flashlight were aimed at the snow. The three men were talking softly, but no sound could be heard from inside the *izba*. Then the shaft of light penetrated the small window again, a pistol shot was heard, and a voice shouted in Russian:

"We've got you covered. Don't move; hands on your heads. One of you come out with your hands up and without weapons." Then the same voice repeated the warning in bad German. Dov made a move to get up and head for the door, but Pavel beat him to it: before Dov was on his feet, Pavel had opened the door and walked out, hands raised.

"Who are you? Where do you come from and where are you going?"

“We are soldiers, partisans, and Jews. We’re not from around here, we come from Novoselky.”

“I also asked you where you’re heading.”

Pavel hesitated; Mendel stepped out, hands in the air, and stood at his side.

“Comrade, we were fifty and now ten of us are left alive. We’ve fought and our camp was destroyed. We’re lost and we’re tired, but fit for service; we’re looking for a group that will take us in. We want to continue our war, which is also yours.”

The man dressed in white replied: “We’ll see later whether or not you’re fit for service. We can’t take in any useless mouths to feed; in our group if you don’t fight you don’t eat. This is our zone, and you were lucky: we saw your women on top of the stove, and so we didn’t shoot. Usually, that’s not what we do. It’s almost never a mistake to shoot on sight.” The man gave a short laugh, and then added: “Almost!”

Mendel felt his heart lighten.

Dawn was breaking. Two of the men took off their skis and came into the *izba*; the third man, the one who had spoken, stayed outside, weapon leveled. He was tall and very young, and had a short black beard; all three wore padded clothing beneath their camouflage overalls, giving them a look of corpulence that seemed out of place with the smooth agility of their movements. The two men, pistols in hand, ordered those in the hut not to make a move, and with quick, expert motions they searched them all, even the two women, offering a few half-serious phrases of apology. They asked them their names and where they came from, piled the weapons and ammunition that they’d found in a corner, and then went back outside and made a quick report to their leader, which was impossible to overhear from inside. The bearded young man lowered his weapon, took off his skis, went in, and sat on the floor in a comradely manner.

“As far as we’re concerned, you’re not dangerous. My name’s Pyotr. Who is your leader?”

Dov said: “You can see for yourself, we’re not an integral band. We’re the survivors of a camp of families; among us were old people, children, and people passing through. I was their elder, or their leader, if that’s what you want to call me. I fought with Manuil (Arrow) and with Uncle Vanka, and I was wounded at Bobruysk last February. I was in the air force. Gedale fought with Uncle Vanka, too. We were friends. Do you know Gedale?”

Pyotr pulled a pipe out of his pocket and lit it. “As far as we’re concerned, you’re not dangerous, but you might become dangerous. You have white hair, boss; you’ve been a partisan—don’t you know that you don’t ask partisans questions?”

Dov fell silent, humiliated: yes, in wartime, people age quickly. He remained there, head bowed, looking at the large hands dangling inertly from his wrists, every now and then massaging his knee.

Pyotr resumed: “. . . But we’re not going to abandon you, whether or not you’re fighters. At least not right away—what might happen later, we can’t say, our leaders can’t say, no one can say. Our time runs like rabbits, fast and zigzagging. If you make a plan for the next day, and you can stick to it, congratulations; if you make plans for next week, you’re crazy. Or else you’re a German spy.”

He smoked calmly for a few more minutes, then he said, “Our camp isn’t far, we’ll be able to get there before nightfall tomorrow. You can keep your weapons, but unloaded: the bullets, forgive us, but we’ll keep them ourselves. For now. Then, once we’ve gotten to know one another, we’ll see.”

They set out, the three skiers leading the group, the others following behind. The snow was deep and floury, and the weight of the three men wasn’t enough to pack it down; the ten people on foot had a hard time moving through it, sinking in with every step, slowing their progress. The slowest of all was Dov; he never complained, but he was clearly having trouble. Pyotr gave him his ski poles, but they weren’t much help: he was panting and pale, and beaded with sweat, and he had to stop frequently. Pyotr, who was the first in line, turned around every now and then to look back, and was uneasy: the terrain was wide open, without trees or shelter; the frozen marshes alternated with slight barren rises, and from the height of one of these, if you turned to look back, it was possible to see their tracks, deep as a crevasse and straight as a meridian. At the end of their tracks were the thirteen of them, so many ants: if a German reconnaissance plane passed overhead, there would be no escape. Luckily, the sky remained overcast, but it wouldn’t be for much longer. Pyotr sniffed the air like a bloodhound: a light north wind was stirring; in time, it would kick up the snow and cover their trail, but the sky would clear before then. He was in a hurry to get back to camp.

He left the track and let the others pass him. When he found himself next to Dov, he said, “You’re tired, uncle: let me say that without offense. Come here, climb onto the tails of my skis and wrap your arms around me; it will be easier on you.” Dov obeyed without a word, and the pair were soon at the head of the line again. It was better for everyone: under the double weight the snow packed harder, and those on foot hardly sank in at all. Line, the lightest of them, was wearing a pair of oversized combat boots, and she floated on the surface of the snow as if she were wearing snowshoes; Leonid was never more than a handsbreadth away from her. They walked until nightfall, spent the night in a bivouac Pyotr knew, and resumed their march the following morning. They came within view of the camp sooner than expected, in midafternoon, under a bright and unnaturally warm sun. “Within view,” of course, only for someone who knew where and how the camp was situated. Pyotr showed them a vast section of forest to the southwest that, like a horizon line drawn with a fine paintbrush, separated the white of the snow from the light blue of the winter sky. Out there, somewhere in the midst of the trees, was the encampment of Ulybin’s band; they’d get there that night, but not in a straight line. It was a lesson taught by experience and one they’d paid for dearly: never leave trails that are too easy to read in clear, windless weather. They had to make a detour; they would resume the correct direction in the shelter of the trees.

The former citizens of the marshes felt as if they were dreaming. Novoselky had been a precarious salvation and a clever improvisation: the camp they were now entering was a professional piece of work, the product of three years’ experience. Mendel and Leonid were able to contrast the organizational strength of Ulybin’s band with the reckless and overweening undertakings of Venyamin’s wandering band.

In the depths of the forest, barely visible to the careless eye, they found a group of three wooden barracks, almost completely buried, arranged along the three sides of an equilateral triangle. At the center of the triangle, every bit as hard to see, were the kitchen and the well. The chimney that scattered the smoke into the tangled tree branches wasn’t an invention unique to Novoselky: they’d come up with the same solution here. When

the time is ripe, certain ideas sprout in different places, and there are circumstances in which problems have only one solution.

In Novoselky, Dov had joked about Leonid's profession: he had no need for an accountant. In Turov they found one, or, rather, a quartermaster in the full performance of his duties. At the same time, he was a representative of the NKVD and a political commissar, and he dealt with the newcomers with brisk efficiency. Name, patronymic, corps affiliation for those in the military, age, profession, registration of identity papers (though few of them had any); then to bed, they'd take care of everything else in the morning. That's right, to bed: inside each barrack was a stove and a board covered with clean straw, and the air was warm and dry, even though the floor was almost two meters below ground level. Mendel fell asleep in a whirl of tangled impressions: he felt exhausted, out of place, and yet protected, less of a father and more of a child, safer and less free, at home and in a barrack; but sleep came immediately, like a merciful blow to the head.

The following morning, the camp offered the refugees nothing less than a hot bath, decorously separated for the women and the men, in a vat placed in the kitchen area. What followed was a delousing, or rather an invitation to perform a conscientious personal self-examination, and the distribution of linen, rough and not new but clean. Last of all, an enormous kasha, filling and hot, eaten communally, with real spoons on real aluminum plates, followed by plenty of sweet tea. It promised to be a beautiful day, with singularly mild weather for that season: where the snow was exposed to the sun, it showed signs of melting, which caused some uneasiness. "We're better off when it freezes," Pyotr told Mendel, as he was showing him around. "When it thaws, if we're not careful, we'll have flooding in the barracks and we'll drown in mud." He proudly showed them the electrical system. A talented mechanic had adapted the bevel gears from an old mill to fit the transmission of a German truck: a blindfolded horse was walking slowly in a circle and, through the system of gears, was operating a dynamo that, in turn, charged a group of batteries. When everything was working, the batteries powered the electric lighting and the two-way radio. "Instead of the horse, in the fall we used four Hungarian prisoners, for seven days."

"And then did you kill them?" asked Mendel.

"We kill only Germans, and even them not always. We aren't like them; we get no pleasure from killing. Blindfolded as they were, we took them to

the far side of the river and let them go where they wanted. They were a little dizzy."

Pyotr warned the newcomers not to try to leave the camp—in fact, not to go more than thirty meters or so from the barracks. "All around, the forest is mined. There are mines buried seven centimeters deep under the earth, and there are trip-wire mines, with string stretched out under the snow. We did good work: secretly, night after night, we cleared a German minefield, retrieved the mines, and laid them here. We didn't lose a single man in the process, and since then the Germans have left us alone. But we don't really leave them alone."

Pyotr seemed to be attracted to and curious about the group of ten he had found in the *izba* and had come so close to killing; he was especially friendly with Mendel. He showed him a project, an idea that Mikhail, the radio operator, had come up with and implemented all by himself. In the corner of his barracks there was an ancient, pedal-operated printing press, with a small supply of Cyrillic and Latin characters. Mikhail wasn't a typesetter, but he'd managed. He had composed a bilingual propaganda poster, set on a two-page spread, similar in every detail to the ones with which the Germans had flooded all the cities and villages in occupied Russia. The German text was copied from the original German posters: it promised the restoration of private property and the reopening of the churches, it invited young people to enlist in the Labor Organization, and it threatened serious penalties for partisans and saboteurs. The Russian text on the facing page was not a translation of the German text; rather, it was the exact opposite. It said:

> Young Soviets! Do not believe the Germans, who have invaded our homeland and are massacring our people. Do not work for them; if you go to Germany you'll suffer hunger and the whip, and they'll brand you like livestock; when you return home (if you return home!) you'll have to reckon with socialist justice. Not a man, not a kilo of wheat, not a jot of information to Hitler's executioners! Come with us, enlist in the Partisan Army!

In both versions there were many spelling mistakes, but they weren't the radiotelegraphist's fault: there was a shortage of *a*'s and *e*'s in the type tray, and so he'd replaced them with the characters that seemed to him to fit best. He had printed several hundred copies, and they had been distributed and posted all the way out to Baranovichi, Rivne, and Minsk.

There were plenty of light weapons to repair and oil: in Turov, Mendel immediately found work. In the hours when he was free of duties, Pyotr never left his side.

"Are all ten of you Jews?"

"No, just six: me, the two women, the young man who's always with the small young woman, the older man you carried on your skis, and Pavel Yurevich, the strongest one of all. The other four are stray partisans who reached us just before the Germans destroyed our camp."

"Why do the Germans want to kill you all?"

"It's hard to explain," Mendel replied. "You'd have to understand the Germans, and I've never been able to. The Germans think that a Jew is worth less than a Russian, and a Russian worth less than an Englishman, and that a German is worth more than all of them; and they think that when one man's worth more than another he has the right to do whatever he wants with him, even enslave or kill him. Maybe not all of them really believe it, but this is what they teach them at school, and these are things that their propaganda says."

"I believe that a Russian's worth more than a Chinese," said Pyotr, thoughtfully, "but unless China did something bad to Russia, I'd never think of killing all the Chinese."

Mendel said, "Well, I don't believe that it makes a lot of sense to say that one man's worth more than another. One man might be stronger than another one but not as wise. Or better educated but less courageous. Or more generous but also stupider. So his worth depends on what you want from him; someone can be very good at his job, and be worthless if you set him to do another kind of work."

"It's just as you say," said Pyotr, his face brightening. "I was the treasurer of the Komsomol, but I couldn't concentrate, I got the accounts wrong, and everyone laughed at me and said I was good for nothing. Then the war came, I volunteered immediately, and ever since I've had the feeling that I'm more valuable. It's a strange thing: I don't like killing, but I do like shooting, and so then killing doesn't really bother me. At first it wasn't like that, I held back, and I had a pretty stupid idea about things. I thought that the Germans, instead of having flesh like ours, were sheathed in steel, and that bullets bounced off them. I don't think that anymore; I've

killed plenty of Germans, and I've seen that they're just as soft as we are, if not softer. What about you, Jew: how many Germans have you killed?"

"I don't know," Mendel replied. "I was in the artillery. You understand, it's not like with a rifle, you position your weapon, you aim, you fire, and you see nothing; if you're lucky, you'll see the explosion from your shell when it hits, five or ten kilometers away. Who can say how many died by my hand? Maybe a thousand, maybe not even one. You get your orders over the phone or by radio, in a headset: three degrees left, elevation minus one degree, you do as you're told, and that's the end of it. It's like flying in a bomber, or when you pour acid into an anthill to kill the ants: a hundred thousand ants might die but you don't feel a thing, you don't even notice. But in my hometown the Germans ordered the Jews to dig a ditch, then they lined them up along the edge, and they shot them all, even the children, and even a number of Christians who were hiding Jews, and among those killed was my wife. Ever since then, I've believed that killing is wrong, but that we have no alternative to killing Germans. From far away or close up, the way you do or the way we do. Because killing is the only language they understand, the only reasoning that persuades them. If I shoot at a German, he's forced to admit that I, a Jew, am every bit as good as he is: it's his logic, you understand, not mine. They only understand force. Sure, convincing someone as he dies may not be very useful, but in the long run his comrades will also start to understand something. The Germans only started to understand something after Stalingrad. There, that's why it's important that there be Jewish partisans, and Jews in the Red Army. It's important, but it's also horrible; only if I kill a German will I manage to persuade other Germans that I am a man. And yet we have a law that says 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

". . . Still, you're strange. You're strange people. It's one thing to shoot and it's another to think things through. If you think too much, you can't shoot straight, and you people always think too much. Maybe that's why the Germans are killing you. Take me, for instance, I've been in the Komsomol since I was a kid, I'd give my life for Stalin the way my father did, I believe in Christ as the saviour of the world the way my mother does, I like vodka, I like girls, I even like to shoot, and I'm happy to live here in the steppe hunting Fascists, and I don't waste a lot of time thinking about it. If one of my ideas doesn't fit perfectly with another one, I don't really give a damn."

Mendel was listening with his ears and half his brain, while with the other half and with his hands he was using oil to clean the rust off the screws and springs of an automatic rifle he'd disassembled. He took advantage of that confidential moment to ask Pyotr a question that mattered deeply both to him and to Dov.

"What's become of your deputy commander? Wasn't a certain Gedale here with you, Gedale Skidler, a Jew, half Russian and half Polish, who fought in Kosava? A tall guy, with a hook nose and a wide mouth?"

Pyotr took his time replying: he looked up and scratched his beard, as if summoning to mind memories that had vanished years ago. Then he said, "Sure, sure. Gedale, of course. But he was never deputy commander; sometimes he just gave orders, when Ulybin was away. He's on a mission, Gedale. He'll be back, sure: in a week, or maybe two or even three weeks. Or maybe he's even been transferred: in the *partizanka*, nothing is ever certain."

This Pyotr is much better at covering ground on skis than he is at telling lies, Mendel said to himself. Then, with a laugh, he asked:

"Was he one of those who think too much?"

"It's not that he thought too much: no, certainly not that, that wasn't his problem, but he certainly was strange, him, too. I already told you, you Jews really are a little strange, one way or another, and I'm not saying it as a criticism. This Gedale could shoot almost as well as I could, I don't know who taught him; but he wrote poetry, and he always carried a violin with him."

"He composed songs and played them on the violin?"

"No, the poems were one thing and the violin was another. He played it at night; he had it with him in August, when the Germans launched their big roundup around Luninets. We managed to sneak out through the encirclement, but a sniper shot him: the bullet went through the violin from one side to the other, which blunted the impact so that it didn't hurt him at all. He fixed the holes with pine resin and bandages from the infirmary, and since then he's always carried the violin with him. He said that it sounded better than ever, and he even attached a bronze medal that we found on a dead Hungarian. You can see what a strange guy he was."

"If we were all the same, what a dull world this would be. We have a special blessing that we utter to God when we see a person who's different from others: a midget, a giant, a black man, a man covered with warts. We

say: ‘Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates such varied creatures.’ If we bless him for warts, then all the more reason to praise him for a partisan who plays the violin.”

“You have a point, and at the same time you drive me crazy. That’s the way Gedale was, too. He always wanted to have his say, and he never got along with Ulybin, or for that matter with Maksim; Maksim is the quartermaster, that is, the scribbler, the one who keeps the books and comes from the NKVD. They sent him here from Moscow and dropped him by parachute, to maintain discipline: as if discipline were the single most important consideration. For that matter, I don’t get along all that well with Maksim, either.”

Mendel was determined to strike while the iron was hot.

“So tell me, what happened between Gedale and the commander?”

“Well, there was a quarrel, at the beginning of the winter. They hadn’t been getting along for some time, Ulybin and Gedale. No, not because of the violin, there were more serious issues. Gedale wanted to roam through the woods and marshes and assemble a band of Jewish partisans. Ulybin on the other hand said that Moscow had given different orders; Jewish combatants were to be taken in a few at a time and incorporated into Russian units. The real break came when Gedale wrote a letter and sent it to Novoselky without Ulybin’s permission; I don’t know what was in that letter, and I wouldn’t be able to tell you which of the two was right, either. The fact remains that Ulybin was furious, he was shouting so loud that you could hear him throughout the camp, and he was pounding the table with his fists.”

“What was he shouting?”

“I couldn’t really hear,” Pyotr replied, flushing red.

“What was he shouting?” Mendel insisted.

“He was shouting that in his unit they were sick of hearing about poets.”

“I’ll bet he didn’t exactly say ‘poets,’” said Mendel.

“You’re right. He didn’t say ‘poets.’” Pyotr fell silent for a moment, then he added, “But tell me something: is it true that you were the ones who crucified Jesus?”

• • •

In the Turov camp the Novoselky refugees found safety and a certain material well-being, but they weren't entirely comfortable. The four men from Ozarichi were inducted as regulation members; the six others, including the two women, were given various service jobs. Ulybin, a few days after their arrival, received them with distant courtesy, but then he disappeared.

The temperature had gradually dropped; around mid-January it was -15 degrees centigrade, and by late January it fell to 30 below. Small ski patrols set out from the camp, on provisioning expeditions, or on harassment and sabotage operations about which Mendel got fragmentary news from Pyotr.

One day Ulybin sent to inquire whether any of them spoke German. All six Jews spoke it, more or less fluently, with a more or less pronounced Yiddish accent: but why was he asking? What was it about? Ulybin, through Maksim, let it be known that he wished to speak to the man with the best accent—not the women, they wouldn't be useful for the matter in question.

That night, in the well-heated barracks, a special meal was handed out. Shortly after sunset a sledge had arrived in the camp, unloaded a crate, and taken off again immediately; at dinner, the quartermaster gave everyone a tin can with an unusual shape. Mendel turned it over and over in his hands, baffled: it was heavy, it had no label, and the lid, soldered on for an airtight fit, was smaller than the outside diameter of the can itself. He noticed that the other diners used the tip of their knife to punch two holes in the circular area around the lid: a small hole and a larger one, and they poured a little water into the larger hole, and then plugged it up with a chunk of bread. Increasingly intrigued, he did as they had, and he felt the can heat up in his hand until it was scalding hot, while the familiar scent of acetylene wafted out of the hole still left open. Like the others, he held a lit match close to the hole, and before long the table was surrounded by a cheerful circle of flickering flames, as if in a fairy tale. Inside the can was meat and peas; in the outer jacket there was carbide, which heated the contents when it reacted with water.

While the storm raged outside, Pavel put on a show in the flickering light of the little flames. He feigned comic indignation:

"What's this? You've forgotten about me? Or are you pretending you don't know? There's no doubt, but of course, *ganz bestimmt*! I speak

German like a German, if I want; better than Hitler, who's Austrian. I can speak it with a Hamburg accent, or a Stuttgart accent, or a Berlin accent, as the client prefers. Or without an accent, as on the radio. I also speak Russian with a German accent, or German with a Russian accent. Tell him, tell your commander. Tell him that I was an actor and I've traveled the world. And that I've been a radio announcer, and that I've done comic routines on the radio, too; by the way, do you know the story of the Jew who ate herring heads?"

He told the story, in a Russian speckled with ridiculous Yiddish inflections, then he told another and another, drawing on the vast body of Jewish self-mockery, subtle and surreal, the just counterweight to the ritual, equally subtle and surreal: perhaps the most refined product of the civilization that through the centuries has been distilled from the lunatic world of Ashkenazi Judaism. His comrades were smiling in embarrassment, the Russians were holding their bellies and exploding in thunderous laughter. They loudly slapped his strong back, and urged him to go on, but encouragement wasn't necessary: how many years had it been since he'd had an audience?

". . . and the story of the *yeshiva bocherim*, the students from the rabbinical school who were drafted into the army, you know that one, don't you? It was during the time of the tsars, and there were lots of rabbinical schools at the time, from Lithuania all the way to Ukraine. It took at least seven years to become a rabbi, and almost all the students were poor; but even the ones who weren't poor were still pale and skinny, because a *yeshiva bocher* is supposed to eat only bread seasoned with salt, drink water, and sleep on the benches at school, and in fact we still say: 'Nebbish, poor thing, he's skinny as a *yeshiva bocher*.' Well, then: the recruiting officers burst into a rabbinical school and all the students are conscripted into the infantry. A month goes by, and the instructors realize that all these boys have an infallible aim: they become sharpshooters. Why is that? I couldn't tell you, the story doesn't say. Maybe because studying the Talmud sharpens the eye. War breaks out, and the regiment of Talmudists is sent to the front, the very front lines. They're in the trench, rifles trained, and here comes the enemy, steadily advancing. The commander shouts, 'Fire!' Nothing, no one shoots. The enemy comes closer and closer. Once again the commander shouts, 'Fire!' and, once again, no one obeys: at this point the

enemy is just a stone's throw away. 'Fire, I said, you damned sons of bitches! Why don't you fire?' shouts the officer. . . ."

Pavel broke off: Ulybin had come in and had sat down at the table, and the excited buzz of conversation among the listeners immediately ceased. Ulybin was about thirty years old, of average height, dark and muscular; he had an oval face, impassive, and always clean-shaven.

"Well, why don't you continue? Let's hear how it ends," said Ulybin. Pavel resumed, less confidently, and with less brio. "So then one of the students says, 'Can't you see, captain, sir? These aren't cardboard cutouts, they're men, just like us. If we shot at them, we might hurt them."

The partisans around the table ventured to laugh quietly, hesitantly, alternating glances at Pavel and Ulybin. Ulybin said: "I didn't hear the beginning. Who were the ones who didn't want to shoot?"

Pavel gave a somewhat confused summary of the beginning of the joke, and then Ulybin asked in an icy voice:

"And you, what would you all do?"

There was a brief silence, then Mendel's subdued voice was heard:

"We aren't *yeshiva bocherim*."

Ulybin said nothing, but after a short pause he asked Pavel:

"Are you the one who speaks German?"

"That's me."

"Tomorrow you'll come with me. Is there anyone here who knows anything about electrical work?"

Mendel raised his hand: "Back home I used to fix radios."

"Fine, you'll come, too."

Ulybin had Mendel and Pavel wakened at four the next morning, in the dead of night. As they were having a quick breakfast, he explained the purpose of the expedition. One of the partisans, while inspecting the forest, noticed that the Germans had run a telephone line between the village of Turov and the Zhitkovichi station: they hadn't installed poles, they'd simply nailed the wire to the trees. The partisan had climbed a tree and cut the wire. Then he'd hurried back to the camp, proud of what he'd done, and Ulybin had told him he was a jackass: we don't cut phone lines, we tap

phone lines. At the Turov camp there was a field telephone that had never been used. Would it be possible to restore the line and patch into it so that they could hear what the Germans were talking about? Yes, Mendel said, it was possible, as long as there was a microphone. They should leave immediately, said Ulybin, before the Germans realized that the line had been cut and became suspicious.

Four of them set off—Ulybin, Mendel, Pavel, and Fedya, the young man who had found the wire and cut it. Fedya hadn't turned seventeen yet, was born right there in Turov, less than an hour's walk from the camp, and had known those woods since he was a child, looking for bird's nests. He flew along on his skis, silent and confident in the darkness, like a lynx, stopping every so often to wait for the other three. Ulybin could move pretty fast; Mendel labored, exhausted, out of condition, and impeded by the loose bindings; while Pavel had never put on a pair of skis in his life, was sweating in spite of the biting chill, and stumbled frequently, swearing under his breath. Ulybin was impatient; it would be wise to repair the line before day dawned. Luckily, according to Fedya, the place wasn't far.

They got there after an hour's march. Mendel had brought a few meters' length of wire; he took off his skis and climbed onto Pavel's shoulders, taking only a few minutes to splice the two ends of the line that had been lying in the snow; but to do the work he'd been forced to take off his gloves, and he could feel his fingers rapidly turning numb in the cold. He had to stop and rub his hands in snow for a long time, while Ulybin peered up at the lightening sky, stamping his feet with cold and impatience. Then he hooked one of the microphone wires to the line running from tree to tree, climbed down, drove a stake into the earth, and hooked the other wire to it. Ulybin grabbed the microphone out of his hand and held it to his ear.

"What can you hear?" asked Mendel, softly.

"Nothing. Just a buzz."

"That's fine," whispered Mendel. "It means that the contacts are working."

Ulybin handed the microphone to Pavel. "You keep listening, you understand German. If you hear someone talking, signal me." Then he asked Mendel, "If we were to talk, could they hear us?"

"Not as long as you keep your voice down, and you cover the microphone with your glove. But if we need to, I can unhook the wire from the stake: it only takes a second."

“Good. We’ll wait here till daylight, then we’ll leave. We’ll come back tomorrow night. Pavel, if you’re cold, I can fill in for you.”

In fact, all four of them took turns listening; when one of them got cold, he went off somewhere far from the microphone to pound his hands and feet. Around seven, Fedya nodded his head sharply and handed the microphone to Pavel. Ulybin pulled him aside:

“What did you hear?”

“I heard a German calling, ‘Turov, Turov’; but from Turov there was no answer.” Just then, Pavel waved his gloved hand and nodded his head yes more than once: someone had answered. He stood listening for a few minutes, then he said:

“They hung up. Too bad!”

“What were they saying?” Ulybin asked.

“Nothing of importance, but I was amused. There was a German who was complaining that he hadn’t slept because of stomach cramps, and he was asking another German whether he had a certain medicine. The one with stomach cramps is called Hermann and the other one is called Sigi. Sigi didn’t have the medicine, kept yawning, and seemed annoyed. He hung up. I was about to tell them that we have some very good medicine—would they have heard me?”

“We’re not here to play pranks,” said Ulybin. Then he added that, in spite of the risk, he’d decided that they should stay there for a few more hours: the opportunity was too tempting.

In fact, shortly afterward they listened in on a more interesting conversation. This time, it was Sigi who was calling Hermann from the Turov outpost: he reported that he’d tried repeatedly to get in touch with the Medvedka garrison, but no one was answering from Medvedka. Hermann, still suffering, replied that the four men in Medvedka might have gone for a walk, and that Sigi shouldn’t worry about them. But Sigi was determined to find out what was going on: he’d heard talk of *Banditen* in the area. Hermann, who was either higher in rank or perhaps just older, gave him some advice: why didn’t he take one of his men, dress him up as a woodsman with ropes and a hatchet, and send him from Turov to Medvedka to see for himself what was going on.

“How far away is Medvedka?” Ulybin asked Fedya.

“It must be six or seven kilometers from here.”

“And how far is Turov from Medvedka?”

“Roughly twice that distance.”

“How big is Medvedka?”

“Medvedka isn’t a village: it’s just a collective farm. Thirty or so peasants once worked there, but now I believe it’s abandoned.”

“You two, get going,” Ulybin said to Fedya and Mendel, “and bring me back the forester, alive. We’ll wait for you here, or not far from here.”

Mendel and Fedya came back around noon with their prisoner, who was unharmed but terrified; they’d tied his hands behind his back with telephone wire. They found Ulybin beside himself with impatience. Sigi had called Hermann back; he was uneasy, the woodsman hadn’t returned. Hermann grumbled something about the snow and the forest, then he told Sigi to send another man, dressed as a peasant this time, and have him follow the river path. To be more convincing, he should carry a couple of chickens. Ulybin told Mendel and Fedya to head out immediately for the bend in the river and to wait for the peasant there.

This time the wait was longer: the two men, the second prisoner, and the two chickens didn’t arrive until sunset. The two prisoners weren’t Germans, but Ukrainians from the auxiliary police, and it wasn’t hard to get them to talk. There were only seven or eight Germans in Turov; they were Territorial soldiers, no longer young, with no particular desire to leave the town and none at all to get involved in any adventures with the partisans. Matters were different in Zhitkovichi; in September someone had sabotaged the railroad tracks not far from the little town, a freight train had been derailed, damaging a bridge, and since then there had been a more substantial and warlike garrison, which kept an eye on the station and the railroad line. There was a Wehrmacht platoon with a small armory, and twenty or so Ukrainian and Lithuanian auxiliary police. There was a storeroom full of provisions and fodder for livestock, and an office of the Gestapo.

Before heading back to camp, Ulybin decided to send the Germans a message. He gave instructions to Pavel, who replied: “Let me take care of this.” He took the microphone and called, at intervals, both Turov and Zhitkovichi until a voice replied. Then Pavel said:

“This is Colonel Count Heinrich von Neudeck und Langenau speaking, commander of the Third Regiment of the Thirteenth Division of the Red Army, section of the Domestic Front and Occupied Zones. I wish to speak with the garrison’s highest-ranking officer.” Pavel was enthusiastically

entering into the part. Knee-deep in snow, standing in a dark forest whipped by bitterly cold winds, with an absurd telephone receiver in his hand, the wires stretching up into branches heavy with snow, he'd unleashed a sonorous and authoritarian German, as martial as it was guttural, with the *r*'s and the *ch*'s resonating roundly in the back of his throat: he mentally applauded himself, bravo Pavel Yurevich, by Jove, you're more Prussian than a Prussian!

A frightened, baffled voice replied, demanding explanations: it came from the garrison of David-Gorodok.

"No explanations," Pavel thundered back, "no objections. Tomorrow we intend to attack your position with five hundred men: you have four hours to evacuate, you and your traitorous lackeys. Not one of you must be found there: we'll hang all and any men we encounter. Over and out." At a gesture from Ulybin, Mendel yanked the wires, and the four men with their two prisoners set off for the camp. Even the grim Ulybin, so chary of words and especially of praise, couldn't stifle a dry crooked smile, which didn't rise all the way to his eyes, but twisted his lips, pale with cold. Without speaking to anyone in particular, as if he were just thinking aloud, he said, "Fine. Tonight they'll have something to talk over at the Gestapo office. They'll phone Berlin to find out just who this deserter count might be." Mendel asked Pavel:

"Was the colonel your idea?"

"No, the colonel was Ulybin's idea, but the count was mine. And didn't I come up with a magnificent name?"

"Very nice. What was it, again?"

"Eh, how am I supposed to remember? If you want, I'll come up with another one."

Ulybin, indifferent to the presence of the prisoners, said:

"We're not going to attack David-Gorodok with five hundred men. We're going to attack Zhitkovichi with fifty men. I don't believe that the Germans have swallowed it, but since they can't be sure they'll send reinforcements from Zhitkovichi to David-Gorodok, and so we'll encounter less resistance."

By now it was completely dark; Ulybin pulled a flashlight out of his backpack and tied it to the barrel of his submachine gun, but left it turned off. They set off, Fedya on skis leading the line, then the two Ukrainians, and, bringing up the rear, in order, Pavel, Mendel, Ulybin. As they crossed

through a section of dense forest, the Ukrainian dressed as a forester suddenly left the track and took off to the left, scrambling through the deep snow and trying to slip away behind the trunks of the trees. Ulybin switched on the flashlight, aimed the narrow cone of light at the fugitive, and fired a single shot. The Ukrainian keeled forward, took a few more steps, then fell to his hands; in that position, on all fours like an animal, he advanced for several meters, digging a bloodstained tunnel through the snow, then he stopped. The others caught up with him: he was shot in the shin, and it looked as if the bullet had passed directly through his leg, shattering his tibia.

Ulybin handed the rifle to Mendel, without a word.

"You want me to . . . ?" Mendel stammered.

"Go on, *yeshiva bocher*," Ulybin said. "He can't walk, and if they find him, he'll talk. A spy never changes: he's always a spy."

Mendel felt bitter saliva fill his mouth. He took a few steps back, aimed carefully, and fired. "Let's go," said Ulybin, "the foxes will take care of this one." Then he turned to look at Mendel again, illuminating him with his flashlight: "Is this your first time? Don't think about it: it'll get easier."

5

January–May 1944

The attack on Zhitkovichi never took place. The night Ulybin's little group returned, the camp radio, which for many weeks had been broadcasting only information about German movements and reports from the front, started repeatedly transmitting the code phrase that meant "stand by." There was a heated discussion between Ulybin and Maksim, and it was Maksim's opinion that won out. He was considered the representative of the government and the Party in the band: his view was to take no initiative, to wait, and perhaps orders would come in for some special operation.

Ulybin withdrew into isolation. He was seen only rarely, and then only to hand out criticism and advice. The cook was told that the kasha was too salty: did he think that salt fell from the sky free of charge, as plentiful as the snow? The radio operator's notes were illegible. Pavel ate too much and talked too much. Everyone was at fault because, in his opinion, the camp was not sufficiently clean and tidy. The two women, who had been relegated to the kitchen, were viewed with suspicion; whether out of shyness or contempt, he never spoke to them directly except for strictly practical reasons.

Toward Dov, Ulybin showed the grudging respect that one accords one's elders even when one outranks them, a respect that can easily cross the border into irritation and rudeness. Dov had not fully recovered from the exhaustion of the last march. His wounded knee caused him unremitting pain; at night it denied him the relief of sleep and by day it hindered his movements. At Novoselky, in a community huddled in a defensive position, his limited physical capability could be tolerated, outweighed as it was by

his experience. In the camp at Turov, populated only by young people, Dov knew that he had become a burden and had no illusions. He tried to make himself useful in the kitchen, or helped with the cleaning, or small maintenance jobs: no one rejected his assistance, but he knew he was not needed. He had become taciturn, and since everyone knew how contagious depression and demoralization could be, few spoke to him. Pavel, who had attained a certain degree of popularity with his wiretapping exploits, addressed him with boisterous, conventional cordiality: completely understandable, with the cold and the damp, bones will ache, it even happens in Moscow, so of course, out here, in the middle of the marshes, and in these huts half buried underground and half covered with snow. But spring couldn't be far away now, and with spring, who could say, perhaps peace would come as well: news was that the Russians had crossed the Dnieper, and that there was fighting in the area around Krivoy Rog. . . .

Dov was comfortable only around Mendel and Sissl. Mendel did his best to cheer him up, but with instinctive discretion he avoided any mention of Dov's injury and his exhaustion; he tried to keep his mind off his troubles, he asked him for advice and comments on the war's progress, as if Dov knew any more than what they heard on the radio. Even more restful for Dov was Sissl's presence. Calm in speech and movement, Sissl would sit at his side and, with hands that were deft but as big as a man's, peel potatoes or patch trousers and jackets that had already been patched to the brink of desperation. The two of them would sit wordlessly at length, enjoying the relaxed and natural silence that springs from reciprocal trust: when two people share grim experiences they feel no need for talk. Mendel would gladly linger, watching Sissl's face as she worked intently, by the warm light of the underpowered electric lightbulb. That face contrasted with the woman's strong, mature body, and it testified to a complicated intermingling of bloodlines. Sissl had fair skin and smooth blond hair that she wore parted down the middle and pulled into a bun at the back of her neck. Even her eyebrows were blond; she had slanted eyes, joined to the bridge of her nose with a faintly Mongol fold of flesh, but the eyes themselves were the gray color you find in Baltic peoples. Her mouth was wide and soft, her cheekbones were high, the chin and jawline prominent but aristocratic in appearance. No longer a young woman, Sissl emanated confidence and tranquility, though not gaiety, all around herself, as if her broad shoulders could have served as a shield against any adverse event.

She never spoke about her father. She had Dov tell her stories about hunting in the forest, the cunning of the lynx, the strategy of wolf packs, ambushes laid by Siberian tigers. In the town where Dov came from, Mutoray, on the Tunguska River, three thousand kilometers away, winter lasted nine months and the soil never thawed below the depth of a meter, but Dov talked about the place nostalgically. There if you weren't a hunter you weren't a man. Mutoray was a town unlike any other on earth. In 1908, when he was ten years old, eighty kilometers away a star had fallen, or a meteor, or a comet; scientists had come from all over the world, but no one could clear up the mystery. He still remembered that day clearly: the sky was blue, but there had been an explosion like a hundred thunderbolts, and the forest had caught fire, burning so furiously that the smoke darkened the sun. It left an enormous crater, and for sixty kilometers in all directions the trees were either burned or knocked down. It was summer, and the fire finally died out, just at the edge of the village.

Mendel, Pavel, Leonid, Line, and the men from Ozarichi took part in the marching exercises and target practice as well as the supply expeditions to the surrounding farms and villages. For the most part, these expeditions were carried out without resistance or friction from the peasants; the burden of supplying the partisans with provisions was a tax payable in kind, once an imposition, now accepted. The peasants, even those still disgruntled about collectivization, understood by now which side had won; besides, Ulybin's partisans defended them from the German roundups, raids to supply the Germans' endless hunger for men to work in the labor camps.

Pavel returned from one of these expeditions on horseback, putting on boastful airs, with his fur cap clapped on sideways. It wasn't a riding horse but, rather, a draft horse, majestic and old; Pavel said that he had found it lost in the forest, and starving to death, but no one believed him: the animal wasn't all that skinny. Pavel considered it to be his by right. He became fond of it and the horse became fond of him; when called, it came running like a dog, at a lumbering, out-of-breath trot. Pavel had never ridden a horse in his life, and in fact the horse's back was so broad that it forced its rider into an unnatural position, but it was very common to see Pavel in his time off practicing his riding skills around the barracks. Ulybin said that Pavel's horse ought to take its turn with the other horse turning the dynamo, but Pavel objected, a fair number of the partisans sided with him, and Ulybin, who displayed an inexplicable partiality toward Pavel, let it go.

The commander proved to be less indulgent where Leonid was concerned. He frowned on his relationship with Line, which was, for that matter, the topic of much comment and ribbing on the part of one and all: benevolent or malicious, depending on circumstances. Leonid clung to the young woman with the frantic intensity of a shipwrecked sailor who has found a floating plank. It was as if he wished to envelop her in an all-encompassing embrace, as if he were shielding her from all other human contact, sequestering her from the world. He no longer spoke with anyone, not even with Mendel.

One day Ulybin stopped Mendel. “I don’t have anything against women, and none of this is any of my business; but I’m afraid that your friend is going to get himself into trouble and possibly get someone else into trouble with him. Monogamous couples are fine during peacetime: but things are different here. We have two women and fifty men.”

Mendel was about to answer him the way he’d answered Dov in September at Novoselky, that is, that he was not responsible for Leonid’s actions, but he sensed that Ulybin was made of sterner stuff than Dov: he restrained himself, and replied vaguely that he would speak to him, but he knew he was lying. He would never dare say a word to Leonid; he felt a tangle of conflicting emotions when it came to Leonid’s relationship with Line, which he had been trying in vain to unknot ever since he’d been at Turov.

He was envious: about that he had no doubts, and in fact he was a little ashamed. It was an envy, with a hint of jealousy, for Leonid’s youth, his nineteen years, for that hasty and innate love that so painfully reminded him of his own love affair, six years earlier (or had it been sixty, or six hundred?), a love affair that had thrown him impetuously into the arms of Rivke the way an arrow goes to its mark: Rivke! There was also envy for the good luck that had guided Leonid into the force field that radiated from Line: a boy like him could have stumbled into any trap, but Line did not seem to be a trap of a woman. What could Line have seen in Leonid? Mendel asked himself. Perhaps nothing more than a shipwrecked sailor: there are women who are born to rescue others, and perhaps Line was one of them. I am a rescuer myself, thought Mendel, a consoler. A fine calling, to console the afflicted in the midst of the snow, the mud, and weapons at the ready. Or maybe it’s something different; Line isn’t looking for a shipwrecked sailor to rescue, but the opposite: she is looking for a

humiliated man so that she can humiliate him further, climb up on his shoulders the way you climb up on a podium, to be a little taller and see a little farther. There are people like that: they do harm to others without even realizing it. Leonid should beware. I envy him but I'm also afraid for him.

At Turov the days of respite followed one upon the other, and Mendel and Sissl became lovers. Words were unnecessary; it was as natural and inevitable as in the Garden of Eden, and at the same time hasty and uncomfortable. The sun was shining, and all the men were outdoors beating their blankets and oiling their weapons. Mendel went in search of Sissl in the kitchen, asked her, "Will you come with me?" and Sissl stood up and said, "I'm coming." Mendel led her to the woodshed, which also served as a stable for the two horses, and from there up the ladder mounted on the wall, to the hayloft. It was cold, they undressed only partly, and Mendel was stunned by Sissl's womanly odor and by the gleam of her flesh. Sissl opened up like a flower, docile and warm; Mendel felt his groin explode with the power and desire that had lain silent for two years. He plunged into her, but without abandonment, in fact, wholly intent and vigilant: he wanted to savor it all, waste nothing, engrave it deep within himself. Sissl took him in trembling slightly, eyes closed, as if she were dreaming, and it was over immediately: they heard voices and footsteps nearby, and Mendel and Sissl slipped out of their embrace, brushed off the straw, and got dressed again.

After that, they didn't have many opportunities to be together again. They managed to maintain discretion, but not secrecy; when the partisans spoke to Mendel about Sissl they referred to her as "your woman," and Mendel was content. In Sissl he found peace and comfort, but he wasn't sure that he loved her, because his soul was overburdened, because he felt as if he'd been cauterized, and because the presence of Line disturbed him. With Line, Mendel could not escape an impression of a rare and precious human substance that was, at the same time, unsettled and unsettling. Sissl was like a palm tree in the sun, Line was a tangled, nocturnal ivy. She could not be more than a few years older than Leonid, but the privations that she had experienced in the ghetto had wiped her face clean of all youthfulness, her skin appeared opaque and weary, marked by untimely wrinkles. Her eyes were large and wide-set, with ashy shadows under them, her nose was small and straight, and she had the minute features of a cameo, which gave her an expression that was at once sad and resolute. She moved quickly and confidently, at times with rude haste.

Line had insisted to Ulybin that she be allowed to take part in the training exercises: she was a partisan, not a refugee. Mendel had admired her skill with weapons at Novoselky and also, during the march through the snow, her stamina, at least equal to Leonid's. This is not a natural quality, he thought: it's a reserve of courage and strength that must be reconstituted every day, and we all ought to do as she does. This girl knows how to impose her will; she may not always know what she wants, but when she does, she gets it. He envied Leonid, and at the same time he was worried for him. He seemed to have been taken in tow by Line, and the tow cable was straining. A strained cable can snap, and what then?

Line didn't talk much, and never pointlessly: a few unemphatic, carefully thought-out words, spoken in a low and slightly husky voice, eyes fixed on her interlocutor's face. She had a way about her unlike that of the women, Jewish and non-Jewish, whom Mendel had met in his life. She displayed neither timidity nor false modesty, she was never theatrical or capricious, but when she did speak with people she approached them face-to-face, as if to observe their reactions from a close distance; often she also laid her small strong hand, with its gnawed fingernails, on their shoulder or arm. Was she aware of the feminine charge conveyed by this gesture of hers? Mendel sensed her intensity, and was hardly surprised that Leonid followed Line the way a dog follows its master. It might be the effect of long abstinence, but when Mendel looked at Line he was reminded of Rahab, the seductress of Jericho, and all the other temptresses of Talmudic legend. He'd found evidence of them in an old book that belonged to his teacher the rabbi: a forbidden book, but Mendel knew where it was hidden, and he had furtively leafed through it more than once, with all the curiosity of a thirteen-year-old boy, whenever the rabbi napped in the heat of the afternoon, in his high-backed chair. Michal, who charmed anyone who saw her. Yael, the murderous partisan of times gone by, who drove a nail through the temple of the enemy general but seduced all men with the mere sound of her voice. Abigail, the wise queen, who seduced anyone who thought of her. But Rahab was superior to all of them; any man who so much as uttered her name instantly spilled his seed.

No, Line's name possessed none of these virtues. Everyone in Novoselky knew the story of Line and her name, which was neither Russian nor Yiddish nor Hebrew. Line's parents, both of them Russian Jews and philosophy students, had brought her into the world without giving the

matter much thought during the white-hot years of the revolution and civil war. Her father had volunteered for the army and had gone missing in Volynia, fighting against the Poles. Her mother had found a job in a textile factory. Earlier, she had taken part in the October Revolution, because she viewed it as the path to her own liberation, both as a Jew and as a woman; she had organized demonstrations in public squares and had spoken in the soviets: she was a follower and an admirer of Emmeline Pankhurst, the kind and indomitable lady who in 1918 had won English women the right to vote, and she was happy to have given birth to a baby girl just a few months later, because it allowed her to name the child Emmeline, a name that everyone, beginning in nursery school, had shortened to Line. But Line's maternal grandmother, Anna Kaminskaya, had not been a woman who dedicated her life to cooking, children, and church, either. She was born in 1858, in the same year and on the same day as Emmeline Pankhurst; she had run away from home to study economics in Zurich, and, once she completed her studies, she returned to Russia, where she preached the renunciation of all worldly goods and of marriage, along with the equality of all workers, whether Christians or Jews, women or men. For her troubles she was exiled to Omsk, where Line's mother was born. In the tiny room where Line and her mother lived, in Chernigov, Line remembered a photograph of Mrs. Pankhurst that her mother had cut out of a magazine, framed, and hung on the wall behind the stove: arrested in 1914, the tiny revolutionary in her long skirts and ostrich-plumed hat was dangling in midair, suspended several feet over a London sidewalk glistening with rain, dignified and impassive, in the paws of a British policeman who was pressing her slender back against his own colossal gut.

In Chernigov, and later in Kiev, where she had moved to study to become a schoolteacher, Line had frequented Zionist organizations and, at the same time, the local Komsomol: she saw no contradiction between Soviet communism and the collective farming preached by the Zionists; but, from 1932 on, Zionist organizations had an increasingly hard time, until they were officially disbanded. To those Jews who wished to have a land of their own, where they could settle and live according to their traditions, Stalin had offered a grim patch of territory in eastern Siberia, Birobidzhan: take it or leave it, those who want to live as Jews can go to Siberia; if they rejected Siberia, that meant they preferred to be Russian. There was no third option. But what must and can a Jew who wants to be a

Russian do, if the Russians forbid him to attend the university, call him *zhid*, unleash pogroms against him, and form alliances with Hitler? There is nothing he can do, especially if that Jew is a woman. Line stayed behind in Chernigov, the Germans came and locked all the Jews in the ghetto: in the ghetto she had met up again with some of her Zionist friends from Kiev. With them, and, this time with the help of the Soviet partisans, she had purchased weapons, few and inadequate, and had learned to use them. Line had no propensity for the theoretical; in the ghetto she'd suffered hunger, cold, and exhaustion, but she had felt her many souls merge into one. The woman, the Jew, the Zionist, and the Communist had all condensed into one Line and she had only one enemy.

In late February they received the radio message that they had been expecting for so long, and the camp was immediately thrown into a hubbub. Near David-Gorodok, on the Stviga marshes, which had been frozen for four months, the Germans had equipped a field for nocturnal parachute drops: it was actually nothing more than a field of snow bounded by three fires at the tips of an elongated triangle; the fires, simple stacks of branches, were lit whenever the radio transmitted a predetermined signal. Ulybin's men were given the job of preparing a drop field just like that one, not far from the Turov camp, and ten kilometers from the German camp; it was up to Ulybin to decide exactly where. When the warning signal came in over the radio, a team would be assigned to light the fires of the false drop field; another team would be assigned to distract the Germans and put out the fires of the real drop field. In the uniform expanse of the steppe, the German aircraft would have no other indication guiding them than the fires of the drop field prepared by the partisans, and they'd drop their parachutes onto that one. Provisions, winter clothing, and light weapons were expected to be dropped.

Ulybin sent two men on skis, by night, to take note of the size and orientation of the German triangle. They weren't gone long: everything corresponded perfectly to what the radio had told them. The drop field had already been laid out, with the three stacks of wood at each tip of the triangle, oriented from west to east; a country road ran past it, and had been cleared with a snowplow. On the road were tracks, both recent and old, of

horses, wagon wheels, and tires. Between the road and the drop field there was a small wooden barrack, with a smoking stovepipe: no more than ten or twelve men could fit in it. Most likely, the matériel being dropped was intended not only for the garrison of David-Gorodok but for all the German garrisons scattered across Polesie and in the Pripet marshes: in those areas the partisan presence was making itself felt, and aerial drops were both the quickest way of delivering provisions and the most secure.

Finding a field that resembled the one prepared by the Germans wasn't hard: it would have been difficult to find one that was different. Ulybin chose a large marsh about twenty minutes' march from the field; it, too, was parallel to a passable road, and he had a board hut built in roughly the same position as the one the Germans had: there was no chance of the Germans making drops by day, but they might well send a scout plane to take pictures of the ground. After that, while awaiting the German radio signal, he named the two teams. The first team, assigned to provoke the Germans and put out the fires on their drop field, included nine men, among them Leonid, Pyotr, and Pavel. The second team, which had the task of lighting the fires on the false drop field, was made up of six men, including Mendel. Everyone else was instructed to stand by. When the work was done, the report was sent by radio to the partisan operative command.

The weather continued cold. Around March 5 it snowed again, a dry powdery snow that came down in fine, intermittent gusts; between one snowfall and the next, the sky remained covered with mist. For the parachute drops, the Germans would certainly wait for the sky to clear entirely. Nonetheless, one morning the roar of an airplane was heard: it came and went, flying not very high but still above the clouds, as if in search of a landing field. It seemed too low to be able to make a drop, and for that matter there had been no warning message on the radio. Ulybin gave orders to set up the heavy machine gun: it was mounted on a sled, but the men unbolted it and aimed it at the sky by hand. The airplane kept flying back and forth, but the noise was growing fainter. The partisans came out of the barracks to look up at the luminous but impenetrable sky; every so often the sun could be glimpsed, surrounded by a halo, but it vanished immediately.

"All of you into the huts, you stupid good-for-nothings!" shouted Ulybin. "If it drops below the clouds it'll strafe us all." In fact, the plane suddenly appeared, barely clearing the treetops: it was heading straight for

them. The two men holding the machine gun maneuvered to get the plane in their sights, but a number of voices rang out, shouting: “It’s one of ours, don’t shoot!” And in fact it was a small fighter plane, bearing the insignia of the Soviet Air Force under its wings; it veered over the huts and an arm appeared, waving a greeting. All the men on the ground waved their arms, pointing the plane toward the drop field, and it took off in that direction, vanishing behind the screen of trees.

“Will it be able to land?”

“It has skids, not landing gear; if it heads in the right direction it will.”

“Come on, let’s follow it.” But Ulybin asserted his authority: only he, Maksim, and two others put on skis and set out, first cautiously following the zigzag path that led around the minefields, then straight, with the lengthy agile stride of cross-country skiers.

They were back an hour later, and they weren’t alone. With them were a Red Army lieutenant and captain, young, clean-shaven, smiling, sheathed in magnificent padded overalls and gleaming leather combat boots. They greeted everyone cordially, but immediately withdrew with Ulybin to the little room he used as a headquarters. They remained in conference for many hours; every so often, Ulybin sent for bread, cheese, and vodka.

In the camp, the arrival of the two unexpected messengers was the subject of much commentary, mixed with friendliness, hope, fear, and a pinch of ridicule. What were they bringing from the Great Land? Information, no doubt; new instructions; orders. And why had they arrived so suddenly, without any warning by radio? It’s the same as in the army, someone replied: inspections are never announced in advance, if they were they wouldn’t be inspections. “They’re living the good life, the gentlemen from the Great Land,” said a third person. “I’ll bet you they spent the night in their own beds, with pillows and sheets, and maybe even with their wives. I wonder if, along with the propaganda, they brought shaving soap, too!” Because the partisans of all times and places have much in common: they respect the central authorities, but they would gladly do without them. As for shaving soap, this item was in the front line in the general inventory of camp jokes. In Turov, wearing a beard was not advisable; in other bands it was explicitly forbidden, because a young man with a beard was too easily identified as a partisan. Nonetheless, in defiance of prohibitions and danger, many of the men in the forests and the marshes wore thick beards. The beard had become a symbol of *partisanzchina*, the freedom of the

forest, the outlaw life, and the triumph of independence over discipline. At a more or less conscious level, the length of the beard was considered proportional to the seniority of the partisan, as if it were a title of nobility or a hierarchic rank. “Moscow doesn’t want us to wear beards, but Moscow doesn’t send us shaving soap and razors. What are we supposed to use to shave with? With hatchets, with bayonets? No soap, no shaving—we’ll keep our beards.”

“It’s all stuff that couldn’t hurt a soul,” Pyotr came to announce; he’d been assigned to sort through the matériel brought by the two officers. “No weapons, no ammunition, just printed paper and anti-scabies ointment. No, there’s no shaving soap. There’s no laundry soap, either.” On his own initiative, he went to take the news to the two women, busy in the laundry hut: “You’ll just have to be patient, ladies. Keep on using ash and lye, as our grandmothers did. The important thing is to kill the lice. Anyway, the war’s about to end.”

The officers departed the same evening. While the two men, already dressed in their flying suits, looked out of the small window with an ostentatious display of patience, Ulybin took Dov aside and spoke to him in an undertone. Then Dov was seen stuffing his few possessions into a knapsack. He bid everyone farewell somberly; his eyes welled over with tears only when he took leave of Sissl, with a brief embrace. Limping, he left the room with the two messengers and a partisan suffering from a fever, and with them vanished into the livid light of sunset. Pyotr said, “You needn’t worry. They’ll take them to a hospital in the Great Land: they’ll be better off there than here, and they’ll have a chance to recover.” Mendel slapped him on the shoulder with one hand, but said nothing.

After that visit, Ulybin became even more laconic and irritable than before. As if he were trying to reduce all contact to a minimum, he selected a lieutenant of sorts from among the partisans, Zachar, who was tall and skinny as a beanpole and even less talkative than he was. Zachar conveyed orders in one direction, complaints in the other, and served as an intermediary in both directions. No longer very young, and practically illiterate, he was a Cossack from Kuban who raised rams for a living. Zachar was a born diplomat, and from the outset he proved skillful at settling disputes, assuaging frustrations, and maintaining both discipline and esprit de corps. Word got around that Ulybin was getting drunk in his

little headquarters room; Zachar denied it, but the steady stream of full and empty bottles was hard to conceal.

The false drop field was ready, all the men were ready, but the order to act didn't come. The entire month of March went by virtually without action, which was bad for one and all, not merely for the commander who no longer had anything to command. Hunger was making itself felt: not the piercing hunger that Leonid and others had experienced in German prisoner-of-war camps behind the lines, but a sort of sentimental hunger, a muffled yearning for fresh vegetables, fresh baked bread, food that might be simple but chosen on the whim of the moment. A yearning for home was making itself felt as well, painful for everyone, heartbreaking for the group of Jews. For the Russians, the longing for home was a reasonable hope, in fact likely: a desire to return, a call. For the Jews, the yearning for their homes was not hope but despair, hitherto buried beneath heavier and more urgent sorrows, but still lurking. Their homes were gone: they had been swept away, burned by warfare or massacre, bloodied by the squadrons of manhunters; tomb-houses, better not to think about them, houses of ashes. Why go on living, why go on fighting? For what home, for what homeland, for what future?

Fedya's home, on the other hand, was too close. Fedya was turning seventeen on March 30, and he got permission from Ulybin to spend his birthday at home, in the village of Turov, but he didn't come back. After three days, Ulybin sent word through Zachar that Fedya was now a deserter: two men were to go and find him and bring him back to the band. They had no difficulty finding him; he was at home, and it had never crossed his mind that being away for three days during a time of inactivity was such a serious transgression. But that wasn't the worst of it: Fedya publicly confessed that while he was at home he had gotten drunk with other young men, and that while drunk he had talked. About what? About the barracks? About the false drop field? Gray-faced, Fedya said that he didn't even know; that he couldn't remember; that probably no, he hadn't talked about secret matters; that he absolutely hadn't talked about them.

Ulybin had Fedya locked up in the woodshed. He sent Zachar to bring him food and tea, but at dawn they all saw Zachar walking barefoot back to the woodshed, and they all heard the pistol shot. It fell to Sissl and Line to undress the boy's body and recover his clothes and boots; it fell to Pavel

and Leonid to dig a grave in the dirt soaked with water from the thaw. Why Pavel and Leonid in particular?

A few days later, Mendel noticed that Sissl was uneasy. He questioned her: no, this wasn't about Fedya. Zachar had called her aside and had told her: "Comrade, you should take care. If you get pregnant, that's a problem; this is no clinic, and airplanes from the Great Land don't come every day. Tell your man." Zachar had delivered the same lecture to Line, but Line just shrugged. In the same period, an order of the day was posted on the bulletin board, written in a fine hand and in pencil, and signed by Ulybin: soon the thaw would begin, it was urgent to dig a runoff canal around the barracks in order to keep them from being flooded. This was an important job and took absolute precedence, and so the makeup of the two teams that for the past month had been ready for the drop-fields mission was changed. Leonid and Mendel were taken off the teams, and had to put down their rifles and take up a pick and shovel. Not Pavel: Pavel remained a member in good standing of the first team, the one that was to put out the German fires. Mendel, Leonid, and four other men began the excavation work. Snow and dirt both froze during the night, only to thaw into a sticky reddish mud during the warmest hours of the day. As if their curiosity had been roused, large crows landed on the branches of the fir trees to supervise the work, growing constantly in number, pressed one against the other; suddenly their weight would bend the branch, and then they all took flight, cawing and cackling, only to settle on another branch.

The order came through when no one any longer expected it: German radio signals had been intercepted indicating that a parachute drop was imminent. Evidently it would be an important drop, too, because the signals were repeated more than once. Then, on April 12, the final announcement came: the drop was scheduled for that night. The two teams set out immediately; Pavel, mindful of the risks that awaited him, asked Leonid to look after his horse, which for some reason he had named Drožd, the Thrush.

The rest of the camp readied itself for the coming night; there were no special orders, but they were all on the alert, especially Mikhail, the radio operator, and Mendel, who alternated shifts with him so that he could get a

few hours of rest. The reception was terrible, broken up by buzzing and static; the few messages that they managed to intercept were frantic and repeated several times, but were almost indecipherable, even though both Mikhail and Mendel understood German reasonably well.

At two in the morning, the roar of engines was heard to the west, and they were all on their feet. It was a clear moonless night; the roar grew louder and more intense, modulated by a steady beat, as when different musical chords vibrate together but not in sync. This was certainly not a single aircraft; there must be at least two, perhaps three. They went by overhead, invisible, to the north of the barracks, then the roar faded and vanished.

An hour later one of the partisans from the second team arrived, out of breath. Everything had gone perfectly: fires were lit at just the right time, there were four airplanes, there were thirty parachutes, or forty, or maybe even more, many of them landing on the drop field, others among the trees, some caught in the branches. They should immediately send reinforcements and a sled, there was a great deal of matériel. Everyone wanted to go, but Ulybin was indifferent to their pleas. He went himself, with Maksim and Zachar; he refused even to let the messenger who had brought the news go back with them. For the first time in his career as a partisan horse, the Thrush made himself useful: Ulybin had him harnessed to a sledge that set out across the snow, made compact by the thaw, and covered by a fragile crust of nocturnal ice.

In the meantime the first team had returned as well, all accounted for, just one man with a wounded arm. For the most part, the mission had gone very well, Pyotr and Pavel told them. They had taken up positions near the barrack and heard the roar of the planes, and they'd seen three Germans emerge with jerricans full of gasoline to pour on the stacks of wood. They killed them before they could light the fires, and at the same time a partisan who had climbed onto the barracks roof dropped a hand grenade down the stovepipe. Some of the Germans must have been killed, but others emerged from the devastated barracks and opened fire. One partisan had been wounded and a German was killed; two or three others managed to get a motorcycle with a sidecar started, but they, too, were killed as they were escaping. In the hut, aside from some light weaponry and an assortment of canned foods, they hadn't found anything interesting. There was a radio, but it had been destroyed by the explosion. They took up positions along the

sides of the road, because they expected a truck to arrive from the city to collect the matériel that had been dropped, but by midmorning nothing had been sighted and so they returned to the camp.

The sledge came back fully loaded, though the messenger must have exaggerated: no more than twenty packages had been dropped. Ulybin wouldn't let anyone touch them. He had them all stacked in his room, and he opened them himself, with Zachar's help, letting the others inventory the contents only after he had looked. There was a little of everything, as in a charity raffle: precious stuff, useless stuff, mysterious stuff, and ridiculous stuff. Luxuries that Mendel and his friends had never seen before: made-in-Russia chocolate eggs for the coming Easter, more large chocolates in the shape of sheep, scarabs, and little mice. Cigars and cigarettes, brandy and cognac in cans: could this be special packaging designed by German technicians to withstand the impact with the ground? Terra-cotta foot warmers, evidently meant to be used by sentinels standing guard. A box full of combat medals and assorted decorations, along with certificates to go with them. There were packs of newspapers and magazines, a pack of portraits of the Führer, a sheaf of private correspondence intended for the various garrisons of the district, another sheaf of official correspondence that Ulybin ordered set aside. Two crates were full of ammunition for Wehrmacht Maschinenpistole, two other crates contained clips for a kind of machine gun that nobody was able to identify. In one crate was a typewriter and various types of stationery. Other crates contained six specimens of a device that no one at Turov had ever seen before and whose purpose no one knew: a flattened cylinder, the size of a frying pan and equipped with a long handle, broken down into sections. "This stuff's for you, watchmaker," Ulybin said to Mendel. "Study it and tell us what it's good for."

That night, Ulybin let them celebrate their achievement with a modest party. Then he secluded himself with Pavel to examine the documents that they had found: they weren't in code, none of the material was sensational, it was only detailed lists, invoices in multiple copies, a quartermaster's accounting documents. Ulybin soon grew tired, and started asking Pavel to translate the private letters to him, for they were more interesting; they were written in language that was meant to be impenetrable and allusive, but were so ingenuous that even an outsider like Pavel had no difficulty in deciphering them; it was clear, the bad weather that all the fathers and mothers were complaining about was the "nonstop offensive" of Allied

bombing, and the drought was famine. It was inadvertent defeatist propaganda: Ulybin told Pavel to translate a number of passages publicly.

Pavel was reading, in Russian, with a deliberately exaggerated German accent that made everyone laugh. Then suddenly from the dark sky they heard the same musical hum as the night before, coming in waves.

“Hurry!” shouted Ulybin. “Second team, put on your skis and get moving, light those fires: these idiots are going to give us a second drop!” The six team members rushed out, and Ulybin looked at his watch: if they were fast enough, they could be on the site in fifteen minutes, before the airplanes got tired of looking for the drop field in the dark. In fact, they were searching: the roar of the engines drew near and then moved away; at a certain point, the squadron passed directly overhead, then moved off again. Exactly twenty minutes had gone by according to Ulybin’s watch when they heard a salvo of explosions. They all went outside, baffled: the blasts were too distant and too deep to be coming from the minefields around the barracks. They could see the flashes, to the northeast: after each flash they heard the report, with a delay of six seconds. No doubt about it, those were bombs falling on the false drop site. The Germans had understood and they were taking revenge.

The team returned: just four men. The team leader told what had happened in a broken voice. They had arrived in record time, just as the aircraft were cruising overhead. They had set fire to the first stack of wood, and bombs came raining down immediately: big ones, at least 200 kilos. If the ice had been as thick as it was in January, perhaps it could have withstood the impact; but it was weakened by the thaw, the bombs punched through it, and exploded from underneath, hurling slabs of ice into the air. The two missing men had vanished, swallowed up by the marshes: there was no point in going to look for them.

For the men of Turov this marked the start of a hard time. The thaw had begun, and it was worse than the winter. Ulybin had sent men to check the conditions of the false drop field: it was unusable; no airplane could ever hope to land there, nor would it even be possible to ask for further drops. The thick winter ice had been shattered by the explosions: it formed again during the night, but was so thin that it would not support the weight of a man. On the other marshes, the ice was in better shape because the snow had protected it from the direct rays of the sun, but the snow itself had been altered by the thaw and the wind: it had become a tough, corrugated crust,

upon which a normal airplane, even if equipped with skids, would be unable to land without flipping over.

Ulybin was forced to impose radio silence, because the exploit of the diverted parachute drop seemed to have awakened the German air force to action. All winter its operations had been minimal and apparently guided by chance. Now, however, a clear day rarely went by without a scout plane being seen in the area, and there were plenty of clear days. The deluxe provisions from the parachute drop had been quickly consumed, and flour, lard, and canned foods were beginning to run out. Ulybin established a system of rationing, and morale began to drop. Hunger, the specter of the preceding winters, was about to return, as if time had retreated to the terrible months at the beginning of the partisan war, when everything—food, weapons, barracks, action plans, and even the courage to fight and to go on living—was the product of the desperate initiative of just a few. The men insisted on resuming the provisioning expeditions into the villages; they far preferred hard work and risk to hunger, but Ulybin refused to let them. There was still too much snow; it was hard even to imagine that the scout planes hadn't yet located the huts. It was obvious that they were looking for them; the huts were well camouflaged and it was still possible that they would not be found, but the Germans were certain to notice fresh tracks.

What was to be done? Wait, let time pass: the only possible solution, yet it was a terrible solution. Wait for the snow to melt, because on bare soil, muddy though it might be, tracks were less obvious. Wait for the scout planes to go hunting elsewhere. Wait in silence for news from the radio: the Germans had evacuated Odessa, but Odessa was far away. Radio silence is as burdensome as losing a limb, as if a human being were gagged at the very moment in which he or she wanted to call for help: along with hunger, a siege mentality had settled into the barracks of Turov. Those men were no strangers to privation, exhaustion, discomfort, and danger, but the isolation and seclusion caught them unprepared. Accustomed to open spaces and the fleeting liberty of forest animals, they endured the debilitating anguish of the trap and the cage.

Ulybin went on drinking: it was a well-known fact, criticized by all with the exception of Zachar, under their breath and not always under their breath. He drank in solitude, but he had lost neither his lucidity nor his bad-

tempered authority. Mendel had asked him to explain Dov's hasty departure, and Ulybin had replied:

"Wounded or sick combatants are given medical care, to the extent possible. Your friend will be given medical care, too, but more than that I can't tell you. Maybe you'll find out something about him when the war is over, but the fate of individuals is of no importance."

Ulybin was too intelligent, and too experienced in partisan life, not to understand that something had to be done; that while tracks might be dangerous, despair was even more dangerous. A single track heading out from the barracks would certainly have led the Germans right to them, but if the track led through the little forest that concealed the barracks the location of the camp would be less immediately obvious. Reluctantly, therefore, Ulybin authorized not one but two provisioning expeditions, which would set out on the same night in opposite directions for different villages.

The teams had just left, and dawn was breaking, when they heard a sound that was new and alarming for the Jews but reassuring and unmistakable for the veterans of Turov. It sounded like the rattling of a motorcycle engine, faint, distant, but drawing closer. It got louder and deeper, like a gramophone record being slowed, it sneezed, and then fell silent. Ulybin's men were immediately on their feet: "A P-2! It's landed here, in the clearing! Let's go see!"

"Perhaps we needn't have sent out the teams," said Pyotr.

"What's a P-2?" asked Mendel.

"The P-2s are partisan aircraft. They're made of wood, they fly slowly, but they can take off and land anywhere. They fly at night, without lights; they drop grenades on the Germans, and they bring provisions." A short while later the pilot, stocky and shapeless in his reversed-lambskin flying suit, walked into the barracks. He took off the flying suit, removed the goggles from his forehead, and it became clear that the pilot was a girl, small, plump, with a broad serene face and a domestic way about her. She wore her hair parted in the middle, and pulled back into two short braids tied with black twine. The two men who had gone to meet her carried big bags, as if they were returning from the market. The partisans clustered around her, hugging her and kissing her round cheeks, hard with the cold: "Polina! Good work, Polina! Welcome, dear heart, it's been such a long time! What have you brought us?"

The young woman, who looked no older than twenty, fended them off, laughing with the lovely shy grace of a peasant girl: “Enough, comrades! They sent me to see how things are going here, and because your radio is silent, but let me go, I have to leave immediately. Would there be a drop of vodka for me? Where is your commander?” She went with Ulybin into his small headquarters room.

“It’s her, it’s Polina Mikhailovna,” said Pyotr, happy and proud. “It’s Polina Gelman, from the Women’s Regiment. Don’t you know about it? They’re all women, they’re the ones who fly the P-2s. They’re all great girls, but Polina is the best of them all. She comes from Gomel, her father was a rabbi and her grandfather was a shoemaker. She’s flown more than seven hundred missions, but she’s only come here once, six months ago. She stayed for a day or two and we became friends, but evidently this time she’s in a hurry. Too bad.”

Polina said farewell and took off in her fragile aircraft. She’d brought them a little food and some medicine, along with some bad news. Movements of troops and armored vehicles were under way; in various villages around Turov units of the German and Ukrainian corps that specialized in fighting partisans were assembling. They were preparing for a concentric roundup, with resources far superior to the Turov camp’s ability to defend itself; there were no other partisan bands in the area. For some reason, the Germans had overestimated the partisans’ numbers; or perhaps it was a large-scale operation, throughout the entire area of the Pripet marshes or in all of Polesie. The Salihorsk ghetto, where the old men and invalids of Novoselky had sought safety, had been surrounded and all the inhabitants had been shot; the garrison of Salihorsk had been reinforced by an SS unit that specialized in tracking down people in hiding, and they were equipped with trained dogs. Many of the men of Turov knew these dogs and feared them more than tanks. In short, they would have to evacuate the camp.

Ulybin summoned Mendel and asked if he had figured out what those devices were that had been found among the matériel dropped by parachute.

“They’re mine detectors,” Mendel replied. “Or to be exact, metal detectors: they can find buried metal objects.”

“So you’re saying that if the Germans are equipped with these devices, they can find our minefields?”

“Yes, they can find them; maybe not immediately, but they’d find them eventually.”

Ulybin gave him a grim look: “But I’m going to mine the barracks all the same, whether the Germans have your mine detectors or not. They’ll find the buried mines, but not the ones that we hide in here. You’ll see, I’ll blow up one or two of those bastards.”

Mendel was frightened. That the commander had been drinking, and perhaps a little more than usual, was unmistakable, but still his tone of voice frightened him.

“What are you saying, Osip Ivanovich? Why are you talking to me this way? Do you think I invented the mine detectors? Do you think I gave them to the Germans?”

“I don’t give a damn who invented them. The fact is we are leaving. You wouldn’t want us to stay here and wait for the tanks and let ourselves be slaughtered wholesale.”

Mendel was upset when he left, but a short while later Ulybin called him back: “Do those devices work?”

“Yes, they work.”

“Take Dimitri and Vladimir and show them how to use them.”

“You want to mine the barracks with the mines that are buried all around here?”

“Aren’t you smart, you guessed it. We don’t have any other mines.”

“You realize that’s not a job for kids. Experts are more afraid of mines than beginners. Plus, the longer they’ve been buried underground, the more dangerous they are.”

“You think you’re important, don’t you? Cut it out, just go and do as I told you. I’m the commander, and I’m not interested in your criticism. You people are all the same anyway. You’re all good at arguing; and you’re all half German, Rosenfeld, Mandelstamm. . . . And you, what’s your name? Daycher, right? Mendel Nachmanovich Daycher: you’re German right down to your name.”

Mendel taught his lesson as diligently as he was able, sent the two young men to get their orders from Ulybin, and withdrew, filled with bitterness. At one time, on the day of forgiveness, the Jews took a goat; the high priest would lay his hands on the goat’s head, listing all the sins committed by his people, and placing them upon it—the guilty one was the goat and the goat only. Then, loaded down with the sins it had not

committed, the goat was banished into the desert. The Gentiles think the same way, they, too, have a lamb that takes on the sins of the world. Not me, I don't believe it. If I've sinned, I carry the burden of my own sins, but only those sins, and I have more than enough. I don't bear the sins of anyone else. I didn't send the team to get bombed. I didn't shoot Fedya while he was sleeping. If we have to go out into the desert, we'll go, but we won't take with us sins that we have not committed. And if Dimitri and Vladimir are blown up by the mines in their hands, am I, Mendel the watchmaker, responsible?

As it turned out, the two young men did well: eight of the buried mines were unearthed and planted in various locations in the barracks. At the end of April, spring burst forth, heralded by three days of hot dry wind. The snow on the branches of the trees melted in a continuous rain, whose rhythm slowed only at night; the snow on the ground was also melting rapidly, and immediately the first flowers, timid and absurd, poked up through the drenched soil amid the bent stalks of yellowish grass rotted by the long thaw. German scout planes flew overhead more and more often, and one of them, perhaps by chance, or perhaps made suspicious by some movement, briefly strafed the barracks, without causing damage or victims. Ulybin gave the order to get ready to abandon the camp. The sledges, now useless, were burned; there were no wagons, nor was there time to get any. To transport all their baggage they had only two horses and the shoulders of the men: a caravan of porters, not a column of soldiers on the march. Many of the men complained; they would have preferred to stay in the camp and face the Germans, but Ulybin silenced them—staying was out of the question, and for that matter orders had come over the radio to evacuate. The radio had also indicated the best direction to follow in order to get through the encirclement of anti-partisan forces: heading southwest, following the course of the river Stviga, while sticking to the zone of the marshes. With the thaw, and with their maze of isthmuses, narrows, and shallows, the marshes had once again become friendly terrain.

They were supposed to set out on the night of May 2, but that evening the sentinels sounded the alarm: they had heard noises to the north, human voices and dogs barking. Many of the men reached for their weapons,

unsure whether to get ready to resist or begin their retreat early, but Ulybin broke in:

“Back to your posts, you idiots, you children! Go on with the packing, tie up the bags, shut the crates. Were you all born yesterday? German dogs don’t bark—if they did what kind of war dogs would they be?”

He spoke to the sentinels:

“Be on your guard, but don’t shoot. These people are probably friendly: they sent the dogs on ahead to find the way through the minefield.”

And in fact the dogs came first: there were only two, and they weren’t war dogs but, rather, humble barnyard dogs, excited and confused. They were barking anxiously, first at the barracks, then at the strangers who were slow to follow them, proud of the duty they had performed, unsure of these new human presences; they alternately wagged their tails and snarled, and even did both simultaneously; they leaped back and forth, dancing in place, front paws extended stiffly, and barked themselves breathless, gulping in air now and again with a convulsive wheeze. Then two cows came into view, driven forward by ragged young men: they made sure that the livestock stayed on the trails blazed by the dogs.

Last of all came the main contingent of the band, some thirty people, men and women, armed and unarmed, weary, tattered, and bold. In their midst was a man with an aquiline nose and a tanned face: on straps over his shoulders hung a submachine gun and a violin. Bringing up the rear was Dov. Mendel muttered under his breath: “Blessed is He who revives the dead.”

A hubbub broke out, with everyone asking questions and no one answering them. In the end two voices prevailed, that of Ulybin and that of the tall man, who was Gedale. Everyone could keep quiet and wait for orders; Ulybin and Gedale withdrew to the cramped room that served as headquarters. Many of the Turov men remembered the quarrel that had broken out between the two at the beginning of winter; what would happen now, in this new meeting? Would the two men make their peace, in the face of this impending threat? Would they reach an agreement?

While everyone waited to learn the outcome, the new arrivals asked if they could go into the now empty barracks; some of them sat on the floor, others stretched out and fell asleep immediately, still others asked for tobacco, or for hot water so they could wash their feet. They asked with the humility of those in need, but with the dignity of those who know they are

entitled. They were neither beggars nor wanderers, they were the Jewish partisan band assembled by Gedale, made up of survivors from the communities of Polesie, Volynia, and Belorussia, a wretched aristocracy, the strongest, the most cunning, the luckiest. But some of them came from farther away, along blood-soaked roads; they had fled the pogroms of the Lithuanian plunderers who were willing to kill a Jew to get a bedsheet, the flamethrowers of the Einsatzkommandos, the mass graves of Kovno and Riga. Among them were the few survivors of the Ruzany massacre: they'd lived for months in lairs carved out of the forest, like wolves, and like wolves they hunted silently in packs. There were the peasant Jews of Blizna, their hands calloused by the hoe and the ax. There were workers from the sawmills and textile mills of Slonim who, even before encountering Hitler's barbarity, had gone on strike against their Polish masters and had experienced repression and prison.

Each one, man or woman, carried a different history, as heavy and scalding as molten lead; each would have been grieving over a hundred dead if the war and three terrible winters had left the time and the leisure to do so. They were weary, penniless, and filthy, but not beaten; the children of merchants, tailors, rabbis, and cantors, they had armed themselves with weapons taken from the Germans, they had won the right to wear those tattered uniforms without insignia or rank, and they had tasted more than once the bitter food of killing.

The Turov Russians looked at them uneasily, as is always the case in the presence of the unexpected. They did not recognize in those gaunt yet determined faces the *zhid* of their tradition, the foreigner in their home, who speaks Russian to swindle you but thinks in his own strange language, does not know Christ but instead follows his own ridiculous and incomprehensible precepts, who is wealthy and cowardly, his only strength that of his cleverness. The world was turned upside down: these Jews were armed allies like the British, like the Americans, just as Hitler, too, had been an ally, three years earlier. The ideas they teach you are simple and the world is complicated. All right then: allies; comrades in arms. They had to accept them, shake hands with them, drink vodka with them. A few attempted an awkward smile, a timid advance with the disheveled women, bundled up in oversized military outfits, their faces gray with exhaustion and dust. It's as painful to uproot a prejudice as it is to extract a nerve.

Lack of understanding is a wall with two sides, like any wall, and the lack of understanding can engender awkwardness, discomfort, and hostility; but Gedale's Jews did not feel, just then, either awkward or hostile. If anything, they were cheerful: in each day's new adventure in the *partizanka*, on the frozen steppe, in the snow and in the mud, they had found a new freedom, unknown to their fathers and their grandfathers, a contact with other men, both friends and enemies, with nature and with action that intoxicated them like the wine at Purim, when it is customary to abandon the usual sobriety and drink until you can no longer tell the difference between a blessing and a curse. They were cheerful and ferocious, like animals released from a cage, like slaves rising up to take vengeance. And they had savored it, their vengeance, while paying for it dearly: more than once, in sabotage, in attacks and clashes behind the lines; recently as well, just a few days back and not far away. It had been their finest hour. Alone, they had attacked the garrison of Lyuban, eighty kilometers to the north, where German and Ukrainian troops were converging to carry out their roundup; in the village there was also a small ghetto of artisans. The Germans had been driven out of Lyuban: they weren't made of steel, they were mortal, and when they could see they were outmatched they fled in disarray, even from Jews. Some of them had dropped their weapons and plunged into the thaw-swollen waters of the river; it had been a sight to rejoice in, a picture to take to the grave. The Jews told the Russians about it, in astonishment. That's right, the fair-haired green-uniformed men of the Wehrmacht had fled before them, plunging into the water, trying to clamber onto slabs of ice as they were swept downriver, and the Jews had gone on firing, and they had seen German corpses sinking beneath the water or sailing toward the mouth of the river on their icy catafalques. Their triumph had been short-lived, of course: triumphs are always short-lived and, as it has been written, a Jew's joy ends in fear. They had retreated into the woods, taking with them those Jews from the Lyuban ghetto who seemed capable of fighting, but the Germans had come back and killed all those who stayed behind in the ghetto. That's the way their war was, a war in which you don't look back, in which you don't count your losses, a war of a thousand Germans against one Jew and a thousand dead Jews against one dead German. They were cheerful because they had no tomorrow and they cared nothing for tomorrow, and because they had

seen the supermen thrashing in the icy water like frogs: a gift that no one could ever take away from them.

They also brought other, more useful information. The sweep had already begun, and they had been driven out of their camp, which in any case was a miserable camp of burrows, temporary, certainly not comparable to the Turov camp. But it wasn't true that it was a major roundup: there were neither tanks nor heavy artillery, and one German prisoner that they had interrogated told them that the weak point in the encirclement should be just where Ulybin thought: to the southwest, along the Stviga River.

Dov was better, he scarcely limped at all anymore, but he was more bent. His hair, once again neatly combed, had thinned and grayed. Sissl asked if he wanted something to eat, and he answered with a laugh: "A sick man you ask, a healthy man you give," but he was more eager to tell stories than to eat. A circle of listeners formed around him, both Jews and Russians: not many people came back from the Great Land to partisan territory.

"How long have those two been talking? An hour? It's a good sign: the longer they talk the better they're getting along; and it also means that the Germans are still far away, or that they've changed direction. Of course, they took care of me: what did you think had happened? At the hospital in Kiev. It didn't have a roof anymore, or rather it didn't have a roof yet, because they're rebuilding it, and you know who's doing the work? German prisoners, the ones who surrendered at Stalingrad.

"There was no roof, there was nothing to eat, and there was no anesthesia, but there were female doctors, and they operated on me immediately: they took something out of my knee, a bone, and they even showed it to me later. In the cellars, was where they operated on me, by the light of an acetylene torch, and then they put me in a ward, an enormous ward, with more than a hundred cots on each side, and in them were the living, the dying, and the dead. It's no fun to be in the hospital, but it was in that very ward that my good luck reached me: with luck, even a bull can give birth. There was an official visit, an important member of the Politburo, a Ukrainian: a short, fat, bald man, who looked like a peasant, his chest covered with medals. In the midst of all that hurly-burly of stretcher bearers coming and going, he stopped right in front of me. He asked me

who I was, where I came from, and where I'd been wounded; with him was a radio crew, and he improvised a speech where he said that all of us, Russians and Georgians and Yakuts and Jews, were sons of our great mother Russia, and that all disputes should come to an end—"

Pyotr's voice interrupted: "If he was a Ukrainian, and he was an important man, you should've told him to do a little housecleaning back home! They're miserable people, the Ukrainians: when the Germans invaded, they threw open their doors and offered them bread and salt. Their *banderisti* are worse than the Germans." Other voices silenced Pyotr and urged Dov to go on.

". . . and he asked me, once I was better, where I wanted to be sent. I told him that my home is too far away, that I had friends among the partisans, and that I wanted to get back to them. Well, as soon as I was declared cured, he got busy. Maybe he wanted to set an example, he tracked down Gedale and his band and had me dropped by parachute close to his camp, along with the crate containing four submachine guns as his own personal gift. Parachuting out of a plane is pretty scary, but I wound up in the mud and I didn't get hurt a bit."

Dov would have had plenty of things still to tell them about what he had seen and heard during his convalescence in the Great Land, but the headquarters door opened, Gedale and Ulybin emerged, and everyone fell silent.

6

May 1944

Ulybin spoke first, in an official tone of voice:

“My information and the information that this comrade has brought correspond perfectly. The Germans are coming from the Polish border and their forces are not strong: they send their best troops to the front, and when they return they’re no longer the best troops. The Italians and the Hungarians have abandoned them; they no longer trust the Slovaks and the White Poles. They’re trying to encircle these marshes and tighten the circle little by little; the circle’s weak point is to the south, toward Rechytsa and the Ukrainian border. We’ll make an attempt to get through, then we’ll continue on our separate ways; if we were to merge the two bands, we’d no longer have any advantage and we’d be far too visible. For that matter, Comrade Gedale’s unit has received recognition and support from Moscow __”

“Lots of recognition and not much support!” someone broke in, speaking in Yiddish.

“Shut up, Jozek!” Gedale said in a flat voice.

“. . . and can move freely. The Jews in the camp can make their own choice: stay with us, break through the encirclement, and head east to reach the front, or else—”

“Or else come with us,” Gedale interposed. “We have other orders. We are in no hurry to get home. If we do get out, we’ll head west, to liberate prisoners, to cause disruption behind the German lines, and to settle some accounts. Anyone who wants to join us, come over to this side. Everyone can keep the personal weapons he had when he came from Novoselky.”

The hut was overcrowded, and the sorting out of the groups took place amid noise and confusion. Mendel, Sissl, Line, and Leonid all chose Gedale's side without hesitation; around Pavel, on the other hand, there was a ferment of discussion. Pavel would also have liked to go with Gedale, but he wanted to keep his horse; if Ulybin held on to the horse, he'd stay with him. Gedale didn't understand and asked for an explanation. Over the hubbub, Pavel's deep voice could be heard:

"I'm useful to you because I know German, but my horse doesn't. What would you do with it?"

Ulybin didn't laugh, but instead made a face that was hard to read, then said, "Fine, you all can have the horse and its master." He was less indulgent when he saw that Pyotr, too, had gone to Gedale's side.

"What do you have to do with them? What are you thinking? What are you doing over there, on that side?"

"They all come from far away," Pyotr replied, "none of them know the terrain around here. After a half-hour march, they'd all drown."

"That's just talk. None of them asked for you as a guide. They can get along fine by themselves. Careful what you do: you wouldn't want to wind up like Fedya."

"He's the one who asked me, to be a guide," said Pyotr, pointing to Dov. But it was clear that he was making things up as he went along. Then he added, "And it's not a case of desertion, comrade commander. This is a band, and that's a band." All the same, while they were talking, he left Gedale's group and went back over to Ulybin's side, with the face of a child sent to stand in the corner.

They had lingered too long, and night had fallen; it was time to go. Ulybin ordered the mines hidden in the barracks primed and assembled everyone out front. They had been ordered to remain silent, but an excited murmur could be heard, a buzz of discordant voices, like musicians tuning their instruments before the overture. Discordant, but an attentive ear could have distinguished a single motif, repeated in different keys by Russians and Jews: Pyotr, the pure and daring Pyotr, had fallen head over heels for the eyes of a foreign woman, just like Stenka Razin. Now, whether it was Sissl's gray eyes or Line's brown eyes, opinions diverged. Gossip is a force of nature; it makes difficult situations tolerable, and thrives even amid swamps, warfare, and thawing snow.

They marched all night, in single file, without seeing any trace of the Germans. They halted at dawn to rest in an abandoned warehouse, on the Polish border. Around noon, the men standing guard saw German forces go by on the main road; they all prepared to defend their position, but the column continued on without bothering to inspect the warehouse. When night fell they resumed their march, and on a heath the two bands separated; Ulybin and his men veered to the left to return to Soviet territory, while Gedale's band headed through fallow fields toward Rechytsa. Gedale reassured them: "The worst is over. One more night's march and we'll be out of it."

But Mendel and his friends had felt safer before, in the Turov camp, where they suffered neither hunger nor cold, and where they felt over their heads a roof of solid wood beams and a single authority: Ulybin himself, or the messengers who descended from the sky, or a distant power. These Gedalists (as they called themselves) were reckless people, poor and rootless. Jozek, Gedale's right-hand man, rolled himself an herbal cigarette in a scrap of newspaper, asked Leonid for a match, split it in half lengthwise, lit his cigarette with one half, and slipped the other half into his pocket. The two cows, he said, were plunder of war; they'd seized them a few days earlier, during the attack on Lyuban, "because in warfare you also need to think about supplies." They were skinny and balky, and if they found a tuft of grass they'd refuse to go on, stubbornly grazing, indifferent to the tugs, slowing the march. Where there were still patches of snow in the shade of the trees, they plowed the ground with their hooves in search of lichens. "The first chance we get, we'll sell them," said Jozek in a pragmatic tone of voice.

Jozek wasn't a Russian but a Pole from Bialystok, and a counterfeiter by profession. He told his story to Mendel during the first leg of the journey following the separation; he hadn't before, because he didn't know how the Russians would take it.

"It's nice work, but it isn't easy. I started as a boy, in 1928: I was an apprentice lithographer and I printed fake stamps. The Polish police, in those days, had other things to worry about, and it wasn't particularly dangerous. Still, I didn't make much money. In 1937 I started doing identity papers, I was especially good at passports. Then the war came, first the Russians arrived in Bialystok, and in 1941 the Germans. I had to go into hiding, but I made a good living: there was plenty of demand for

documents, especially ration books for the Poles and Aryan identity cards for the Jews.

“I could’ve gone on like that till the end of the war, but a competitor turned me in because my rates were too low. I spent three weeks in prison; of course, my personal documents were false, I had supposedly been a Christian for two generations, but they stripped me naked, figured out I was a Jew, and sent me to a concentration camp, at Sachsenhausen, to break rocks.”

Jozek paused and lit another cigarette with the half-match that he had saved. He had pale blond hair, and was slender, of average height, with a long foxy face and green eyes almost without eyelashes that he kept half closed as if to see better. The band had come to a halt in a clearing; Jozek was stretched out on the dew-damp grass, smoking and talking with pleasure. Many of the men surrounded him, listening: they already knew the story, but they liked hearing it again; others slept. Leonid had secluded himself with Line, and Sissl was listening, off to one side: she’d pulled out needle and thread, and was mending a sock in the uncertain light of dawn.

“The world is a strange place,” Jozek resumed. “A Jew dies, but a counterfeiting Jew survives. At the end of 1942, they put up a sign in the concentration camp: the Germans were looking for typesetters and lithographers. I applied, and they sent me to a small building at the far end of the camp, and when I walked in I thought I was dreaming. It was a workshop much better equipped than the one I’d had, and a group of Polish, Czech, German, and Jewish prisoners were counterfeiting dollars and pounds sterling, as well as identity documents for spies. Not to boast, but I was the best one there and they gave me the most sensitive jobs; still, it didn’t take me long to figure out that this was a hot operation, it was obvious that none of us would get out alive. And so I set about collecting gold, which is always available in concentration camps, and counterfeiting myself a transfer order.”

“And why not a release order?” Mendel asked.

“I can see you don’t know what a concentration camp is. No one’s ever heard of a Jew being released, especially not a Jew like me. I fabricated a transfer order to the concentration camp at Brest-Litovsk, because the best thing for a Pole is to escape in Poland: a regulation transfer order, on SS stationery, with stamps and signatures, in the name of Jozef Treistman, no. 67703, Funktionshäftling, or Prisoner Functionary. I was running a big risk,

but having no choice is itself a choice. They put me on a train with two escorts, a couple of elderly soldiers from the Territorial Army. I bribed them with the gold, and they jumped at the chance; I escaped just before we reached Brest, and I lived on the run for two weeks, until I found Gedale."

As the days passed and they got to know each other better, it seemed increasingly understandable to Mendel that Gedale and Ulybin had been unable to come to an agreement. Apart from the age-old divide between Russians and Jews, it would have been hard to find two more different men: the only quality they shared was courage, and that was no surprise, because a commander without courage won't last long. But they even had different kinds of courage: Ulybin's courage was obstinate and opaque, a dutiful courage that seem to be the product of planning and discipline rather than a natural quality. Every decision he made and every order he issued came as if from heaven to earth, vibrant with authority and unstated threat; often the orders were reasonable, because Ulybin was a shrewd man, but even when they weren't they sounded peremptory, and it was difficult not to obey them. Gedale's courage was spontaneous and varied, springing not from a school but from a temperament that was intolerant of chains and had little interest in scrutinizing the future; where Ulybin calculated, Gedale hurled himself forward, as if in a game. Mendel detected in him, thoroughly blended as if in a valuable alloy, very different metals: the logic and impetuous imagination of a Talmudist; the sensitivity of a musician or a child; the comic force of a wandering player; the vitality that is absorbed from the Russian soil.

Gedale was tall and thin, broad-shouldered but with slender limbs and a shallow chest. His nose was sharp and arched like the prow of a ship, his forehead was low beneath the line of his black hair, his cheeks were hollow and wrinkled, the skin tanned by wind and sun, his mouth was wide and full of teeth. He moved quickly, but he walked with a clumsiness that seemed intentional, like a circus clown. He spoke in a loud ringing voice, even when it wasn't necessary, as if his chest served as a sound box; he laughed frequently, sometimes at inopportune moments.

Mendel and Leonid, accustomed to the rigid hierarchy of the Red Army, were both bewildered and alarmed by the Gedalists' way of doing things. Decisions were made casually, in noisy assemblies: sometimes reckless plans put forth by Gedale, Jozek, or others were adopted without a second thought; in other cases quarrels broke out, though peace was soon restored.

Tensions or feuds never seemed to endure long within the band. The members proclaimed themselves Zionists, but from different currents, with all the nuances, ranging from Jewish nationalism, Marxist orthodoxy, and religious orthodoxy to anarchic egalitarianism and even a Tolstoyan return to the earth—the earth that will redeem you if only you redeem it. Gedale, too, declared himself a Zionist. For days on end, Mendel tried to figure out what trend he belonged to, but he finally gave up: the man subscribed simultaneously to an array of ideas, or to none at all, or changed opinion frequently. Certainly Gedale was more inclined to action than to theory, and his objectives were simple: to survive, do the greatest possible damage to the Germans, and go to Palestine.

Gedale was curious to the point of indiscretion. He never asked new arrivals their name or their place or date of birth, nor did he officially enroll them in the band; instead he insisted on hearing each one's story, listening with a child's candid attention. He seemed to feel a fondness for all, to appreciate their virtues and overlook their shortcomings. "*L'chaim*," he said to Pavel after listening to his story. "To life. Welcome to our ranks, may your back be blessed. We need backs like yours. You are a Jewish bison: a rare animal, we'll hold you dear. You may not want to be one, but if you're born a Jew you stay a Jew, and if you're born a bison you stay a bison. Blessed be he that cometh."

This was the first peaceful halt that the band allowed itself after escaping the encirclement. They had spent the night in the hayloft of an abandoned farmhouse, they'd found clean water in the well, the air was mild and sweet-smelling, all their faces were relaxed, and Gedale was enjoying himself.

Leonid compressed his story to no more than two or three minutes, but Gedale didn't seem to mind and asked nothing more. All he said was: "You're very young. It's a disease that's quickly cured, even without medicine, but it can still be dangerous. Until you're rid of it, take care of yourself."

Leonid looked at him with suspicious astonishment: "What did you mean by that?"

"You shouldn't take me literally. I have a prophet's blood in my veins, like all sons of Israel, and every now and then I play at being a prophet."

With Line and Sissl he abandoned his soothsayer pose and put on manners more suitable to light opera. He addressed them as "my noble

ladies," but he insisted on knowing how old they were, whether they were still virgins, and which men had been with them. Sissl replied timidly, Line with grim pride, and both women were clearly eager to put an end to his questioning. Gedale didn't insist and turned to Mendel. He listened attentively to his story, then said to him: "You're not acting. You're still the watchmaker, you've donned neither the feathers of the peacock nor those of the hawk. You, too, are welcome, you'll be useful to us because you're cautious, you'll serve as a counterweight. Here among us, caution has to some extent fallen by the wayside. We don't have much memory to speak of, either, except for one thing."

"What's that?" asked Mendel.

Gedale solemnly laid his forefinger against his nose:

"'Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you were come forth out of Egypt; How he met you by the way, and smote the hindmost of you, even all that were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; and he feared not God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies round about, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess it, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget it.' This, then, is what we will not forget. I'm quoting from memory, but this time it's entirely pertinent."

In mid-May Gedale's band was camped on the banks of the Gorin River, which were white with lilies of the valley and impatient daisies. Men and women, naked or half naked, were joyfully washing themselves in the river's slow waters. Jozek, with two armed comrades, had set out for Rechytsa with the two cows and Pavel's horse: at Rechytsa, close to the Ukrainian border, there was a market. He returned a few hours later; he had traded the cows for bread, cheese, lard, salted meat, and soap: the rest of the payment was in occupation Deutsche marks. The Thrush was striding, glorious and sweaty, under the burden. It almost seemed as if the war were over; in any case the winter was. In the small town, Jozek had seen no sign of Germans: if there were any, they were staying out of sight. He hadn't been required to give any explanations, or to haggle; the peasants had

learned long ago that when it came to partisans (whatever their allegiance) the important thing was to be neither curious nor stingy.

Upon his return, Jozek saw at least half of the band lined up along the riverbank, in silence; Gedale was sitting on a log, with his feet in the water and his violin held high, while Izu, one of the men from Blizna, hairy as a bear and stark naked, was wading very slowly, step by step, toward an outcropping of rock in the middle of the river. They were all watching him, and he gestured to them not to move or speak. When he was at the foot of the outcropping, he sank entirely into the water, again with extreme caution; the water swirled for a moment, and then Izu emerged with a large fish struggling in his hands. He bit it right behind the head, and the fish went limp: it was two handsbreadths in length, and its bronze scales glittered in the sunlight.

"What did you catch, Izu?" Gedale asked.

"I thought it was a trout, but it's a *sazan*!" Izu replied proudly, climbing up the bank. "That's funny, in such shallow water." He crouched down near a flat stone, gutted the fish, washed it in the river current, sliced it along its back with his knife, and started pulling flesh off its sides and eating it.

"What, aren't you going to cook it?"

"Cooked fish loses all its vitamins," Izu replied, and went on chewing.

"Still, it tastes better. Plus it has phosphorus, and phosphorus makes you intelligent. Clearly, you men of Blizna always eat your fish raw."

Gedale waved at Jozek from a distance, greeting him: "Good work, Jozek, with that we're set for a week." Then he went back to playing his violin: he'd stripped down to his belt, and he had an ecstatic expression on his face, though it wasn't clear whether it was because of the music or because his feet were soaking in the water. Still, Bella was giving him no peace. Of the three women who had arrived in Turov with the band, it seemed that Bella was closest to Gedale, that she considered herself his legitimate and definitive female companion, and that Gedale had different ideas, or at least that he did not care enough to settle the matter. Bella, with a few others, was pitching a military tent, but she kept interrupting her own work, and interrupting Gedale, too, shouting into his ear as if he were deaf; Gedale would answer her patiently and resume playing, and once again Bella would interrupt him with her complaints:

"Stop playing that violin. Why don't you come give us a hand!"

"Hang it on a willow tree, Gedale!" Dov shouted from a distance.

“We may not be in Jerusalem yet, but we’re no longer in Babylon,” Gedale replied, and resumed playing. Bella was a small slender blonde with a long, pouty face. She looked about forty, while Gedale couldn’t have been any older than thirty; she frequently handed out criticisms and rebukes, and issued orders that no one obeyed, though she gave no sign of resenting the fact. Gedale treated her with a tenderness just tinged with irony.

Late that morning, the sentinels sighted a man, all alone, shouting from a distance, “Don’t shoot!”; they let him draw near, and it was Pyotr. Gedale welcomed him without any display of astonishment:

“Good work, I’m glad you came with us. Sit down, we’re about to eat.”

“Comrade commander,” said Pyotr, “I have only my revolver, I left my submachine gun with Ulybin’s men.”

“If you’d brought it with you, that would’ve been better, but it doesn’t matter.”

“You see, I know that I’ve done wrong, but I quarreled with Ulybin. He was too harsh, not just with me but with everyone. And one night we had a very serious discussion . . . a political discussion.”

“And you talked about the Gedalists, didn’t you?”

“How did you guess?”

Gedale said nothing in reply, but in his turn asked, “Won’t he come looking for you? Because, believe me, we don’t want any trouble with Ulybin.”

“He won’t come looking for me. He was the one who told me to leave. He told me to lay down my gun and go. He told me to come here with you.”

“He must’ve spoken in anger. Or drunkenness—maybe he’ll think better of it later.”

“He was angry, but he wasn’t drunk,” Pyotr said. “And in any case they’re four or five days’ march away now. And I’m no deserter. I didn’t come to you out of fear; I came to you to fight.”

That night, for no particular reason, they celebrated in Gedale’s camp: perhaps because that was their first day out of the marshes and out of danger, and the first day of full-blown spring; perhaps because Pyotr’s arrival had cheered everyone up; or perhaps simply because, among the other provisions piled high on the Thrush’s back, Jozek had also brought a small keg of Polish vodka. They’d lit a fire between two sand dunes and were sitting around it in a circle; Dov told Gedale that it might be risky, so

Gedale put out the fire, but the glow of the embers warmed their hearts all the same.

The first to perform was Pavel. No one had called on him, but he got proudly to his feet and stood by the embers, picked up a piece of charcoal, and drew a mustache on his upper lip, pulled a shock of wet hair over his forehead, saluted the crowd with his arm held out straight before him at eye level, and began to hold forth. At first he spoke in German, with a swelling wave of anger: it was an improvised speech, and the tone mattered more than the content, but they all laughed when they heard him addressing the German soldiers, inciting them to fight to the last man, and labeling them, variously, heroes of Greater Germany, sons of bitches, dogs of heaven, defenders of our blood and soil, and assholes. Gradually, his fury became white-hot, until his words were suffocated into a doglike snarl broken now and again by outbursts of convulsive coughing. Suddenly, as if an abscess had burst, he stopped talking in German and went on in Yiddish, and everyone bent double with laughter: it was extraordinary to hear Hitler, in the throes of his ranting, using the language of the outcasts to incite someone to slaughter someone else; it wasn't clear whether he was calling on the Germans to slaughter the Jews or the other way around. They clapped frantically, they called for an encore, and Pavel, with great dignity, instead of reprising his routine (which, he explained, he'd first tried out in 1937 in a Warsaw cabaret), sang "'*O sole mio*," in a language that no one understood and which he claimed was Italian.

Then Mottel the Cutthroat took the stage. Mottel was a little man with short legs and extremely long arms, agile as an ape. He grabbed first three, then four, then five glowing brands, and sent them flying in all directions, over his head, under his legs; against the background of the violet sky they described an ever-changing tangle of shimmering trajectories. He was applauded, and he thanked the audience with a bow to each of the four points of the compass, whereupon he withdrew, imitating the lopsided stride of the orangutan. Why the Cutthroat? They explained to Mendel that Mottel was not just some nobody. He was from Minsk, he was thirty-six years old, and he was twice a cutthroat. In the first half of his career he had been a respectable cutthroat: for four years he had been the *shokhet*, the ritual butcher of the Jewish community. He had passed the requisite exam, had been issued a license, and was considered to be an expert in the art of keeping the knife sharp and slicing with a single blow through the animal's

trachea, esophagus, and carotid arteries. But then (because of a woman, it was whispered) he'd gone to the bad: he'd left his wife and home, he'd fallen in with the local underworld, and, while never forgetting his previous profession and his theoretical preparation, he'd also become adept at snatching purses and scaling balconies. He kept his long, blunt-tipped ritual knife; yet, as an emblem of his new direction, he'd snapped off the end at an oblique angle, giving the knife a sharp tip. Thus modified, it lent itself to other uses.

"A woman! Bring on a woman!" someone shouted in a voice made hoarse by vodka. Bella stepped forward, smoothing her tow-blond hair, but Pavel, lurching like a bear, bumped her with one hip and knocked her back into the circle of spectators, resuming his place. He wasn't done yet, and it was unclear whether he was drunk or just pretending. This time he was a Hasidic rabbi; drunk, of course, pouring forth the Sabbath prayers in pretend Hebrew that was actually whorehouse Russian. He prayed until he was breathless, at dizzying speed, because (he explained in an aside) the little pig mustn't slip between one picket and the next: a profane thought must not be able to make its way between one sacred word and the next. This time the applause was more restrained.

Bella hadn't given up. She stepped over to the embers, raised her left hand in a graceful gesture, placed her right hand on her heart, and began to sing an aria, "*Sì me ne andrò lontana*," "I will go far away," but she didn't get very far, because after a few bars her voice cracked and she burst into tears. Gedale came, took her by the hand, and led her aside.

On all sides, voices called out Dov's name. "Come out, Siberian," Pyotr called to him, "and tell us the things you saw in the Great Land." Pavel followed, having taken on the role of master of ceremonies: "And now, here for your enjoyment, David Yavor, the wisest of us all, the oldest, and the best beloved. Come forth, Dov, everyone wants to see you and hear you." The moon had risen, and it was almost full; it lit up Dov's white hair as he reluctantly headed to the center of the arena. He laughed shyly and said:

"What do you want from me? I don't know how to sing or dance, and what I saw in Kiev I've already told you about far too many times."

"Tell us about your grandfather the nihilist." "Tell us about hunting bears where you come from." "Tell us about that time you escaped from the German train." "Tell us about the comet." But Dov fended off the requests:

“These are all things I’ve already told you, and nothing could be more boring than to repeat oneself. Let’s have a game, instead; or a contest.”

“Wrestling!” said Pyotr. “Who wants to take me on?”

For a few moments no one moved; then there was a short argument between Line and Leonid. Leonid intended to accept the challenge, and Line, for some reason, was trying energetically to change his mind. In the end, Leonid escaped her grasp; the two contenders slipped off their jackets and boots and waited, warily, for the bout to begin. They grabbed each other by the shoulders, each trying to flip the other with footwork; they circled repeatedly, then Leonid tried to wrap his arms around Pyotr’s waist, unsuccessfully. The band’s two dogs barked uneasily, snarling and bristling. Pyotr not only was stronger than Leonid but also had the advantage of longer arms. After a confused and somewhat unfair skirmish, Leonid tripped and fell and Pyotr was on him immediately, pinning his shoulders to the ground. Pyotr took the audience’s cheers with both hands raised, and turned around to see Dov.

“What do you want, uncle?” Pyotr asked. He was practically a full head taller than Dov.

“To wrestle with you,” Dov replied, and he squared off, but lazily, his hands dangling loosely from his wrists, in the stance he usually took when he was relaxing. Pyotr waited, perplexed. “Now let me teach you something,” said Dov, and went into a crouch. Pyotr backed up, keeping a cautious eye on him. Dov’s movement, in the pale glow of the moonlight, wasn’t at all clear; they saw him stretch out one hand and a knee, dropping slightly, and then Pyotr teetered off balance and fell onto his back. He got up and brushed off the dust. “Where did you learn these moves?” he asked in an offended tone. “Did they teach you in the army?” “No,” Dov replied, “my father taught me.” Gedale said that Dov should teach the whole band to fight that way, and Dov replied that he would be glad to, especially the women. Everyone laughed, and Dov added that that was Samoyed wrestling: a number of Samoyed families had been deported to the town where he was born.

“It was the Russians who came up with that name, because they thought they ate human flesh. ‘Samo-yed’ means ‘self-eating,’ but they don’t like that name. They’re good people, and you can learn a lot of things from them; how to light a fire when the wind is blowing, how to shelter yourself from a storm under a pile of sticks. And how to drive a dogsled.”

“That’s probably something that won’t come in handy for us,” Pyotr pointed out.

“But here’s something you might find useful,” said Dov. From the belt that Pyotr had set down on the ground next to his jacket, he pulled a knife; holding it by the tip between two fingers, he balanced it for a moment as if taking aim, and then hurled it toward the trunk of a maple tree, some eight or ten meters away. The knife went spinning through the air and drove deep into the wood. Others tried, Pyotr, astonished and jealous, first among them, but no one succeeded, not even when they stood only half as far away from the tree: in the best cases, the knife hit the tree with its handle or flat-on and fell to the ground. Gedale and Mendel weren’t even able to hit the tree trunk.

“Too bad that it wasn’t Dr. Goebbels instead of a maple tree,” said Jozek, who had taken part in neither the shows nor the games. Dov explained that if you wanted to kill a man no ordinary knife would do; you had to use a special knife, slender but heavy, and well balanced. “Understood, Jozek?” said Gedale. “Keep that in mind, the next time you go to the market.”

Some of the men were already asleep when Gedale picked up his violin and started to sing; but he wasn’t singing for applause. He sang softly, he who was such a loud talker; other Gedalists joined in, some of the voices in the chorus were harmonious and others less so, but all were filled with conviction and resentment. Mendel and his men listened in astonishment to the rhythm, which was vigorous, practically a march, and the words, which ran as follows:

Do you know us? We’re the sheep of the ghetto,
Shorn for a thousand years, resigned to injury.
We’re the tailors, copyists, and cantors
Withered in the shadow of the Cross.
Now we’ve learned the pathways in the forest,
We’ve learned to shoot, and our aim is straight.
    If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
    If not like this, then how? And if not now, when?
Our brothers have risen to heaven
Through the chimneys of Sobibór and Treblinka,
They’ve dug themselves a grave in the air.

Only we few live on
To honor our drowned people
By revenge and by witness.
If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If not like this, then how? And if not now, when?
We are the sons of David and the intransigent of Masada.
Each in his pocket has the stone
That broke Goliath's forehead.
Brothers, away from the Europe of graves:
Let's climb together to the land
Where we'll be men among men.
If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If not like this, then how? And if not now, when?

When they stopped singing, they all fell asleep wrapped in their blankets; only the sentinels remained awake, perched high in the tree branches at the four corners of the encampment. In the morning, Mendel asked Gedale:

"What were you singing last night? Is that your anthem?"

"You can call it that if you want; but it's not an anthem, it's only a song."

"Did you compose it?"

"The music is mine, but it's always changing, little by little, month by month, because it's not written down anywhere. But the words aren't mine. Here they are, look, they're written right here."

From his inside jacket pocket, Gedale pulled out an oilcloth packet tied with a piece of twine. He unfolded it and extracted a sheet of graph paper, wrinkled, dated *13 Juni, Samstag.* It had been torn roughly from a notebook, and it was densely covered with Yiddish letters scratched out in pencil. Mendel took it, examined it carefully, then handed it back to Gedale:

"I can barely read printed characters, and I can't read script at all. I've forgotten how."

Gedale said, "I learned to read it late, in 1942, in the Kosava ghetto: one time we used it as a secret language. Martin Fontasch was there with us in Kosava. By trade he was a carpenter, and he earned his living that way right up until the end, but he had a passion for writing songs. He did it all himself, words and music, and he was renowned throughout Galicia; he

accompanied himself on the guitar, and he sang his songs at weddings and country fairs; sometimes he'd even play in the *cafés chantants*. He was a peaceful man and he had four children, but he was with us in the ghetto revolt, he escaped with us and came into the forest, all alone, no longer young: his whole family had been killed. Last year, in the spring, we were around Novogrudok and there was a brutal roundup; half of our men died fighting, Martin was wounded and fell prisoner. The German who searched him found a flute in his pocket: it wasn't really a flute but a pennywhistle, a cheap toy that Martin had made for himself by whittling an elderwood branch. Now, the German was a flute player: he told Martin that they hanged partisans and shot Jews, he was a Jew and a partisan, so he could take his pick. But he was also a musician, and since he was a German who loved music, he had decided to grant him one last wish: as long as it was a reasonable wish.

"Martin asked to be allowed to compose one last song, and the German gave him half an hour, handed him this sheet of paper, and locked him in a cell. When the time was up, he came back, took the song, and killed him. It was a Russian who told us the story; at first he'd collaborated with the Germans, then the Germans suspected him of being a double agent and locked him up in the cell next to Martin's, but he managed to escape and spent a few months with us. Apparently the German was proud of Martin's song; he showed it around as a curiosity and said he was going to get it translated at the first opportunity. But he never had the chance. We kept an eye on him, we followed him, we figured out where he lived, and one night we crept barefoot into the requisitioned *izba* where he was staying. I've got a taste for justice and I would have liked to ask him if he had one last wish, but Mottel was hurrying me, so I strangled him in his bed. Among his personal effects we found Martin's flute and the song: it didn't bring him much luck, but it's been a talisman for us. Here, look at this: down to here are the lyrics that you heard us sing, and these words at the bottom say, 'Written by me Martin Fontasch, who am about to die. Saturday 13 June 1943.' The last line isn't in Yiddish but in Hebrew; they're words that you know well, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'

"He'd composed lots of other songs, both happy and sad; his best-known song he wrote many years before the Germans came to Poland, in the aftermath of a pogrom. In those days, the peasants took care of carrying

out the pogroms. Almost everyone in Poland knows it, not just the Jews, but no one knows that Martin the carpenter composed it."

Gedale folded the packet and put it back in his pocket.

"That's enough for now, thoughts like this are not for every day. They're all right every now and then, but if you live inside them they'll poison you until you're no longer a partisan. And keep in mind: I believe in three things only, vodka, women, and the submachine gun. There was a time when I also believed in reason, but not anymore."

A few days later Gedale decided that they had rested long enough and it was time to start marching again:

". . . but this is an open band, and anyone who prefers to remain in Russia is free to leave—without his weapons, of course. You can wait for the front lines to reach you, or go wherever you like." No one chose to leave, and Gedale asked Pyotr:

"Do you know this country?"

"Pretty well," Pyotr replied.

"How far is the railway?"

"A dozen kilometers or so."

"Excellent," said Gedale. "The next leg of the journey, we'll go by train."

"By train? But there are guards on all the trains!" said Mendel.

"Oh well, you can always try. You can reason with the guards." But Gedale took Pavel's objection seriously:

"But what about the horse? You can't be thinking of abandoning it. After all, we need it, it carries half our baggage."

Gedale turned to Pyotr again:

"What kind of trains run on this line?"

"Freight trains, nearly all of them; sometimes there are a few passengers aboard, people working the black market. If the train's carrying supplies for the Germans, then there are guards, but never very many of them: two men on the locomotive and two at the end of the train. Military transport trains never come through here."

"What's the closest station?"

"That's Kolki, forty kilometers south of here: it's a small station."

“Is there a loading dock?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

Dov broke in:

“But why do you want us to take the train?”

Gedale replied impatiently, “Well, why shouldn’t we take the train? We’ve been walking for more than a thousand kilometers; the railroad is close by; and basically I want to enter Polish territory in a way that will make people remember us.”

He thought it over for a moment and added, “Boarding a train in a station is too dangerous. We have to stop it in the open countryside, but then we can’t get the horse on board. All right, we’ll take most of the baggage, after all it’s not far; you, Pavel, go ahead with the horse and wait for us at Kolki.”

Pavel had his doubts:

“What if you don’t get there?”

“If we don’t get there, just come meet us with the horse.”

“But what if there’s no loading dock?”

Gedale shrugged his shoulders: “And what if, what if, what if! Only the Germans anticipate everything, and that’s why they lose wars. If there’s no loading dock we’ll think of something else. We’ll see on the spot, there’ll be a way. Get going, Pavel; remember that you’re a peasant, and don’t let people see you in towns and villages. Around here, the Germans requisition horses.”

Pavel set off at a trot, but he was still within sight when the Thrush settled back into his customary solemn gait. Gedale and his men began marching, and in a little over two hours they were at the railroad. It was a single track, and it cut across the plain from one horizon to the other, straight as a shaft of light.

It’s easy to mistake hope for likelihood. Everyone expected the train to be coming from the north and heading toward the Polish border; after a couple of hours of waiting, however, they saw it arriving from the south. It was a freight train and it was traveling slowly. Gedale positioned armed men behind the hedges lining either side of the tracks, and then, disarmed and in short sleeves, he stood between the rails waving a red rag. The train slowed and came to a halt, and from the engineer’s cab shots were immediately fired. Gedale darted off, and hid behind a hazelnut tree; everyone else started firing back. Mendel, even as he, too, was shooting,

trying to hit the locomotive's narrow windows, admired the Gedalists' military training. From everything he'd seen up until that point, he would have expected them to be reckless, as in fact they were; what he hadn't expected, however, was the precision and economy of their shots, and the impeccable technique of their deployment. Tailors, copyists, and cantors, their song said: but they had learned their new trade quickly and well. It's easy to spot those who are inexperienced and frightened, because they look for massive shelter, a boulder or a huge tree trunk, which will certainly protect you, but which also prevents you from moving or shooting without exposing your head. Instead, they were all crouching behind thick bushes, and they shot through the leaves, moving frequently to disorient their adversaries.

The train's guards, safe behind metal plate, fired fast and accurately: there had to be at least four men, and they weren't skimping on ammunition. The last car of the train, however, was defenseless. Mendel saw Mottel suddenly leap out and rush at the train. In an instant he had clambered onto the roof of the last car: up there he was safe, and, besides, they hadn't seen him from the cab. He had a German hand grenade fastened to his belt, the kind that are shaped like a small club, with a delayed explosion, and he ran toward the locomotive from car to car, leaping over the gaps. When he was on the roof of the first car, they saw him yank the pin out of the grenade and wait a few seconds; then he used the grenade itself to break the cab's rear window, and dropped it inside.

There was an explosion and the firing stopped. In the cab they found that there had been only three German guards; one of them was still alive, and Gedale finished him off without hesitation. The fireman and the engineer were also dead; too bad, said Gedale, they weren't at fault and they would have been useful to us: oh well, if you serve the Germans you're running a risk and you know it. He pouted like a child. Mottel's initiative had been brilliant but it had spoiled his plans:

"Now who's going to drive this thing? Who knows how much damage your bomb did to the controls; most important of all, we have to put it into reverse."

"Commander, you've got a hard head and you're never happy," said Mottel, who'd been expecting high praise. "I bring you a train and you criticize me. The next time I'll let you attack and I'll sit back smoking my pipe."

Gedale paid no attention to him, and told Mendel to climb up into the cab and see whether he was able to get the train moving. In the meanwhile, other men were inspecting the rest of the train. They came back disappointed: the train wasn't carrying valuable merchandise, only bags of cement, lime, and coal. Gedale had them toss all the cement out of two boxcars, to make room for the men and for the horse: he still hadn't given up on his idea of a railroad excursion. He was very excited; he ordered them to cut all the bags with a knife, then reconsidered and had them stack a considerable number between the tracks in front of the locomotive:

"If we weren't in such a hurry, we could've done a better job; but even this way, with a little rain and a bit of luck, it'll make quite a blockade." Then he climbed up into the cab next to Mendel:

"Well? What can you tell me?"

"A locomotive isn't a watch," Mendel replied in some annoyance.

"*Nu*, they're both mechanisms, and you haven't answered my question. A locomotive isn't a watch, and a watchmaker isn't an engineer, and an ox isn't a pig, and someone like me isn't the leader of a partisan band, but he tries to be the leader of a partisan band, and he does the best he can at it; in fact, he becomes the leader of a band of partisan bandits." Here Gedale laughed, with that easy laugh of his that cleared the air in an instant. Mendel laughed, too:

"All right, get out, and we'll give it a try."

Gedale climbed down and Mendel fiddled with the controls. "Careful, I'm going to give it some steam." The smokestack puffed, the couplings groaned, and the train moved backward a few meters; everyone shouted, "Hurrah!" but Mendel said, "There's still some pressure in the boiler, but it won't last long. Having an engineer isn't enough, you also need a fireman."

Efficient as the Gedalists might be when it came to fighting, they were equally chaotic when it came to peacetime choices. No one wanted to be the fireman; after an involved discussion, Mendel was assigned a woman assistant, though she was as strong as any man: Rokhele the Black, who was being punished because a few days before, while they were cleaning their weapons, she had lost a rifle spring. She was called Rokhele the Black to distinguish her from Rokhele the White: her face was as dark as a gypsy's, she was thin and agile. She had exceedingly long legs, and a long neck, too, atop which sat a small triangular face, lit up by laughing slanting eyes. She wore her black hair gathered in a bun. She, too, was a veteran of

Kosava, though she was barely twenty. Rokhele the White, on the other hand, was a simple, meek creature who almost never spoke, and, when she did, spoke in a voice so low that it was almost impossible to hear her. For those reasons, nobody knew anything about her, nor did she seem interested in having anyone know anything: she passively followed the band as it marched, obeyed everyone, and never complained. She came from a remote village in Ukrainian Galicia.

Mendel showed the Black what she'd have to do in order to feed the boiler, everyone else climbed into the two free cars, and the train began to move, pushed instead of pulled. Mendel set the steam throttle for a very low speed, because from the cab he couldn't see the way. Jozek had taken up a position with his submachine gun in the brakeman's cubby, on the last car, which was now the first, and was acting as a lookout; every so often they both leaned out, and Jozek signaled to Mendel whether the tracks ahead were clear. The firewoman laughed as if she were playing a game and shoveled coal with childish glee; it wasn't long before she was dripping with sweat from head to foot, and black for real now, so black that her eyes and teeth glittered like headlights in the darkness. Mendel, on the other hand, was having no fun at all. His satisfaction at having tamed that huge mechanical beast soon waned; the blood on the metal floor made him uneasy, he wasn't happy driving practically blind, and the whole enterprise struck him as a gratuitous folly and extremely foolhardy. He couldn't grasp what farsighted intentions Gedale might have.

Midway, he was forced to admit that Gedale rarely had distant intentions, and instead preferred to improvise: he'd leaned out of the boxcar and was waving for him to stop the train. He did, and they both got out.

"Listen, watchmaker, it strikes me that the best thing would be to damage this train as badly as we can. What do you recommend?"

"Here, nothing at all," Mendel replied. "If we were traveling forward instead of backward, we could uncouple the cars and do something to keep them from moving. But this way is a whole different matter. As it is, the only thing we can do is to let down the sides of the flat cars; that way, with all the bumps and jerks, the lime and coal will wind up scattered along the embankment."

"What about the cars themselves and the locomotive?"

"We'll think about that later," said Mendel. "Once you've had enough fun."

Gedale ignored his mocking tone, sent three men to lower the sides of the flat cars, and the train took off, cheerfully scattering construction material along both sides of the track. They arrived in Kolki in the early afternoon, and the cars were almost empty: Pavel was waiting with his horse on the loading dock. There was nobody in the tiny station, except for the stationmaster, and when he saw the machine gun in Jozek's hands, he gave a sort of military salute and withdrew. Mendel braked the train to a halt, loaded Pavel and the Thrush in a flash, and took off again. Gedale was happy, and he waved for Mendel to go on, and to go faster: "To Sarny! To Sarny!" Over the roar of the engine, Mendel could hear shouts and singing from the two boxcars, along with the Thrush's frightened whinnying.

Shortly thereafter, it was Mendel who, of his own initiative, halted the train by a small river running over the uninhabited steppe. It wasn't only so that he could get a rest and so that Rokhele could wash up a little, but also to inform the others that the boiler was about to run out of water. Everyone set to work, forming a bucket brigade from the river with the few available containers: several cooking pots and a pail that they found in the locomotive. The operation dragged on, and Mendel took advantage of the opportunity to listen to Pavel, who was telling what he had seen at Kolki.

"We were in no danger, neither the horse nor I. No one paid any attention to us, and no one spoke to us, and yet I doubt that anyone took me for a peasant. I saw no Germans; and yet they must have been there, because they had their propaganda posters outside the town hall. Still, I saw none in the streets. The people are no longer afraid to talk, or less so than in the past. I went into a tavern, the radio was playing, and I recognized the voice of Radio Moscow: it was saying that the Russians have retaken Crimea, that all the German cities are being bombed day and night, and that in Italy the Allies are at the gates of Rome. Oh, how wonderful it is to walk through the streets of a town, to see the balconies with potted flowers, the shop signs, the windows with their curtains! Look what I brought you: I took it off the wall, there's one on every corner."

Pavel showed everyone a poster, printed in large letters on ugly yellowish paper, in Russian and in Polish.

It said: "Don't work for the Germans, don't give them information. Anyone who supplies the Germans with wheat will be killed. Reader, we're watching you; if you tear this poster off the wall, we'll shoot you."

"And you tore it off the wall?" Mottel asked.

“I didn’t tear it off the wall, I took it off the wall: that’s another thing entirely. I took it off carefully, anyone could see that I was taking it away to show it to someone; and in fact they didn’t shoot me. You see? It’s signed Red Star Regiment: that’s who’s in charge around there.”

“We’re in charge, too,” Gedale interrupted impetuously. “We’ll make our own entrance into Sarny: an entrance they won’t soon forget. Who here knows Sarny?”

Jozek knew the place, he’d done his military service in the Polish Army there: a modest little city, with a population of perhaps twenty thousand. A few factories, a spinning mill, and a workshop to repair railroad rolling stock. The station? Jozek knew it very well indeed, because he’d been on guard there shortly before the war broke out; Sarny was the last Polish city before the border, the Russians entered Sarny without fighting, immediately after the outbreak of hostilities. It was a fairly important station, because the line for Lublin and Warsaw ran through it, and because of the repair shop. There was a big train shed and a turntable, which they used to send locomotives to the repair shop, in fact. Gedale’s face lit up, and he said to Mendel, “Your locomotive will die a glorious death.” Mendel said he hoped that he wouldn’t, too.

Gedale ordered the train to halt at night, at the entrance to the marshaling yard, and had everyone get out of the cars. The horse, frightened of the dark, balked: it refused to get out, it tried to rear up, it neighed convulsively and kicked at the boxcar’s far wall. They hauled on it and shoved it from behind, and in the end it made up its mind to leap, but it landed awkwardly and broke its front leg; Pavel walked away without a word and Gedale finished off the horse with a bullet to the back of its head. The Sarny station seemed deserted, too: no one reacted to the gunshot. Gedale told Mendel to push the rest of the cars onto a side track, and Jozek and Pavel to go ahead cautiously, and to set the switches toward the turntable; they came back when they were finished and reported that the turntable tracks were set sideways with respect to the main line in: excellent, said Gedale. He was going to send the locomotive crashing down into the pit beneath the turntable, and the repair shop would be out of commission for at least a month.

“Do you have your doubts, watchmaker? You’ve become fond of your machine, eh? Me, too, a little bit, but I don’t feel safe going on like this, and I don’t want to give the locomotive to the Germans. And I’ll tell you one

thing that I've learned in the woods: the exploits that turn out best are the ones that your enemy would never believe you could pull off. Come on, push the cars away, start up the engine, and jump off."

Mendel obeyed. The locomotive without its crew vanished into the darkness, visible only because of the sparks that billowed out of the smokestack. They waited, holding their breath; a few minutes later they heard a clatter of crushed metal, a thunderous roar, and a high-pitched hiss that slowly died away. An alarm siren wailed in the night, excited voices could be heard, and the Gedalists fled silently into the countryside. As Mendel groped his way through the darkness of the blackout, stumbling over tracks and cables, the words of the blessing of the miracles buzzed, incongruously, in his head: "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who did for me a miracle in this place."

And that was how Gedale's band announced its entrance into the inhabited world.

7

June–July 1944

“I’m sorry for you, Pavel, but for a few weeks we’d better stay far away from the windows with their curtains and the balconies filled with flowers; and especially from the railroads.” That was what Gedale had said, while he was leading the band to shelter in the thick of the forest. All the same, just three days after they set up camp, Gedale put on a suit of approximately civilian clothing, laid down his weapons, told them to wait for him without doing anything on their own initiative, and left by himself. The others set about coming up with hypotheses, ranging from the most idle ones to the most elaborate, until Dov told them to stop:

“Gedale likes to play, but he’s a good player. If he left without saying anything it means he had his reasons. Now get busy; in a camp, there’s always work to be done.”

They spent several days in a blend of laziness, anxiety, and the ordinary occupations of an encampment, which may be dull but help to pass the time. Gedale returned on June 10, calmly, as if he’d gone for a pleasant walk in peacetime. He asked for something to eat, he lay down to nap for half an hour, he woke up, he stretched, and he went a little distance away to play the violin. But it was clear that he was dying to tell them: he was just waiting for someone to give him an excuse. Bella provided it; although she had received no official appointment, she felt herself to be in charge of provisions. When Bella talked, it was as if she were pecking, a series of sharp but not painful jabs, like a small sparrow:

“You just up and leave without a word, pursuing your own thoughts or who knows what, and you leave us here like a bunch of fools. Listen, we’re

about to run out of supplies."

Gedale set down his violin and pulled a wad of cash out of his pocket: "Here you are, woman. We're not going to starve to death right away. Go on, summon everyone; let's have an assembly. It's far too long since the last one, but it's also far too long since we had good news; now we have some."

Everyone gathered around Gedale, and Gedale said:

"Don't expect a speech, speeches aren't my style. Don't ask me any questions, at least not for now. I'll tell you everything I can, which isn't much, but it is important. We're no longer orphans and we're no longer stray dogs. I talked with somebody, and he knew who we are and where we come from. What we did with the locomotive turned out to be useful, more than I imagined. I was given money, we'll be given more, and perhaps also weapons and regulation uniforms. I've learned that we're not alone. Among the bands that are incorporated in the Red Army, like Ulybin's, there are also spontaneous bands of peasants, bands of Ukrainian and Tartar dissidents, and bands of bandits, but also other Jewish bands like ours—other Gedales and other Gedalists. They're not talked about much, because the Russians don't like separatists, but they're out there, more or less armed, large and small, on the move or operating in place. There are even Russian bands commanded by Jewish chiefs.

"I laid out our objectives and they were approved; we can continue on our way, it's fine with them. We don't need to wait for the front: we're a vanguard, we are to go ahead. They expect us to go on doing what we've always done, guerrilla warfare, sabotage, diversions, but something more than that as well: they want us to advance into Poland and attack the concentration camps holding prisoners of war and Jews, if there are any left. We must gather together those who are scattered and cleanse the country of spies and collaborationists. We must move westward. The Russians want us to be present in the west as Russians; we want to be present as Jews, and, for once in our history, the two things are not mutually exclusive. We've been given a free hand, we can cross the borders and mete out our own justice."

"Cross all the borders?" asked Line.

Gedale replied: "I said not to ask questions."

They went on marching for days and days, in sun and rain, across the fields and forests of the dreary countryside of Volynia. They kept away from the well-traveled roads, but they couldn't avoid passing through certain villages, and on the main square of one of these they sighted a poster different from the one that Pavel had taken down, a poster that concerned them more closely. It said:

> Whoever kills the Jew Gedale Skidler, a dangerous bandit, will be rewarded with 2 kilograms of salt. Whoever supplies this headquarters with information leading to his capture will be rewarded with 1 kilogram of salt. Whoever captures him and turns him over alive will be rewarded with 5 kilograms of salt.

Gedale happily slapped his thighs, because the photograph printed on the poster was not of him: it was a picture of a Ukrainian collaborationist who was well-known throughout the area. Gedale couldn't seem to drag himself away: "A fantastic idea, I wish I'd come up with it. It would be even better if we were able to capture this Gedale." It took a long time to talk him out of the idea and persuade him to continue on the way.

In mid-June it started raining heavily, the water level rose in all the rivers and streams, and it became impossible to wade across them. Even the swamps became deeper. They spotted a windmill, explored it, and found that it was abandoned and empty. Empty, certainly: there was no flour, not a bag, not a handful, but the sour smell of fermented flour pervaded every corner of the building, mixed with the scent of mold and fungus from the rain-soaked wood. Nonetheless, the roof was watertight, and the mill room was reasonably dry; stout shelves ran the length of the walls, perhaps meant to hold the sacks of wheat. The Gedalists settled in for the night, some on the floor, some on the shelves: by candlelight, the place took on a picturesque appearance, half theater and half backstage. Comfortable it wasn't, but there was room enough for everyone, even to stretch out fully, and the drumming of the rain on the wooden roof was cheerful and cozy.

Isidor, one of the survivors of Blizna, had obtained a candle and a piece of sheet metal: stretched out on his belly, he was scraping every inch of floor. He was the youngest member of the band; he hadn't yet turned seventeen. Before joining up with Gedale, he'd spent almost four years in hiding, with his father, his mother, and a little sister, in a pit dug beneath a stable floor. The peasant who owned the stable had extorted all the family's cash and valuables, and then reported them to the Polish police. Isidor had

been lucky; every so often one of the four would venture out into the forest for some fresh air, and when the Germans came he was out. He was on his way back, he hid, and from his hiding place he watched as the SS, themselves little more than boys, only a few years older than him, clubbed his father, his mother, and his sister to death. Their faces weren't ferocious; in fact, they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Behind them, Isidor had seen the peasant and his wife, pale as snow. Since then, Isidor hadn't been quite right in the head. He was a boy with an absent demeanor, slightly hunched, with long arms and legs; he always carried a knife in his belt, and he often raved about going back to his village to kill that peasant.

"What are you doing, Isidor? Cleaning house for Passover?" Mottel asked from his shelf high above. Isidor said nothing and went on scraping: every now and then, when he had gathered a pinch of off-white dust, he lifted it to his mouth, chewed it, and then spat it out.

"Stop that, you'll make yourself sick to your stomach," said Mottel, "you're eating more rotten wood than flour." Isidor often got himself into trouble and they tried to keep an eye on him; still, he did his best to be helpful, and everyone loved him. He had an obsessive hunger, and he put everything he found into his mouth.

"Here, eat this," Rokhele the Black said to him, holding out a handful of gooseberries that she had gathered in the woods. "It won't be long until Jozek gets back—he's probably found something."

In fact, Jozek came back with not much stuff and not much variety. The local peasants were poor and also mistrustful; they had no sympathy for Russians, or Jews, or partisans. They had agreed to deal with him only because he spoke Polish, but all they gave him was grapes and bread, and that for an exorbitant price. "We have enough for today and for tomorrow, and after that we'll see," said Gedale. "We'll see what strategy to follow."

The wind had sprung up, and they felt as if they were inside a ship. The structure, made of colossal rough-hewn wooden beams, creaked, vibrated, and pitched. The four blades, stripped of their cloth and stuck for who could say how long, lurched with every gust of wind and then stopped immediately with a dull thump. Their pointless efforts were transmitted into jolts and slamming blows to the shafts and gears; the entire structure seemed to strain like a giant slave struggling to free itself. Only Pavel managed to get to sleep, and he was snoring, flat on his back, with his mouth open.

“Hey, the whole place is full of worms!” Isidor said suddenly, poking a stick into the gaps between the planks of the floor.

“Leave them alone,” said Bella, in alarm. “Eat your bread and go to sleep.”

Isidor turned to Bella with a foolish laugh: “Of course I’ll leave them alone. I’d never eat worms—they aren’t kosher.”

“Silly, the reason we don’t eat worms is that they’re dirty, not because they’re not kosher,” said Bella, who was cutting her fingernails with a small pair of scissors. That was the only pair of scissors that the band possessed: Bella claimed that they belonged to her personally, and that anyone who wished to use them had to ask her to lend them and had to return them without fail. With each fingernail that she cut, she contemplated the back of her hand with careful complacency, like a painter after a brushstroke.

Rokhele the White broke in, in a faint voice: “Worms are *trayf* precisely because they’re dirty. Pigs are dirty, too, which is why they’re *trayf*. How can you not believe in *kashrut*? You might as well stop being Jewish.”

“As far as I’m concerned,” said Jozek, “these are all stories from bygone times. Pigs may be dirty, but rabbits and horses are clean, and yet they’re not kosher. Why not?”

“You can’t know everything,” the White responded with some annoyance. “Perhaps, in Moses’ time, they were dirty, or they carried some disease.”

“Exactly: it’s just as you said, these are things from bygone times. If Moses were here with us, in this windmill, he wouldn’t hesitate two seconds to change the laws. He would shatter the tablets, just as he did that time when he flew into a rage over the golden calf, and he would make new ones. Especially if he had seen the things that we have.”

“Kosher-schmosher,” Mottel yawned, falling back on the ingenious Yiddish way of dismissing something by repeating it in distorted form. “Kosher-schmosher, if I had a rabbit I would eat it. In fact, tomorrow I’m going to put out some traps. When I was a boy I was good at making traps; I’ll have to get good at it again.”

Pyotr sat listening in amazement. He turned to Leonid, who was sitting beside him: “Why can’t you eat rabbit?”

“I have no idea. I know that you’re not supposed to, but I couldn’t tell you why. It’s a forbidden creature, it says so in the Torah.”

Dov broke in: “It’s forbidden because it doesn’t have a cloven hoof.”

Isidor said, “But in that case, if my worms had cloven hoofs, would we be able to eat them?”

Gedale had noticed Pyotr’s astonished face:

“Pay it no mind, Russian. If you stay with us, you’ll have to get used to these things. All Jews are crazy, but we’re a little crazier than the rest. That’s why we’ve been lucky so far, ours is the luck of the *meshuggener*. In fact, now that I think about it, we have an anthem, but we don’t have a flag. You ought to make us one, Bella, instead of wasting your time primping. A flag with all different colors, and in the middle, instead of a sickle, or a hammer, or a two-headed eagle, or a Star of David, you can put a *meshuggener* with a fool’s cap with bells and a butterfly net.”

Then he spoke to Pyotr again: “For that matter, the fact that you chose to come with us must mean you’re a little crazy yourself—there’s no other explanation. Russians, after all, are either crazy or boring, and clearly you’re from the crazy side of the family. You’ll fit in fine, even if our laws are a bit complicated; don’t worry about it, we only observe them when they do nothing to hinder the *partizanka*, but we do have fun arguing about them. We’re very good at making distinctions, between the pure and the impure, men and women, Jews and goyim, and we also make distinctions between the laws of peace and the laws of war. For instance: the law of peace says that you must not covet your neighbor’s wife. . . .”

Pyotr, who was lying next to Rokhele the Black, moved away from her slightly, perhaps unconsciously.

“No, in fact, you have nothing to worry about. Here all the men desire all the women.”

“Commander, you never talk seriously,” broke in Line, who instead was always serious. Her slightly hoarse contralto voice wasn’t loud, but it did have the quality of being heard over all other voices. “When it comes to the issue of your neighbor’s wife, we have a great deal to say.”

“We who?” asked Gedale.

“We women. First of all: why can a woman belong to a man, whether or not he’s your neighbor, but a man cannot belong to one woman? Does that seem just? It doesn’t seem just to us, it’s not acceptable. It’s not acceptable anymore; nowadays women are sent into exile just like men, they’re hanged just like men, and they shoot better than men. This alone would be enough to show how reactionary Mosaic law is.”

Pavel had woken up, and now he was snickering and saying something under his breath to Pyotr. Leonid was silent, but he was looking at Line out of the corner of his eye with a worried expression. There was a strong gust of wind, rain mixed with hail showered against the wall; the windmill creaked, then slowly turned, like a carousel, on the gigantic axle set in its buried foundation. Isidor clutched the White, and she comforted him, caressing his bristly head.

"Go on, go on, Line," said Gedale. "I can't believe a little wind will frighten you. Tell us what your law is; if it's not too harsh, we'll try to comply with it."

"It's not the wind that scares me, it's you people. You're a bunch of cynical primitives. Our law is simple: as long as they are not married, men and women can desire one another and make love as much as they wish. Love, until marriage, must be free, and in fact it already is, and always has been, and there is no law that can imprison it. Not even the Bible says anything different; our parents were no different, they made love just as we do, then as now."

"Then even more than now," said Pavel. "It's no accident that the Bible begins with two people screwing."

". . . but after marriage things change," Line went on, ignoring him. "We believe in marriage, because it's a pact, and pacts must be observed. The wife belongs to the husband, but the husband also belongs to the wife."

"Then we shouldn't get married," said Gedale. "Right, Bella?"

"Shut up, listen," Bella replied. "After all, everyone here knows that you're a filthy pig. And I never asked you to marry me. As a commander I suppose you're all right, but as a husband, the less said the better."

"That's fine," said Gedale. "You see that we're always in agreement. We have plenty of time to think it over: first, we need the war to end." Then he turned to Leonid, who was curled up next to Line, his face dark with anger. "And you, Muscovite, what do you think about your woman's theories?"

"I don't think anything. Leave me alone."

". . . and I'm not anyone's woman," Line added.

"All this talk!" said Jozek from his corner, addressing one of the men from Slonim. "Our father Jacob, for instance, had four wives and they all got along famously."

Mottel broke in:

“But they weren’t his neighbor’s wives. Jacob had every right to them, because one of them he married by accident, in fact, through the trickery of Laban, and the other two were slave girls. He only had one real wife: it was all on the up and up.”

“Nice work, Mottel!” said Gedale. “I didn’t know you were such a scholar. Did you study at the yeshiva, before you started cutting throats?”

“I studied many different things,” Mottel replied haughtily. “I studied the Talmud, too, and do you know what the Talmud says about women? It says that you must not speak to a woman who is not your wife, and that you must not even signal to her, with your hands, or your feet, or your eyes. That you must not look at her clothing, even when she’s not wearing it. That listening to a woman sing is like looking at her naked. That it is a grave sin if two people engaged to be married embrace—that the woman is rendered unclean, as if she were having her period, and she must be purified in a ritual bath.”

“All this is written in the Talmud?” asked Mendel, who hadn’t spoken until then.

“In the Talmud and elsewhere,” said Mottel.

“What’s the Talmud?” asked Pyotr. “Is it your Book of Gospels?”

“The Talmud is like a soup containing all the things that a man can eat,” said Dov. “But there is the wheat with the chaff, the fruit with its pits, and the meat with the bones. It’s not that tasty, but it’s nutritious. It’s filled with errors and contradictions, but for that very reason it teaches you how to think, and anyone who has read it all—”

Pavel interrupted him: “Just what the Talmud is I can explain to you with an example. Now pay close attention. Two chimney sweeps fall down a chimney; one emerges covered with soot, the other emerges perfectly clean. Now I ask you: which of the two goes to wash himself?”

Suspecting a trap, Pyotr looked around as if in search of help. Then he gathered his courage, and replied: “The dirty one goes to wash himself.”

“Wrong,” said Pavel. “The one who is dirty sees the face of the other man, which is clean, and believes that he, too, is clean. The one who is clean, on the other hand, sees the soot on the face of the other man, believes that he is dirty, and goes to wash himself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I get it. It’s well thought out.”

“But wait; the example isn’t finished yet. Now I’m going to ask you a second question. These two chimney sweeps fall down the same chimney a

second time, and once again one of them is dirty and the other one isn't. Which of them goes to wash himself?"

"I told you that I understood. The clean chimney sweep goes to wash himself."

"Wrong," said Pavel, mercilessly. "While washing after his first fall, the clean man saw that the water in the basin did not become dirty, while the dirty man understood the reason that the clean man went to wash himself. Therefore, this time the dirty chimney sweep goes to wash himself."

Pyotr sat listening with his mouth hanging open, equally appalled and curious.

"And now for the third question. The two men fall down the chimney a third time. Which of the two goes to wash himself?"

"From now on, the dirty one goes to wash himself."

"Wrong again. Have you ever heard of two men falling down the same chimney, and one comes out clean and the other one dirty? There, that's what the Talmud is like."

Pyotr sat astonished for a few seconds, then he shook himself like a dog that has just gotten out of the water, laughed shyly, and said, "You made me feel like a wet hen. Like a green recruit who has just entered the barracks. Fine, I understand what your Talmud is, but if you give me a second examination I'm going to turn right around and head back to Ulybin. It's not my style, I prefer a frontal assault."

"Don't take it personally, Russian," said Gedale. "Pavel didn't mean you any harm, he wasn't trying to make fun of you."

Line broke in: "All he was trying to do was give you an idea of what it feels like to be a Jew; I mean, what it feels like to have your head constructed in a certain way, and to be surrounded by people whose heads are constructed in a different way. Now you're the Jew, all alone and surrounded by goyim who are laughing at you."

". . . and you'd be well advised to change your name," said Gedale, "because your name is too Christian: instead of Pyotr Fomich use a name like Jeremiah or Habakkuk or some other name that will go unnoticed. And learn Yiddish and forget Russian; and you might even have yourself circumcised—if not, sooner or later we'll decide to have a nice little pogrom." Once he had spoken, Gedale yawned with gusto, blew out the candle, said good night to all, and withdrew with Bella. The two or three

other candles were blown out. In the darkness a voice could be heard, hoarse with sleep, possibly the voice of one of the men from Ruzany:

". . . in my village there was a Jew who'd eaten a sausage made of wild boar. The rabbi scolded him, but he said that this wild boar ruminated, and so it was kosher. 'Nonsense, wild boars don't ruminate,' said the rabbi. 'They don't ruminate in general, but this one did: it ruminated just like an ox,' said the Jew; and since the wild boar was no longer alive, the rabbi couldn't say a thing."

"In my village," said another voice, "there was a Jew who had himself baptized fourteen times."

"Why? Wasn't once enough?"

"Certainly once was enough, but he enjoyed the ceremony."

Someone could be heard clearing his throat and spitting, and then a third voice said:

"In my village there was a Jew who got drunk."

"Well, what's so strange about that?" another voice replied.

"Nothing. I never said that there was anything strange about it, but tonight it's strange to tell stories that aren't strange, since everyone's telling strange stories."

"In my village—" Isidor began. A woman's voice interrupted him: "Enough, now; go to sleep, it's late." But Isidor continued:

"In my village there was a woman who'd seen the devil. His name was Andushas, he had the body of a unicorn, and he played music."

"What did he play?"

"He played the horn."

"How could he do that, if the horn was on his forehead?"

"I don't know," said Isidor. "I didn't ask her."

A deep voice yawned from above: "Now be quiet. It's time to sleep, we've walked all day. We need to get our rest. Even the Almighty took six days to create the world, and on the seventh day He rested."

Gedale replied: "He rested, and He said, 'Let's hope it works.'"

The faint voice of Rokhele the White could still be heard in the darkness, as she murmured the evening prayer, "Into Your hands I commit my spirit," and the blessing, "May the Merciful One break the yoke of exile from our neck and may He lead us upright to our land"; then there was silence.

The evening downpour had given way to a gentle steady drizzle, and the wind, too, had dropped. The old mill's framework no longer creaked, but now only crackled softly, as if hundreds of woodworms were gnawing at it, and Mendel, stretched out on the hard wooden floor, was unable to sleep. Other confused sounds came from the attic, quick light footsteps, perhaps the sound of mice or weasels, against the background of his sleeping comrades' breathing and groaning. The air was warm, heavy with the humors of the night and the bittersweet scent of pollen, and Mendel felt a wave of desire flow through him. It was an adolescent's desire, shapeless, soft, hot, and white: he tried to describe it to himself but couldn't. The desire for a bed, and a woman's body in that bed; the desire to dissolve inside a woman, to become a single flesh with her, a twofold flesh isolated in the world, secluded from roads, weapons, fears, and memories of the slaughter.

At his side, Sissl was breathing quietly. Mendel reached out a hand in the darkness and touched her hip, covered by the roughness of the blanket. He pressed, tried to pull her to him, but Sissl resisted, frozen in sleep. Across the flickering screen of half-sleep, names and faces, present and distant, chased after one another. Sissl blond and weary. Rivke with her sad black eyes, but Mendel chased her away immediately, he wouldn't, he couldn't think about her. Rivke, Strelka, the mass grave: go away, Rivke, please. Go back where you came from, let me live. Mendel stubbornly tried to fall asleep, and he realized that it was precisely that effort that stung him and kept him awake. His mind was not so confused that it could be unaware that another face and another name were knocking at its door. A name without a face, the name of Rahab, the prostitute with the perverse power; yes, the bizarre report was true, it was enough for Mendel to utter that name, even only in his mind, and his flesh swelled. And a face without a name, a hollowed face, young and worn, with large distant eyes. Mendel started: that face wasn't nameless. It had a name and that name was Line.

He saw her the way he had seen her a few hours earlier, arguing with conviction, free of laziness and doubt, serious to the verge of the ridiculous, vibrant as a taut cable. He threw aside the blanket, took off his shoes, and groped his way toward her, stumbling over the limbs of sleeping bodies. He'd seen where she had withdrawn to sleep, and he found her easily, under the ladder that led up to the loft: in the darkness he touched her hair, and his

blood surged at the contact. Next to Line slept Leonid, the two wrapped in the same blanket; the image of Leonid and the image of Sissl together weighed on Mendel's conscience for an instant, then they moved off into the darkness, growing smaller and more transparent as they faded into the distance and, finally, disappeared, just as Rivke's terrible face had disappeared.

Mendel touched Line's shoulder, then her forehead. The girl's hand, small but strong, freed itself of the blanket, found Mendel's arm, and crept up it, exploring. It slipped into the opening of his shirt, brushed his rough-shaven cheeks; the fingers found the scar on his forehead, and followed it, careful and sensitive, to where it vanished into his hair. The other hand emerged, and pressed the nape of Mendel's neck, pulling his head down toward her. Mendel helped Line to get free of the blanket without awakening Leonid. Together they climbed up into the loft: the ladder creaked under their weight, but the noise was lost in the rustling of wind and rain.

The loft was cluttered. Mendel recognized a grain hopper by feel, touched a cogwheel greasy with lubricant; he withdrew his hand in disgust and wiped it off on the bottom of his pant legs. He felt his way with his feet to a clear area, pulling Line behind him; she followed with docility. They lay down, and Mendel took Line's military clothing off. The body that emerged was thin and tense, almost masculine; the belly was flat, the arms and thighs muscular and slender. The knees were square, hard, and rough like children's knees; Mendel's hand hungrily explored the two dimples on either side of the tendons, beneath the kneecap, then slid up her hips, but her breasts, though small, were withered, sad little sacks of empty skin beneath which he could feel her ribs. Mendel undressed, and immediately Line grabbed him tight as if they were about to wrestle. Crushed under the weight of the male body, Line twisted, a tenacious and resilient adversary, exciting him and challenging him. It was a language, and even in the red fog of desire Mendel understood it: I want you but I'm going to resist you. I resist you because I want you. I'm smaller and I lie beneath you but I don't belong to you. I am no one's woman, and by resisting you I bind you to me. Mendel felt she was armed even though she was naked, armed as she had been the first time he glimpsed her in the dormitory at Novoselky. She belonged to no one and to everyone, like Rahab of Jericho: Mendel sensed it and it pierced him through, just as he pulled away from her, at the last

instant. The effort was so lacerating that Mendel sobbed loudly, in the mill's dark silence.

Once the fever had dissolved into the quiet of his satiated body, gentle as a convalescence, Mendel listened carefully: the silence was not complete, he could hear other muffled voices, hard to recognize. He slipped into sleep by Line's side; she was already sleeping peacefully.

He woke up a short while later, in the early dawn light, when the others were still sleeping, and he saw Gedale lying next to Bella, Pavel next to Rokhele the Black, and Rokhele the White next to Isidor. Line's sharp pale face lay in the hollow of his arm. Why did I do it? What am I seeking in her? Love and pleasure. No, that's not all. I'm seeking another woman in her, and this is terrible and unfair. I sought her in Sissl and I didn't find her. I'm seeking something that no longer exists, and I'll never find it. And now I'm bound to this one: now I'm bound by this one, bound by the ivy. Forever, or not forever, I couldn't say: nothing is forever. And she's not tied to me: she binds you and isn't bound herself, you must've noticed this by now, Mendel, you're not a child anymore, untie yourself while you still can, this is no time for establishing bonds. Cut yourself loose or you'll wind up badly: you'll wind up like Leonid. He looked around, and Leonid was nowhere to be seen. Nothing odd about that, he might just have stepped out. He went on advising himself in a brotherly manner to free himself of Line, ordering himself, demanding of himself, and he knew full well that, if someone else had spoken to him like that, he, Mendel, the mild-mannered watchmaker, would have punched him out. Half an hour later everyone was awake, and Leonid was gone; gone with him were his backpack and his weapon.

Gedale muttered in Polish, inviting the devil to take care of Leonid; then he went on in Yiddish: "*Nu*, we aren't the Red Army and I'm not Ulybin, and as a partisan he wasn't worth much. He's not the kind of man who'd betray us, but if he runs into the Germans that's another matter. Let's just hope he doesn't cause any trouble. He can't go far alone: in three days we'll find him again, you'll see."

"Still, he could have left us the automatic rifle," said Jozek.

"Yes, and that's the problem. If he took it he plans to use it."

Mendel suggested going after him. Dov added that they might try using the dogs, and Gedale told them to do as they thought best, but not to waste too much time on it. Dov led a dog to sniff Leonid's blanket, and then took the dog outside; the animal sniffed apathetically at the ground, lifted its muzzle and scented the air, then chased its tail a couple of times; finally, tail and ears drooping, it pointed its muzzle in Dov and Mendel's direction, as if to say: "What do you want from me?"

"It's time to go," said Gedale. "Get ready to leave. The idea of looking for him is out of the question. If he looks for us he'll know how to find us." Mendel thought: He's gone to shoot at Germans, but maybe he really wanted to shoot at me.

They resumed their march, with a beautiful clear sky overhead and a rain-soaked ground beneath their feet. They skirted a number of apparently deserted villages; the column, led by Jozek, proceeded slowly through patches of thick forest and fields overrun by weeds. The terrain was flat, but toward the west they could make out a backdrop of blunt hills. Mendel marched in silence, and felt less than happy about being Mendel. In a single night, he had been twice the traitor: or even three times, if you counted Sissl as well. But he didn't have to count Sissl, there she was just a short distance ahead in the line, walking along behind Pyotr with her usual tranquil stride. Nor was it necessary to count the dead, they stay in their world of the dead, and almost never emerge from it. You can't let them get out, it's like an outbreak of typhus, you need to reinforce the enclosure, keep them locked up in their quarantine. The living have every right to defend themselves. But it was different with Leonid, Leonid wasn't dead. . . . And do you know, after all, whether or not he's dead? Whether or not you killed him, who were his brother, and who, when they asked you where he was, replied with all the insolence of Cain? For all you know, you took from him the only thing he had; you cut the towrope, and now he's sinking, or he's already sunk. Actually, what you did was worse: you unhooked him from the rope, and you took his place. Now you're the one having yourself towed. Towed by her, by the hardheaded young girl with the gnawed fingernails. Take care what you do, Mendel son of Nachman!

On the morning of the third day of the march, they found themselves on the edge of a gorge. It dropped straight down, a sheer cliff wall of nasty clay made slippery by the rains; the far wall was just as steep, and running

through the bottom of the gorge, a good thirty meters down, was a muddy rushing torrent, choked between the two banks.

“You may be good at printing counterfeit dollars, Jozek, but as a guide you’re not worth much,” said Gedale. “We can’t get through here: you took us the wrong way.”

Jozek had plenty of good excuses. The paths were numerous, and you could hardly expect him, after so many years, to remember them all. He blamed the rain; in the dry season, and he was certain about this, you could pretty easily climb down and back up again, and the torrent dwindled to a rivulet that wouldn’t frighten anyone. In any case, there was no need to turn back. They could just head north, following the rim of the gorge; sooner or later they’d find a way across.

They set off again, following faint trails overrun by thornbushes. It soon became clear that the torrent wasn’t running north, but rather toward a northeast that was practically an east, and Jozek’s popularity began to decline: nobody had ever heard of marching eastward in order to get to the west. Gedale pointed out that that was exactly what Christopher Columbus had done, or, rather, it was the other way around, and Bella, dead tired, told him to stop playing the fool. Jozek insisted that there must be a way through, and that it couldn’t be far; indeed, around midday, they found a well-marked path that ran along the rim of the gorge. They followed it for half an hour, and saw that Jozek must be right: the gorge was twisting toward the left, which is to say, to the west, at a sharp angle, and the increasingly well-trodden path was descending obliquely toward the bottom. In spite of the rain that had fallen a few days earlier, it was possible to make out hoofprints left by cattle: perhaps the trail led to a ford, or a bridge, or a watering hole. They hiked all the way down and saw that the trail reached the torrent right at the tip of the curve, and that beyond the curve the gorge opened out into a broad streambed; the torrent split up into an assortment of streams that flowed gently over the rocks. In the short stretch of flatland, there were the ruins of a stone hut; six men were standing outside the door, and one of them was Leonid. Of the others, four were armed and were wearing uniforms of the old Polish Army, tattered and faded; the sixth man, unarmed and shirtless, was off to one side, sunning himself.

One of the armed men moved toward the Gedalists. He slid the strap of the machine gun he was carrying on one shoulder over his head; he didn’t

aim the gun at the newcomers, but carried it carelessly by the muzzle, letting it dangle at his side, and spoke to them in Polish: “Halt.” Gedale, who was born and brought up in Poland, and who spoke Polish better than Russian, stopped, waved to the line behind him to halt, and spoke in Russian to Jozek:

“Why don’t you see what the *pan* wants.”

The *pan*, that is, the gentleman, understood (and, for that matter, Gedale had done everything he could to make sure he understood), and said with cold rage:

“What I want is for you to go away. This is our land, and you’ve already caused trouble enough.”

Faced with the prospect of a quarrel, Gedale assumed an expression of ecstasy, and this only further irritated the Pole. Gedale told Jozek: “Tell the gentleman that, if we have caused him any annoyance, that was certainly not our intention, or we certainly never meant to harm him personally. Asked him if he happens to be referring to what happened with the locomotive in Sarny, and if so, tell him that we will never do it again. Tell him that all we want is to leave, and we certainly don’t need his encouragement. Ask him—”

It turned out that the gentleman spoke Russian reasonably well, because, instead of waiting for Jozek to translate, he interrupted Gedale angrily:

“Obviously I’m talking about the locomotive. That, too, is our territory, it belongs to the National Armed Forces, and we had to deal with the German reprisal ourselves. But I’m also talking about your man”—and here he pointed at Leonid, with a contemptuous jerk of the thumb—“this reckless idiot, this deranged fool with a Red Star who’s going around all alone playing the hero without considering that—”

This time it was Gedale who interrupted, in good Polish, abandoning the sideshow with the interpreter in his surprise:

“What? What has he done? Where did you capture him?”

“We didn’t capture him,” the Pole snarled, “we rescued him. And don’t go around spreading the word: because this is the first time, damn it, that the NSZ, the National Armed Forces, ever saved a Jew, and what’s more a Russian and a Communist, from German bullets. But he must be just a little soft in the head: armed, in broad daylight, without looking left or right, he was walking straight toward the German checkpoint—”

“What checkpoint?”

“The checkpoint outside the Zielonka power plant. If we hadn’t stopped him, all hell would’ve broken loose, not to mention how important the power from Zielonka is to us, too. If you want to sabotage things, go somewhere else, far from here, and the devil take you. And find out about the political situation. And most of all, don’t send us any more nutcases like this one.”

“We didn’t send him: he did it on his own initiative,” said Gedale. “We’ll interrogate him and we’ll punish him.”

“That’s what he told us, that it was his own idea: we’ve already interrogated him ourselves. But don’t take us for idiots. Or children. We’ve been fighting on two fronts since 1939, and, believe me, we’ve learned a few tricks. And these are tricks that you copied from the Nazis: just like when they burned the Reichstag: you take a mental defective, you send him into action, and then the reprisal lands like a lightning bolt on whichever side is most convenient to you.”

The Pole stopped to catch his breath. He was tall, thin, no longer young, and his gray mustache was quivering with rage. Gedale shot a glance over at Leonid: he was sitting on the stone threshold of the hut, his hands tied, and resting on his thighs. He was only ten steps away, within earshot, but he didn’t seem to be listening. The Pole observed Jozek closely:

“Come to think of it, you look Jewish, too. We’ve seen some strange things, but this beats them all: a band of Jews wandering around Poland with weapons stolen from the Poles, passing themselves off as partisans, the sons of bitches!”

Gedale leaped into action. With his left hand he grabbed the machine gun from the Pole’s hands, and with his right hand he landed a violent blow to the man’s ear. The Pole staggered, took a few stumbling steps, but stayed on his feet. The three others had moved closer with a menacing air, but their leader said something to them, and they retreated a few steps, but with their weapons still leveled.

“I’m a Jew, too, Panie Kondotierze,” said Gedale in a tranquil voice. “We didn’t steal these weapons, and we know how to use them pretty well. You’ve been fighting for five years, we’ve been fighting for three thousand. You’ve been fighting on two fronts, we can’t begin to count the fronts we’ve been fighting on. Try to be reasonable, Mister Captain. We have the same enemy to fight: let’s not squander our forces.” Then he added, with a

courteous smile: ". . . or our insults, for that matter." Perhaps the "captain" would have been less accommodating if he hadn't found himself surrounded by twenty or so determined-looking Gedalists. He grumbled some mysterious imprecation involving thunder and cholera, then he scowled. "We don't want to know anything about you and we don't want to have anything to do with you. Take back your man. And take this one, too, he claims to be one of your people: we don't know what to do with him."

At a gesture from him, his men grabbed Leonid by the arms, lifted him to his feet, and shoved him toward Gedale, who immediately cut the rope that bound his wrists. Leonid said not a word, kept his gaze fixed on the ground, and slipped into the crowd of Gedalists standing on the trail. The other man mentioned by the Pole, the one who was off to one side, sunbathing shirtless, stepped forward spontaneously. He was as tall as Gedale, he had a fierce, hawklike nose and a majestic black mustache, but he couldn't have been much older than twenty. His body, agile and muscular, would have been a perfect model for a sculpture of an athlete if it hadn't been for the clubfoot that deformed one of his legs. He'd picked up a bundle from the ground, and he seemed happy to change masters. It was time to go; Gedale handed the Pole's weapon back to him, and said:

"Good Sir Captain, I believe that there is one point on which we can agree, and that's that we also want nothing to do with you. Tell us which way we ought to go."

The Pole replied: "Steer clear of Kovel, Lukov, and the railroad. Don't stir up the Germans in our district, and go straight to hell."

"What a great guy!" Gedale said to Mendel when they resumed their march, without a sign of a grudge or contempt. "Just fantastic, like a Hollywood Indian. If you ask me, he was born into the wrong century."

"But you slapped him around!"

"I had to. But what does that have to do with it? I admired him all the same: the way you might admire a waterfall or an unusual animal. He's stupid, and he may even be dangerous, but he gave us quite a show."

Anyway, Gedale seemed to fall in love with every new arrival, aside from any moral or utilitarian consideration. He buzzed around Arie, the clubfooted young man, as if he wanted to sniff him and observe him from every angle. In spite of his handicap, Arie had no trouble keeping up with the line, in fact, his stride was loose and limber, and he immediately made himself popular, killing a quail by hurling a stone at it, and offering it as a

gift to Rokhele the White. He neither spoke nor understood Yiddish, and he pronounced Russian in a very odd manner: Arie was Georgian, and proud of the fact. His mother tongue was Georgian, he'd learned Russian at school, but his name, of which he was equally proud, was pure Hebrew: Arie means Lion.

Not many of the Gedalists had ever met a Georgian Jew before, and Jozek, half joking, half serious, even questioned whether Arie really was a Jew; if you don't speak Yiddish you're not a Jew, it's almost axiomatic, and there's even a proverb: "*Redest kain Yiddish, bist nit kain yid*."

"If you're a Jew, speak to us in Hebrew: let us hear a blessing in Hebrew."

The young man accepted the challenge, and recited the blessing of the wine with a Sephardi pronunciation, rounded and solemn, instead of an Ashkenazi accent, syncopated and tight. Many of the men laughed.

"Hey, you speak Hebrew like a Christian!"

"No," Arie replied, with an air of offended nobility, "we speak it the way our father Abraham did. You're the ones who speak it wrong."

It was surprising how quickly Arie fit into the band. He was strong and willing and he was happy to do any job; he even accepted what little partisan discipline the band still possessed. Although everyone was curious about him, he showed little interest in the band's objectives: "If you're going to kill Germans, I'll come with you. If you're going to the land of Israel, I'll come with you." He was intelligent, cheerful, proud, and touchy. Proud of many things: of being Georgian (a descendant of Alexander the Great's Macedonians, he stated, although he was unable to provide any evidence of the fact); of not being Russian, but at the same time of being a compatriot of Stalin; and of his surname, Hazanshvili.

"But of course! You even resemble him," Mottel laughed. "Not just your mustache, but your name, too."

"Stalin is a great man and you shouldn't mock him. I wish I resembled him in my name, but I don't. He is Dzhugashvili, which means son of Dzhuga, and I'm only Hazanshvili, which means son of the Hazan, the cantor at the synagogue."

He was sensitive on the subject of his deformity, and he didn't much like to talk about it, but in all likelihood it had saved his life:

"I was rejected by the draft board, and back home they made fun of me, because for us it's an honor to join the army. But then, in 1942, when they

were taking everyone, I was called up, too, and they sent me behind the lines in Minsk to bake bread in the military bakery. The Germans took me prisoner, but as a civilian laborer, and that was my good luck. They didn't notice that I was a Jew. . . ."

"It's all due to the mustache, believe me," said Jozek. "Too bad that so few people thought of that, growing a mustache."

"The mustache and my height. And also because I declared myself a farmer and a specialist in grafting vines."

"Smart of you!"

"No, not at all, it's actually my profession, my grandfather and my father and I have always grafted grapevines. And so they sent me to a farm to graft trees that I'd never seen before. We were practically free, and in April I escaped. I wanted to fight with the partisans, and I ran into the ones you saw; but I wasn't very happy with them—they called me 'Jew' and made me carry their loads as if I were their mule."

Gedale tended to make improvised decisions, but when it came to Leonid he didn't feel like improvising. He called Jozek, Dov, and Mendel aside, and he wasn't the Gedale they were used to: he didn't go off on tangents, he thought about what he was saying, and he spoke in a subdued tone.

"I don't like punishments: I don't like to give them or receive them. That's strictly for Prussians, and for people like us they aren't useful. But this kid has really screwed up: he ran away with our weapons, without orders, and without leave, and he did everything he could to get us all into trouble. It was just a good thing that most of the NSZ forces were far away, otherwise it would have ended badly. He behaved like a fool, and he made us all look like fools: inept intruders, incompetent fumblers. They already dislike us around here; after what happened they'll like us even less, and we have a long way to go, and we need the support of the populace. Or at least their silent neutrality. Leonid has to understand these things: we have to make him understand."

Jozek raised his hand to ask to speak. "If it were another man, I think that the best solution would be to beat him up a little and then ask him to do some self-criticism, like the Russians. But Leonid is a strange guy, and it's hard to figure out why he does the things he does. You're right, commander,

we've got to make him understand certain things; all the same, if you ask me, at least for the moment, that boy isn't capable of understanding a thing. Since we got him back, he hasn't said a word: not one word. He's never looked me in the eye, not once, and every time I've taken him food he's pretended to eat and then, the minute I leave, he's thrown it all away: I saw him perfectly clearly. If this were peacetime, I'd know what he needs."

"A doctor?" asked Gedale.

"That's right, a head doctor."

"You two have known him longer," Gedale said to Mendel and Dov. "What do you think?"

Dov spoke first, to Mendel's relief. "At Novoselky he caused me some problems because he wasn't punctual when it came to work. I sent him out on a sabotage mission, to test him and to give him an opportunity to look good in front of the others: it seemed to me that it was something he needed. He didn't do badly and he didn't do well, he was courageous and he was reckless. His nerves betrayed him. If you ask me he's a good kid with an ugly temper, but I don't think you can judge a man from what he did at Novoselky; or, for that matter, from what he does here."

"I'm not interested in judging him," said Gedale. "I'm interested in deciding what we should do with him. What do you say, watchmaker?"

Mendel was on pins and needles. Did Gedale know, or had he guessed, the real reason for Leonid's suicide mission? If he did, not to speak of it would be childish and dishonest. If he didn't, if he hadn't guessed, Mendel would prefer not to provide a subject for curiosity and gossip. In short, it was nobody's business but his own, right? His business, and Line's, private matters. He didn't feel like making Leonid's situation worse, and to explain that Leonid had deserted because of a woman would mean making his situation worse. And it would mean making your situation worse, too. Yes, of course: it would make my situation worse, too. He kept it vague, feeling like a liar inside, as despicable as a worm:

"We've been together for a year. We met last year in July in the forests of Bryansk. I agree with Dov, he's a good kid with a prickly personality. He told me his story, his life has never been easy, he began to suffer long before we did. If you ask me, it would be a cruelty to punish him, and pointless besides: he's already punishing himself. And I agree with Jozek as well; this man needs treatment."

Gedale jumped up and started pacing back and forth. “You certainly are some fine advisors. Treat him, but we can’t. Punish him, but we shouldn’t. We might as well say it outright, your advice is to leave things the way they are, and let the matter take care of itself. You remind me of Job’s consolers. Fine, for now, let’s leave things as they stand; I’ll see whether the girl can give me any more concrete advice. She knows him better than you do, or at least she knows him in a different light.”

So he doesn’t know, Mendel thought with relief, and at the same time he felt ashamed at how relieved he felt. But Mendel never knew what Gedale and Line said to each other; either they hadn’t spoken or (what was more likely) Line hadn’t said anything important. Gedale’s bad mood didn’t last; in the days that followed his usual demeanor returned, but, as he had done at Sarny, he vanished once again in early July, while the column was camped near Annopol, not far from the Vistula. He reappeared the next day, wearing a new velvet jacket and a peasant’s straw hat, and with a bottle of ersatz perfume for Bella, and small gifts for the four other women. But he hadn’t gone into the city to go shopping; after that a number of things changed. They became more cautious. Once again, as in the spring, they marched at night and by day camped, doing their best not to be noticed, which became increasingly difficult, because the whole area was crisscrossed with roads and dotted with villages and farmhouses. Gedale seemed to be in a hurry; he demanded longer and longer marches, as much as twenty kilometers a night, and he was headed in a specific direction, toward Opatów and Kielce. He reminded all of them not to venture far from the group and not to speak to the peasants they might run into: only those who spoke Polish could talk to the locals, but even they should do so as little as possible.

Whether they were marching or in camp, Leonid’s presence had become burdensome to them all, and especially to Mendel. Mendel was forced to admit that he was afraid of Leonid. He avoided being around him; when they were marching in single file, he went to the head of the line if Leonid was at the rear, or vice versa, but in fact, Mendel noticed, to his chagrin, Leonid, intentionally or not, always seemed to maneuver so that he was close to him, although he never spoke. He merely looked at him, with those dark eyes of his, heavy with sadness and supplication, as if he wished to afflict him with his presence, refusing to be forgotten, and taking vengeance by afflicting him. Or was he just keeping an eye on him? It could be: certain

gestures of his made Mendel think that Leonid was laboring under some suspicion. He'd turn his head suddenly and look behind him. During the halts, which took place during the day, and for the most part in abandoned peasant huts, when he lay down to sleep he would choose the place closest to the door, and even then slept only fitfully; he'd wake up with a jerk, look around uneasily, and peer out the door or one of the windows.

On a cloudy gray morning, after a night march that had worn everybody out, Mendel was gathering firewood in the forest and he spotted Leonid nearby, also gathering firewood, even though no one had ordered him to. He had lost weight and looked tense, and his eyes glistened. He turned to Mendel with an air of complicity: "You understand it, too, don't you?"

"Understand what?"

"That we've been sold out. We can't have any more illusions. We've been sold out, and he's the one who sold us."

"He who?" Mendel asked, in astonishment.

Leonid lowered his voice: "Him, Gedale. But he had no alternative, they were blackmailing him, he was a puppet in their hands." Then he raised his finger to his lips, invoking silence, and went back to gathering firewood. Mendel told no one else about it, but a few days later Dov said to him:

"That friend of yours has some strange ideas. He says that Gedale works for the NKVD or who knows what other branch of the secret police, that they're blackmailing him, and that we're all hostages in his hands."

"He said something of the sort to me, too," said Mendel. "What should we do?"

"Nothing," said Dov.

Mendel remembered comparing Leonid to a watch clogged with dust, but now Leonid reminded him of certain other watches that people had brought him to repair: perhaps they'd bumped against something, and the coils of the mainspring had got tangled; for a while they'd run slow, for a while they'd rush madly ahead, and ultimately they would break down, impossible to fix.

The summer was bright and windy, and the Gedalists realized that they had ventured into the land of hunger. Gedale's instructions, to avoid contact

with the local people, proved superfluous, if not actually ironic. There weren't a lot of people to avoid, in that countryside: no men, few women; standing in the doorways of the devastated farmhouses only old people and children. These weren't people they had any need to fear; if anything, they themselves were marked by fear. Just a few months earlier, the partisans of the Polish Home Army had launched an attack on the German garrisons throughout the area, while to the south of Lublin units of Soviet paratroopers were interrupting the German lines of communication that brought ammunition and provisions to the front. Other Polish fighting units had blown up bridges and viaducts, and they had also attacked a village where the Germans had driven out the peasants by force in 1942 and resettled the place with colonists of the Thousand Year Reich. The German reprisal was widespread, covering the entire district, and it was ferocious. It was directed not against the bands, which had fled to safety in the forests and were almost impossible to catch, but, rather, against the civilian population. The Germans had brought in reinforcements from distant areas behind the lines; at night they would encircle the Polish villages and set them on fire, or else they deported all the men and women of working age: they gave them half an hour to get ready for the journey, then loaded them onto trucks and hauled them away. In some towns they'd focused their attention on the children: they deported to Germany the "Aryan"-looking children and killed all the others. The villages, which had always been poor, were reduced to smoking piles of ruins and rubble, but the fields were left undamaged and the ripe rye stood waiting, in vain, for someone to harvest it.

The idea came from Mottel. He had gone to ask for water at an isolated farmhouse, perhaps a kilometer from the village of Zborz, and there he had found an old woman, all alone, lying on the straw in a stable, but the stable was empty of livestock. The old woman could barely move, she had a broken leg that no one had treated. She told Mottel to go to the well, and take all the water he wanted, and would he bring a little for her as well. But she asked him to bring her something to eat, too: anything at all. She hadn't eaten for three days; every once in a while someone from the village would remember her and bring her a bit of bread. And yet in the fields just outside there was enough rye to feed a large family, but the minute the first rains came it would rot because there was no one to harvest it.

Mottel reported to Gedale, and Gedale decided immediately.

“We must help these people. Our war consists of this as well. This is our chance to make them understand that we come as friends, not enemies.”

Jozek made a face. “They’ve never liked us around here; before the Germans burned their houses, they were burning ours. They don’t like Jews, and they don’t like Russians, either, and many of us are both Jews and Russians. They know what happened to the Russian peasants in the twenties, and they’re afraid of collectivization. Let’s help them, but let’s be careful about how we do it.”

But all the others agreed eagerly: they were tired of destruction, tired of the stupid and negative work that war forces people to undertake. The most enthusiastic were Pyotr and Arie, both of them experienced in farm work. Mottel had told them that “his” old woman’s roof had fallen in, and Pyotr said:

“I’ll fix it. I’m good at fixing thatched roofs, it’s something I used to do back home, and people paid me for it. But now, for the privilege of fixing your old woman’s roof, I’d give as many rubles as they used to give me; that is, if I had the money, of course, because in fact I don’t.”

The old woman accepted the offer. Pyotr got to work, with Sissl’s help, and a few days later an elderly man with a drooping mustache was noticed wandering around nearby. He acted as if he were there for other business: he straightened fence posts, checked the walls of the irrigation ditches even though they were desperately dry, but he was clearly watching the two as they worked. One day he spoke to Pyotr, asking a series of questions in Polish; Pyotr pretended not to understand and went in search of Gedale.

“I am the *Burmistrz*, the mayor of the village,” the old man said, in a dignified tone, though he had the appearance of a beggar. “Who are you? Where are you going? What do you want?”

Gedale had shown up for the meeting unarmed, in shirtsleeves, wearing faded and tattered civilian britches, with the straw hat that he had bought on his head. He spoke Polish without the slightest Yiddish accent, and it would have been hard for anyone to place him with precision. At first he was cautious:

“We’re a group of refugees, men and women. We come from different towns, and we’re not here to do you any harm. We’re just passing through, we’re going somewhere far away, we’re not here to bother anyone, but we don’t want to be bothered ourselves. We’re tired, but our arms are strong: perhaps we can be useful to you in some way.”

“Such as?” asked the mayor, suspiciously.

“Such as harvesting the rye before it rots.”

“What do you want in exchange?”

“Part of the harvest, as much as you think fair; and then water, a roof over our heads, and your agreement to say little about us.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Forty or so; five are women.”

“Are you the leader?”

“I am.”

“There’s fewer of us than there are of you: less than thirty, if you include the children. Believe me, we’ve never had money, we no longer have livestock, and there aren’t any young women, either.”

“Too bad about the young women,” Gedale said, laughing, “but that’s not our main concern. As I told you, all we want is water, silence, and if possible a roof over our heads so we can get a few nights’ sleep. We’re tired of war and of walking, we yearn for peacetime occupations.”

“We, too, are tired of war,” said the mayor, and then hastened to add: “But do you know how to harvest?”

“We’re out of practice, but we’ll do all right.”

“There’s a mill in Opatów,” said the mayor, “and I hear it’s in operation. We have plenty of sickles, they left us those. You can start tomorrow.”

All the men from Blizna and Ruzany went to harvest, and, with them, Arie, Dov, Line, and Rokhele the Black, joined by Pyotr once he had finished repairing the roof: twenty or so in all. Arie was the most experienced, and he taught the others how to stand up the sheaves of grain and how to sharpen the sickle, first with a hammer and then with a whetstone. Pyotr, too, proved to be skillful and hardworking. Line amazed everyone: slender as she was, she harvested from dawn to dusk without the slightest sign of exhaustion, and she tolerated with no trouble heat, thirst, and the cloud of horseflies and mosquitoes that immediately gathered. It wasn’t the first time she’d done this work: she’d done it a thousand years before, near Kiev, on a collective farm where young Zionists were preparing to immigrate to Palestine, in that distant past when being a Zionist and a Communist had not yet become an absurd contradiction. Dov was a good worker, though the years and his wounds weighed on him. It wasn’t an entirely new experience for him, either: he’d harvested

sunflowers when he was exiled to Vologda, where summer days were eighteen hours long and they'd had to work all eighteen of them.

The other members of the band, including Mendel, Leonid, Jozek, and Isidor, spread out into the village to do the various jobs that the mayor had identified: there were chicken coops to be repaired, more thatched roofs to fix, gardens to hoe. Once they had overcome the villagers' mistrust, they learned that there were also potatoes to be dug up, and it was the potatoes that served to cement a bond between the wandering Jews and the starving Polish peasants, at night, beneath the summer stars, sitting in the farmyard on the earth still warm from the sun.

8

July–August 1944

While the potatoes were boiling in the pot, and other potatoes were roasting in the embers, the mayor looked around, studying the strangers' faces in the reddish light of the fire. Next to him in the circle was his wife, broad-faced, with high cheekbones and an impassive expression. She wasn't looking at the Gedalists; she looked at her husband, as if she were afraid for him, wanted to protect him, and at the same time prevent him from saying something imprudent.

"You're Jews," the old man said suddenly, in a calm voice. His wife spoke rapidly into his ear, and he replied to her:

"Calm down, Seweryna; you never let me talk."

"This one's a Russian," said Gedale, pointing to Pyotr. "The rest of us are Jews, Russian and Polish Jews. How did you recognize us?"

"From your eyes," said the mayor. "There were Jews who lived among us, and their eyes were just like yours."

"What are our eyes like?" asked Mendel.

"They're uneasy. Like the eyes of hunted animals."

"We aren't hunted animals anymore," said Line. "Many of our people died fighting. Our enemies are your enemies, the same ones who destroyed your houses."

The mayor fell silent for a few minutes, chewing his ration of potatoes, then said:

"Girl, things aren't so simple here. In this village, for instance, the Jews and the Poles lived together for I don't know how many centuries, but they never really got along. The Poles labored on the land, while the Jews were

artisans and merchants, collecting taxes for the landlords, and the priest in church told us it was the Jews who sold Christ and crucified Him. We never shed their blood, but when the Germans came in 1939, and the first thing they did was to start stripping the Jews of their possessions, mocking them, beating them, and locking them up in ghettos, I have to tell you the truth—”

Here Seweryna broke in again, whispering something into her husband’s ear, but he shook her off and went on.

“. . . I have to tell you the truth, we were happy about it, and I was happy about it, too. We didn’t like the Germans, either, but we assumed that they’d come to do justice, or anyway to take the Jews’ money away from them and give it to us.”

“So were the Jews of Zborz really that rich?” asked Gedale.

“Everybody said they were. They were shabbily dressed, but people said that that was just because they were misers. And people said other things as well: that the Jews were Bolsheviks, that they wanted to collectivize the land, just like in Russia, and kill all the priests.”

“But that makes no sense!” Line broke in. “How could they be simultaneously rich, misers, and Bolsheviks?”

“Yes, it does make sense. One Pole said that all the Jews are rich, and another Pole said that they’re all Communists. And yet another Pole said that one Jew is rich, and another one is a Communist. You see that it’s no simple matter. But things got even more complicated later, when the Germans gave rifles to the Ukrainians so that they could help massacre the Jews, but instead the Ukrainians shot us and took our livestock, and when the Russian partisans started disarming and taking away the Polish partisans. I changed my mind about you people when I saw with my own eyes what the Germans did to the Jews of Opatów.”

“What did they do?” asked Mendel.

“They dragged them out of the ghetto and locked them all up in the movie theater: even the children, the old people, and the dying, more than two thousand of them in a movie theater that would seat five hundred. Seven days without giving them any food or water, and they shot at those among us who felt pity and tried to hand them something through the windows; and they also shot others among us who took them water but demanded their last pennies in exchange. Then they opened the doors and ordered them to come out. Only a hundred or so emerged alive, and they killed them in the square, and ordered us to bury them all, the ones in the

square and the ones who were still in the movie theater. Well, when I saw children who'd died like that, I started to understand that the Jews are people like us, and that the Germans would eventually do to us what they'd done to them; but I have to tell you the truth, not everyone has understood that. And I'm telling you these things because when a person makes a mistake it is right for that person to acknowledge his error, and also because you harvested the rye and gathered the potatoes."

"Mayor," said Gedale, "the things you've told us aren't new, but we have new things to tell you. Perhaps we seem strange to you: you should know that a living Jew is a strange Jew. You should know that what you saw in Opatów happened everywhere the Germans got a foothold, in Poland, Russia, France, and Greece. And you should also know that if the Germans kill one out of every five Poles with weapons or hunger, they don't leave one Jew alive."

"None of this is news, the things that you tell me. We don't have a radio, but the news gets to us all the same. We know what the Germans have done, and what they continue to do, here and everywhere."

"You don't know everything. There are other things, so horrible that you wouldn't believe them: and yet they're happening not far from here. The only ones of us who will survive are the ones who've chosen our path."

"I noticed this right away, too. That you people are armed."

"Was that from our eyes, too?" Gedale asked, laughing.

"No, not from your eyes, from the fact that the left shoulder of all your jackets is shiny from the rifle strap. Please, let me ask you, for the sake of your God, for the sake of ours and all the saints, don't attack the Germans here. Move along, go where you want, but don't make trouble here, otherwise it will be pointless for you to have done anything for us. Why don't you just hide in the woods and wait for the Russians to arrive? They're not that far now, they may already be right outside Lublin; when the wind is blowing the right way, you can hear the sound of their artillery."

"Things aren't so simple with us, either," said Gedale. "We're Jews and we're Russians and we're partisans. As Russians, we'd like to wait for the front to pass, then get some rest, and go try to find our homes, but our homes are gone now, and so are our families; and if we did go back, maybe no one would want us, like when you pull a wedge out of a log, and the gap in the wood closes up. As partisans, we fight a war different from the soldiers', and you know it; we don't fight on a front, we fight behind the

enemy's back. And as Jews we have a long road ahead of us. What would you do, mayor, if you found yourself all alone, a thousand kilometers from your home, and you knew that your town, and your fields, and your family no longer existed?"

"I'm an old man, and I think I'd hang myself from a rafter. But if I were younger I'd go to America. That's what my brother did, but he's braver than me, and more farsighted."

"You said it; there are Jews who have relatives in America, and who wish to join them. But no one in this band has relatives in America: our America isn't that far away. We're going to fight until the end of the war, because we believe that waging war is a horrible thing, but that killing Nazis is the most just thing that a person can do these days on the face of the earth; and then we'll go to Palestine, and we'll try to build the homes that we've lost, and start to live again, the way other people live. That's why we're not going to stay here, and we're going to continue westward—to stay behind the Germans, and to find our path toward our America."

When they finished the potatoes, Gedalists and peasants went to sleep; the only ones left in the farmyard were Gedale, Mendel, Line, the mayor, and his wife. The mayor sat staring into the embers with a rapt expression, then he said, "What are you going to do in Palestine?"

"We're going to farm the land," said Line. "In Palestine the land will belong to us."

"Are you going to be peasants?" the mayor asked. "It's a good thing you're going far away from here, but it's a bad idea to become peasants. Being peasants is hard."

"We'll go live like all other people," said Line, who had laid her hand on Mendel's arm. Mendel added, "We'll do all the work there is to do."

". . . except collecting taxes for the landlords," Gedale added. The wind had dropped, you could see fireflies dancing around the edges of the farmyard, and in the silence of the night they discovered that the old man had been telling the truth: from far away, from some unidentified point, perhaps from a number of different points, came the subdued rumble of the front, full of hope and menace. The mayor got laboriously to his feet and said it was time to go to sleep now:

"I'm glad I met you. I'm glad you harvested for us. I'm glad I talked with you as friends, but I'm also glad that you're leaving."

It had been easier to maintain contact and gather news from the rest of the world in the marshes and forests of Polesie than it was in the densely inhabited land through which Gedale's band moved in August of 1944. To move only by night and avoid inhabited areas had become a strict rule, but, even though they adopted these obvious precautions, every street to be crossed and especially every bridge constituted a risk and a challenge. The district was swarming with Germans: no longer just their increasingly unreliable and demoralized collaborators but authentic Germans, from the army and the police, in all the towns, frantically coming and going along the streets and railroad lines. The Russians had broken through at Lublin, crossed the Vistula near Sandomierz, and established a strong bridgehead on the river's left bank, and the Germans were preparing a counterattack.

Contacts with the peasants, so necessary to obtaining supplies, had been reduced to a strict minimum; Gedale didn't want to be talked about, nor, for that matter, did the peasants, who were terrorized and disoriented, wish to talk. In these conditions, paradoxically, the main sources of information were newspapers, found on rare occasions in farmhouses, more often recovered, tattered and filthy, from dumps, occasionally purchased recklessly by Jozek at a newsstand. From newspapers they had learned that the Allies, after landing in Normandy, were advancing on Paris; that on July 20 an assassination attempt on Hitler had been unsuccessful; that there had been an uprising in Warsaw (the *Völkischer Beobachter* minimized the event, mentioning "traitors, subversives, and bandits"). But they'd learned other news as well, and this did not come from newspapers. Behind the lines, there were all sorts of people, not only Germans, and, like the Gedalists, many of them avoided the light of day: they were Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Tartars from the German auxiliary corps who had sniffed the wind and had deserted, and were now living underground, as black marketeers or as bandits; they were partisans from the various Polish formations who had lost touch with their units and had found shelter with peasants. Moreover, there were professional smugglers, highway robbers, and spies for the Germans and the Russians who concealed themselves under the garb of all the categories mentioned above. From these people Gedale had received confirmation of the rumors that he'd heard earlier, and which he'd mentioned to the mayor of Zborz: the Germans had dismantled their first death camps, Treblinka, Sobibór, Belzec, Majdanek, and

Chelmno, but had replaced them with just one, which matched them all, and where they had profited from the experience of all the others—Auschwitz, in Upper Silesia. Here they had killed and burned Poles and Russians and prisoners from all over Europe, but especially Jews; and now they were exterminating, train by train, all the Jews of Hungary. Finally, the Gedalists learned an unsettling piece of news from a Ukrainian deserter: the bands of Russian partisans, who had been air-dropped behind the lines or who had escaped from German concentration camps, were not all behaving the same way. Some commanders had liberated Jewish labor camps, saving and protecting the survivors that they'd found there, and offering to take them into their ranks. Others, in contrast, had attempted to break up by force groups of Jewish partisans they'd encountered in the forest: there had been fighting and killing. Other Jews had been disarmed or killed by more or less regular units of Polish partisans.

"They'll accept us as martyrs: perhaps, afterward, they'll erect monuments to us in the ghettos, but as allies they won't accept us," said Dov.

"We'll make our own way," said Gedale, "and decide what to do in each situation, moment by moment."

The moment to decide came soon. Mendel, along with Dov and Line, understood that crossing the Polish border had brought about a profound shift in Gedale's plans, or really in the nature of his improvisations. He felt farther from Russia, and not only physically: more vulnerable, more independent, more threatened, but also freer. In short, more responsible. Once again, around August 20, he left the band, but he didn't bring back gifts nor had he made any purchases. Contrary to his habit, which was to make decisions in chaotic assemblies, he immediately secluded himself with Dov, Mendel, and Line, who had never seen him so tense. He got right to the point: "Twenty kilometers from here there's a concentration camp, near Chmielnik. It's not one of the bigger ones: there are only a hundred and twenty prisoners, all of them Jews except for the Kapos. They all work in a plant not far away, where they make precision equipment for the air force. . . ."

"How do you know these things?" asked Mendel.

"I know them. Now the front is getting closer, the plant will be moved to Germany, and all the prisoners will be killed because they know certain secrets. They don't know whether they'll be killed there or somewhere else:

they got a message out, they'd like to attempt a revolt if they knew they'd be supported. They say that there aren't many Germans guarding them, ten or twelve."

"Do the prisoners have weapons?"

"They don't mention them, so they must not have any."

"Let's go see," said Dov. "We can't do much, but we can go take a look."

"Yes, but not all of us," said Gedale. "We'd be too obvious. This is the first time we've split up, but here is where we're going to have to split up. Six of us can go: we'll have to count on the element of surprise—without that, we won't achieve anything, even if there were thirty of us."

"Can we send them an answer?" Line asked.

"No, we can't. It would be too dangerous, for them as well as for us. We have to go there: leave immediately."

"The four of us and who else?" Line asked again, apparently anxious to burn her bridges behind her.

Gedale hesitated. "Not Dov: Dov should stay with the bulk of the band. There are no ranks in our organization, but he's the de facto deputy commander. And he has more experience than any of us."

Dov showed no emotion, either in words or with the expression on his face, but it was clear to Mendel that those weren't the reasons Gedale was leaving him out, and that Dov himself had understood the real reasons and was saddened by them.

"The three of us, Pyotr, Mottel, and Arie," Mendel suggested.

"Not Arie—he's lame and he has no military experience," said Gedale.

"But he's good with a knife!"

"Mottel's better than he is. Arie is still too much of a child, I don't want him. I want Leonid."

Mendel and Line, nonplussed, both spoke at the same time:

"But Leonid isn't . . . Leonid's not well. He's in no shape to fight."

"Leonid needs to fight. He needs it the way he needs bread and the air that he breathes. And we need him: he was held prisoner by the Germans, so he knows what a concentration camp looks like from the inside. He's a paratrooper, he's had the training, he has experience in sabotage and commando operations. And he's brave: he proved that recently."

"It was a strange way to prove it," said Line.

“All he needs is to be made part of a group and to be given clear orders,” said Gedale with uncharacteristic harshness. “Believe me when I say it. In Kosava we had others like him, and I know what I’m talking about.”

With those words he got to his feet, indicating that the conversation was finished. Dov and Line moved away; to Mendel, who had stayed behind, Gedale said: “You go get ready, too, watchmaker. I have experience in this sort of thing: for desperate enterprises you need desperate men.”

“Desperate enterprises shouldn’t be undertaken at all,” said Mendel. But as he was about to go get ready, as Gedale had ordered, Gedale laid a hand on his shoulder and gave him a light pat, saying, “Ah, Mendel, I’m familiar with your wisdom. Mine is no different, but here it’s out of place. It might have applied a hundred years ago, and it will apply again a hundred years from now, but here it’s as useful as last year’s snow.”

They left in darkness. All six of them were strong hikers, they carried no burden except their weapons, and even their weapons weren’t very heavy: they only wished they were. All the same, it took five or six hours to reach the outskirts of Chmielnik, because none of them were familiar with the countryside, and because they had to avoid roads and inhabited areas. By the light of dawn the town looked dreary, black with smoke and coal dust, surrounded by a horizon of low hills, piles of coal and slag, smokestacks and industrial sheds. They wasted more time looking for the concentration camp; the directions that Gedale had received were sketchy, and the town seemed to be dotted with concentration camps, or at least barbed-wire enclosures. “It’s all one big prison,” Line murmured to Mendel, who was walking right behind her. She had taken advantage of a moment in which Leonid wasn’t walking between them; whether by chance or intentionally, throughout that entire march Leonid had always found a way of walking between Mendel and Line, though without ever speaking to either of them. He walked briskly, and seemed tense and determined.

They found the factory before they found the concentration camp; in fact, it was the factory that pointed the way. Surrounded as it was by all those old kilns, tar distilleries, shed roofs covering scrap heaps, and blackened foundries, it stood out because it was large, new, and clean: they saw from a distance that there was a guard booth next to the front gate. The concentration camp couldn’t be far away, and they found it just three kilometers farther along, concealed in a hollow. It was different from the

other enclosures that they had seen. It had a double barbed-wire fence, with a broad corridor between the two enclosures of metal wire; the barracks were painted with camouflage. There were four of them, not particularly large, on each of the four sides of an open area. From the center of the open area a column of black smoke rose into the sky. Outside the wire fences, there were two wooden guard towers and a small white house.

"Let's get closer," said Gedale. The hilly amphitheater surrounding the concentration camp was wooded, and they were able to approach without danger. They inched cautiously down; they ran into a rusty barbed-wire fence, followed it for a distance, and spotted a plank guard booth. The door was open, and there was no one inside: "Just cigarette butts," said Mottel, who had gone in to take a look around. It wasn't hard to cut the barbed wire; the six of them continued to climb downhill, then suddenly they froze. The wind had shifted, the smoke was blowing toward them, and they had all caught the odor at the same instant: burning flesh. "It's over. We got here too late," said Gedale. From where they were now it was possible to make out details more clearly: the column of smoke was coming from a pyre, around which some men were working, not many, perhaps ten.

Mendel let the machine gun he was gripping in one hand slide to the ground, and he himself slid down until he was sitting amid the bushes. He felt oppressed by a wave of weariness unlike anything he could ever remember experiencing. The weariness of a thousand years, accompanied by nausea, rage, and horror. Rage concealed and overwhelmed by horror. Icy, impotent rage, now with no fire from which to draw heat and the will to resist. A desire to stop resisting, to dissolve in smoke, in that smoke. And shame and astonishment: astonishment that his comrades were still standing, weapons in hand, and that they could find voices with which to speak to one another; but their voices came to him as if from a great distance, through the cushion of his nausea.

"They're in a hurry, the bastards," said Gedale. "They've left. They don't want to leave any traces."

Pyotr said, "They can't all have left. Some must have stayed behind, to oversee this work, and we need to kill them." Pyotr is the best one, thought Mendel, hearing his tranquil voice. The only real soldier. I wish I could be Pyotr. Good man, Pyotr. He felt Line looking at him and got to his feet.

"Probably six of them stayed behind," said Leonid, who was speaking for the first time since they left.

“Why six?” asked Gedale.

“Two guard towers, and three for each tower, each standing a shift. That’s how the Germans do things.” But Mottel and Line, who had the sharpest eyes, said that things might be different: from that distance it was possible to see clearly the little balcony atop the guard towers, and the machine guns aiming down into the concentration camp were gone now. What would a sentry stay behind to accomplish without a machine gun?

“They must be in the house. One guard is enough to supervise the work on the pyre,” said Mottel.

“Certainly, there can’t be many of them left, standing guard over a demobilized camp. We’ll attack them tonight, no matter how many of them there are,” said Gedale. “We’ll see whether they go on with the work at night as well, but I doubt it. We’ll decide accordingly.”

Mendel said, “However we might attack them, the first thing they’ll do is to kill those who are working on the pyre. They want to make sure those people don’t talk.”

“It doesn’t matter whether they’re killed,” said Line.

“Why not?” said Mendel. “They’re people just like us.”

“They’re not like us anymore. They’ll never be able to look themselves in the eye again. They’d be better off dead.” Gedale told Line that it wasn’t up to her to decide the fate of those miserable wretches, and Pyotr told them that they were all talking nonsense. Reluctantly, they ate the small amount of food that they had brought and then prepared to await nightfall; by sunset the bonfire had gone out, but the prisoners were not moved into the house.

They spent a few hours lying on the ground, in an unquiet halt that was neither slumber nor rest. Mendel felt a strange sense of relief when Pyotr said, “Let’s go.” A twofold sense of relief: because the waiting was over, and because the order had come from Pyotr. In spite of the wartime blackout, the house and the concentration camp were lit up by searchlights. Leonid said that the camp in Smolensk, from which he had escaped in January of 1943, was also lit up at night: the Germans were more afraid of escape attempts than of enemy bombing raids. There was only one sentinel, guarding both the house and the camp: he walked a figure eight around the two, at regular intervals, but sometimes in one direction, at other times in the opposite direction. “Go,” Pyotr said to Mottel.

Mottel went down silently and took up a position in the shadows, behind the gate to the house; the five others drew to within thirty or so

meters. The sentinel seemed sleepy; he walked with a slow step until he was practically in front of Mottel, then he bent down, perhaps to tie a shoe, and resumed his rounds in the opposite direction. He walked around the concentration camp, vanished behind the house, and wasn't seen again; instead, Mottel appeared. He had emerged from his hiding place and was waving them forward. They all turned to Gedale with questioning looks, Gedale looked at Pyotr, and Pyotr, too, waved to them to go down. Pyotr was the first to move out: he was holding an Italian hand grenade, one of those attack explosives that produce more noise than damage, but just then the Gedalists had nothing else. Pyotr moved closer to the house, which had three windows on the ground floor, protected by metal grates. Pyotr moved over to the first window, and gestured for Gedale and Line to move over to the other two; he positioned Mendel and Leonid behind a hedge, in front of the main door. Then, slipping the butt of his machine gun through the metal grating, he smashed the glass of the window, tossed in the hand grenade, and bent over; Line and Gedale did the same with the other two windows. There were only two explosions: for some reason Gedale's grenade didn't go off. Gedale tossed in a second grenade, then he, Line, Pyotr, and Mottel ran over to take up positions behind the hedge that surrounded the house: it was a low myrtle hedge, and they were all forced practically to lie down.

For a few seconds nothing happened; then they heard the rattling of an automatic weapon. Someone was firing bursts, blindly, down the hallway of the house and out the door. Mendel flattened himself to the ground, and heard bullets whistle through the air right over his head. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Leonid jump to his feet. "Get down!" he hissed, trying to hold him back: but Leonid got away from him, leaped over the hedge, fired an answering burst and lunged, head lowered, toward the door. A single isolated shot came from the house and Leonid fell forward across the threshold.

Two or three more bursts of gunfire came out the door. Mendel, without getting to his feet, moved along the hedge; it was obvious that the German was firing from the far end of the hallway, because the bullets were punching through the hedge in a narrow fan shape. Mendel, from the position he'd taken, was out of range, but it also meant that the German was out of range of his weapon. Mendel still had two hand grenades: he yanked the safety on one and hurled it over his head toward the door. The grenade went off just beyond Leonid's body, and the German came out with his

hands up: he was an SS Scharführer, or squad leader. He didn't seem to be wounded, and he was looking around, his lips drawn back to reveal his teeth. "Don't move," Mendel shouted at him in German. "Keep your hands up. I've got you covered." As he was speaking, he saw Line pass through the hedge, a ridiculously diminutive figure in oversized military garb; calmly, and showing no signs of haste or fear, she walked around behind the German, pulled open his holster, extracted the pistol, put it in her pocket, and went back to Mendel.

Gedale and Pyotr had also gotten to their feet. Gedale spoke briefly with Pyotr, then asked the German:

"How many of you are there?"

"Five; four inside, and one standing sentry."

"What happened to the three inside?"

"One of them is certainly dead. I don't know about the others."

"Let's go see," Gedale said to Pyotr and Mendel. They left the German under Line and Mottel's guard and went around the house, peering in through the windows.

"Wait," said Pyotr. He pulled off his jacket, tied the sleeves together so that it was a bundle roughly the size of a man's head, slipped it over the muzzle of his machine gun, and held it up in front of the metal grating, shouting loudly, "Who goes there?" No one answered, nor was there any sign of life. "It's all right," said Pyotr. He put his jacket back on and walked into the house. From outside they could hear his footsteps, followed by a single gunshot. Pyotr came back out:

"Two of them were already dead; the third was dying."

The bullet had gone clean through Leonid's chest: he must have been killed instantly. The sentry killed by Mottel lay in a pool of blood, his throat cut. Mottel showed off his notorious knife: "If you want to keep someone from screaming, that's how you do it," he told Mendel with serious professionalism; "you cut fast, right here, under the chin." Only then did they notice that someone had been watching the fight: ten or so human figures had emerged from the concentration camp's barracks, drawn by the din of blasts and gunfire, and now they were standing in silence, watching, from behind the barbed-wire fence.

By the light of the searchlights they appeared wan, tattered in their gray-and-light-blue striped outfits, their faces black with smoke, ill shaven. "We need to liberate them, kill the German, and go," said Pyotr. Gedale nodded

his head in agreement. Mottel moved closer to the fence, but Mendel held him back: “Wait: it might be an electric fence.” He moved closer and saw that between the fence posts and the wire there were no insulators. He wanted to make even more certain: he looked around, found a piece of concrete rebar, stuck it into the ground near the fence, and then pushed the end of it against the wires with a piece of wood. Nothing happened; Mottel and Pyotr used the butts of their rifles to tear a breach in the fence. The ten prisoners were hesitant about emerging.

“Come out,” said Gedale. “We’ve killed them all, except for this one here.”

“Who are you?” one of them, tall and bent, asked.

“Jewish partisans,” Gedale replied. He tipped his head toward the pyre and added, “We got here too late. Who are you?”

“You can see for yourself,” the tall prisoner replied. “There were a hundred and twenty of us, we worked for the Luftwaffe. They set us aside, the ten of us, and killed all the others. They set us aside to do this work. My name is Goldner, I was an engineer. I’m from Berlin.” The other prisoners had come over, but they were standing behind Goldner and remained silent.

“What can you tell me about that guy over there?” asked Gedale, pointing to the German with his hands up.

“Kill him immediately. It doesn’t matter how you do it. Don’t let him speak. He was the leader; he was the one who gave the orders, and he fired, too, from the guard tower. He enjoyed it. Kill him immediately.”

“Do you want to kill him yourself?” asked Gedale. “No,” Goldner replied.

Gedale seemed undecided. Then he went over to the German, who was still standing with his hands up, covered by Line and Mottel’s guns, and quickly searched his clothing and pockets. “You can put your hands down. Give me your dog tag.”

The German fiddled with the chain, but he couldn’t open the clasp; Pyotr came over, tore it off his neck with a jerk, and handed it to Gedale, who pocketed it. Gedale said:

“We’re Jews. I’m not sure why I’m telling you that, it doesn’t change much, but we want you to know it. I had a friend who used to write songs. You took him prisoner, and you gave him half an hour so he could write his last one. It wasn’t you, was it? You don’t write songs.”

The German shook his head no.

“This is the first time that I’ve talked to one of you,” Gedale went on. “If we set you free what would you do?”

The German straightened at the waist: “Enough of this nonsense. Do it fast and do it clean.” Gedale took a step back and lifted his weapon, then he lowered it again and said to Mottel: “The uniform can come in handy. You take care of it.” Mottel shoved the German inside the house and took care of it, fast and clean.

“Let’s go,” said Gedale, but Line asked: “Aren’t we going to leave our signature?” Everyone looked at her in bafflement. The young woman insisted: “We need to say that it was us: otherwise it’s meaningless.”

Pyotr was opposed: “It would be foolish and a pointless risk.” Gedale and Mendel weren’t sure. “We who?” asked Mendel. “The six of us? Or the whole band? Or all those who—” but Mottel cut off the discussion. He ran to the pyre, picked up a piece of charcoal, and wrote on the house’s white plaster wall five large Hebrew letters: VNTNV.

“What did you write?” Pyotr asked.

“‘*V’natnu*,’ ‘And they will give.’ You see, you can read it from right to left and from left to right: it means that everyone can give and everyone can give back.”

“Will they understand?” Pyotr asked.

“They’ll understand as much as they need to,” Mottel replied.

“Come with us,” Gedale said to Goldner, but his voice lacked conviction.

“Each of us can make his own choice,” said Goldner, “but I’m not coming. We’re not like you, we’re not comfortable with other people.”

The ten prisoners conferred for a moment, then they told Gedale that they all agreed with Goldner, except for one. They would wait for the Russians, hiding in the forest or in the ruins of the villages. The one who said he was willing to come with the Gedalists was a young man from Budapest. He set off with the five who, though weighed down by their new weapons, still marched briskly, but after walking for half an hour he sank down and sat on a rock. He said that he’d rather go back to the other nine.

Mendel hadn’t dreamed in a long time: he couldn’t remember when he had last had a dream; perhaps it was before the war broke out. That night,

perhaps because he was tired from the tension and the march, he had a strange dream. He was back in Strelka, in his small watchmaker's workshop, the one he had built for himself in a closet in his home; it was cramped, but in the dream it was even more so, Mendel couldn't even spread his elbows to work. All the same he was working: before him were dozens of clocks, all of them stopped, and broken, and he was repairing one, with his watchmaker's loup screwed into his eye socket and a tiny screwdriver in one hand. Two men came looking for him, and ordered him to follow them; Rivke was against his going, she was furious and afraid, but he went with them all the same. They led him down a staircase, or perhaps it was a mine shaft, and then through a long tunnel. The ceiling was painted black and many clocks were hanging on the walls. These clocks weren't stopped. You could hear them ticking, but each one showed a different time, and some were actually running backward; Mendel felt vaguely guilty about this. Coming down the tunnel toward him was a man in civilian dress, with a tie and a disdainful air; he was asking him who he was, and Mendel didn't know what to reply: he could no longer remember his name, or where he was born, nothing at all.

Dov woke him up, and he also woke up Line, who was sleeping at his side. As so often happens after a deep sleep, Mendel had a hard time recognizing where he was. Then he remembered that the night before the band had taken shelter in the cellar of an abandoned glassworks: the ceiling was black, like the one in his dream. Bella and Sissl had made soup, and they were distributing it. Gedale was already awake, telling Dov how the mission had gone:

". . . the best were Pyotr and Mottel. And Line, yes, of course. Here's the uniform, with insignia and everything—nicely ironed, even."

"Do you think we can use it?" asked Dov.

"No, that's too dangerous a game. We'll sell it: Jozek can take care of it."

Jozek was noisily spooning his soup next to Pavel, Pyotr, and Rokhele the White. ". . . but it was the Sabbath," said Pavel. "After the sun sets on Friday night, it's already the Sabbath. Isn't it a sin to kill on the Sabbath?"

Rokhele was on pins and needles. "Killing is always a sin."

"Even when you kill an SS officer?" Pavel asked, provoking her.

"Even then. Or maybe not: an SS officer is like a Philistine, and Samson killed them. He was a hero because he killed Philistines."

“But maybe he didn’t kill them on the Sabbath,” said Jozek.

“Well, I couldn’t say. Why do you keep tormenting me? My husband would have known what to say to you. He was a rabbi, and you’re all ignorant unbelievers.”

“What happened to your husband?” asked Pyotr.

“They killed him. He was the first one they killed in our town. They forced him to spit on the Torah and then they killed him.”

“And wasn’t it a member of the SS who killed him?”

“Certainly. He had a death’s-head on his cap.”

“Well, there, you see?” Pyotr concluded. “If Mottel had killed him long ago, your husband would still be alive.” Rokhele said nothing and walked away; Pyotr looked at Pavel with an inquisitive gaze, and Pavel raised both arms slightly and dropped them again.

“And no one talks about him,” Mendel said to Line.

“About who?”

“About Leonid. No one thinks about him anymore. Not even Gedale, and yet he was the one who insisted on sending him. Look at them: it’s as if nothing had happened yesterday.”

The distribution of soup was over; in one corner of the cellar Isidor, equipped with Bella’s scissors, was trimming hair and beard for anyone who wished it. The customers waited in line, sitting on stacks of bricks. The last in line was Gedale; to kill time, he’d taken out his violin, and he was playing a song, faintly, to avoid being heard from outside. It was a comic song that everyone knew, about a miracle-working rabbi who made a blind man run, a deaf man see, and a lame man hear, and in the last verse he walks fully dressed into the water to emerge, miraculously, wet. Even as Isidor went on with his work, he laughed and sang along to the music under his breath; Rokhele the Black, too, sang along softly; she had asked Isidor to cut her hair short like Line’s, and just then she was under the barber’s scissors.

“Gedale has many faces,” said Line. “That’s why it’s so hard to understand him—because there’s not just one Gedale. He tosses everything behind him. The Gedale of today tosses the Gedale of yesterday behind him.”

“He even tossed Leonid behind him,” said Mendel. “But why did he want him to go on the mission at all costs, instead of Arie? I’ve been asking myself that since yesterday.”

“Maybe he did it with good intentions. He wanted to give him a chance; he thought that fighting would do him good, would help him to find himself again. Or else he wanted to test him.”

“I have another idea,” said Mendel. “I think that Gedale didn’t know he wanted it, but he wanted something else. That deep down he wanted to get rid of him. Before we set out, he practically told me so.”

“What did he say to you?”

“That for desperate enterprises you need desperate men.”

Line said nothing, chewing her fingernails. Then she asked, “Did Gedale know why Leonid was desperate?”

Mendel, too, remained silent for a long time, then he said, “I don’t know if he knew. Probably he did, he must have guessed, Gedale finds things out by sniffing the air, he has no need of evidence, no need to ask questions.” He was sitting on a block of rubble, and with his heel he was drawing signs on the packed-earth floor. Then he added, “It wasn’t the German who killed Leonid, and it wasn’t Gedale, either.”

“Then who did?”

“The two of us.”

Line said, “Let’s go sing with them.”

Three or four others had gathered around Gedale, and to the tune of his violin they were singing other happy songs, about weddings and nights at the tavern. Pyotr was trying to follow the rhythm and to imitate the harsh breathings of the Yiddish, laughing like a child.

“I don’t want to sing,” said Mendel. “I don’t want anything, I don’t know who Gedale is anymore, I don’t know what I want or where I am anymore, and maybe I don’t even know who I am anymore. Last night I dreamed that someone was asking me who I was, and I didn’t know what to say.”

“You can’t treat dreams as if they’re important,” Line said, brusquely. At that moment, Izu, the fisherman of the Gorin, who was standing guard outside, raced down the cone of rubble that led into the cellar:

“Have you lost your minds? Or are you drunk? You can hear everything out there: are you really determined to bring the police down on you?”

Gedale apologized like a schoolboy caught red-handed, and put away his violin. “Everyone come here,” he said. “We have a few things to decide. In June I told you that we’re no longer orphans or stray dogs. That remains the case; but we’re about to get a new master, or if you prefer, we’re about to get a new father. We are part of a vast family, under arms, fighting against the Germans from Norway to Greece. In this family, there are disagreements. There is much discussion about what is to be done once Hitler has been hanged, where the borders are going to run, who the land is going to belong to and who the factories are going to belong to. This family includes Iosif Vissarionovich, that’s right, Arie’s cousin. He may be the firstborn, but he can’t come to an agreement with Churchill about what color Poland should be painted; Stalin wants red, while Churchill has another color in mind, and the Poles have yet another; in fact, to hear them all, five or six different colors. The Poles aren’t all like the puppets of the NSZ; they’re hard-fighting partisans eager to take on the Germans, but they don’t trust the Russians, and they don’t trust us, either.

“We are weak and few in number. The Russians are no longer particularly interested in what we do, now that we’ve crossed the border. They’re going to let us go our way; but our way is exactly what we need to talk about.”

“I’m no cousin of Stalin’s,” said Arie, offended. “He’s nothing more than a compatriot of mine. And, as far as I’m concerned, there’s only one way to go: shoot at the Germans as long as there’s even one left standing, and then go to the land of Israel to plant trees.”

“On that point, I think we’re all in agreement,” said Gedale. “Not you, Dov? Fine, excuse me, we’ll talk it over later; what I wanted to tell you now is that we have a source of support, or at least a compass to guide us, an arrow pointing the way. We are not alone in these woods. There are men here whom everyone respects: they are the ones who fought in the ghettos just as we did, in Warsaw, in Vilna, in the Ninth Fort of Kovno, and the ones who had the courage to mutiny against the Nazis in Treblinka and Sobibór. They are no longer isolated: they’ve joined together into the ZOB, the Jewish Combat Organization, the first such group with the courage to call itself that before the world since Titus destroyed the Temple. They are respected, but they are neither wealthy nor numerous; and the fact that they’re respected doesn’t mean that they’re strong: they have neither fortresses nor airplanes nor artillery. They have few weapons and little

money, but with what little they have they have already helped us and will continue to do so. We will preserve our independence, because we fought for it and earned it, but we'll take into account the instructions they give us. The most important one is this: our path runs through Italy. Once the front has moved past us, if we're still alive, and if we're still a band, we'll try to make our way to Italy, because Italy is like a springboard. That doesn't mean, however, that it will be easy."

"Once Hitler is dead, all ways will become easy," said Jozek.

"They'll be easier than they are now, but they won't be all that easy. The English will do everything they can to hinder us, because the last thing they want to do is make enemies of the Arabs in Palestine; the Russians, on the other hand, will help us, because the English are in Palestine, and Stalin will be eager to find ways of weakening them, because he is jealous of their empire. From Italy, already, clandestine ships are setting sail for the land of Israel; some of them make it through, others are stopped, and those who stop them are not the Germans but the English."

"What if someone tries to stop us?" asked Line.

"That's the point," said Gedale. "No one can say when and how the war will end, but it may well be that we'll need our weapons again. It may be that this band, and other bands like ours, will have to go on fighting even after the rest of the world has returned to peace. That is why God has chosen us among all other peoples, as our rabbis say. That is what I wanted to tell you. Dov, you asked to speak? I'm done; go ahead."

Dov was brief: "To get across the front while war is raging is impossible, especially for a single man, but if it were possible I'd already have done it. Forgive me, friends, but I'm forty-six years old. I'll stay with you as long as I can be useful, but when the Russians catch up with us I'll go with them. I was born in Siberia and I'll return to Siberia; out there, there's been no war, and my house is probably still standing. I may have enough strength to work, but I no longer feel like fighting. And the Siberians don't call you 'Jew' and they don't force you to shout, 'Long live Stalin.'"

"You do as you see fit, Dov," said Gedale. "Hitler is still alive, and it's too early to make certain decisions. You are still useful to us. What do you want, Pyotr?"

Pyotr, to whom Gedale had entrusted the commando operation against the concentration camp, and who had conducted it with intelligence and

courage, got to his feet like a schoolboy being examined. Everyone laughed, and he sat back down and said, “I just wanted to know whether in this land of Israel where you want to go they’ll take me in, too.”

“They certainly will,” said Mottel. “I’ll provide you with a recommendation, and there will be no need for you to change your name or get yourself circumcised. Gedale was only kidding, that night in the windmill.”

Then Pavel’s loud voice was heard: “Trust me, Russian: the name doesn’t matter, but get yourself circumcised. Take advantage of the opportunity. It’s not so much a matter of the covenant with God: really, it’s more like how it is with an apple tree. If you prune an apple tree at the right time, then it will grow nice and straight and yield more apples.” Rokhele the Black let out a long nervous burst of laughter; Bella stood up red-faced and declared that she hadn’t walked all these kilometers and run all the risks she had to hear that kind of talk. Pyotr looked around, shy and confused.

Then Line spoke, serious as always. “Of course they’ll take you in, even without Mottel’s recommendation. But tell me: why do you want to come?”

“Eh,” Pyotr began, increasingly confused, “there are so many reasons. . . .” He raised one hand, pinkie extended, the way Russians do when they are starting to count. “First of all . . .”

“First of all?” Dov asked encouragingly.

“First of all, I’m a believer,” Pyotr said, with the relief of someone who’s found a topic.

“Got shenk mir an oysred!” said Mottel. Everyone burst out laughing, and Pyotr looked around, offended.

“What did you say?” he asked Mottel.

“It’s a figure of speech we have. It means: ‘Lord God, send me a good excuse.’ You aren’t trying to tell us that you want to be with us because you believe in Christ, are you? You’re a partisan and a Communist, and you act as if you believed deeply in Christ; after all, we don’t believe in Christ; in fact not all of us believe in God.”

Pyotr the believer swore a fervent oath in Russian and went on, “You are so good at making things complicated. Well, I don’t know how to explain this to you, but that’s exactly the way it is. I want to stay with you because I believe in Christ, and you can all go hang yourselves with your hairsplitting.” He stood up, looking hurt, and strode briskly toward the door as if he meant to leave, but then he came back.

“. . . and I have ten other reasons to stay with this band of idiots. Because I want to see the world. Because I had a fight with Ulybin. Because I’m a deserter, and if they catch me it will go badly with me. Because I fucked all your whoring mothers, and because—” At this point Dov went running straight at Pyotr as if he were about to attack him; instead he threw his arms around him, and the two men happily pounded each other on the back.

9

September 1944–January 1945

The front had come to a halt and the summer was drawing to an end. The land of the Poles, worn out by five years of warfare and ruthless occupation, seemed to have returned to the chaos of the beginning of creation. Warsaw had been destroyed: not just the ghetto this time but the entire city and, with it, the seeds of a peaceful independent Poland. Just as the Poles had allowed the ghetto uprising in the spring of 1943 to be suppressed, so now the Russians allowed the revolt in Warsaw, planned and supervised by the refugee Polish government in London, to be suppressed; let the Germans take care of punishing the hotheads, now as they had then. And the Germans took care of it; routed on every front of the war, they were instead victorious on the internal fronts, in their daily warfare against the partisans and the helpless civilian population.

From the capital, hordes of refugees spread out across the countryside, without bread and without a roof over their heads, terrified of German reprisals and raids. The Germans were starving not only for vengeance but also for strong labor: country and city folk, men, women, old people, and children, rounded up abruptly everywhere, were all set hastily to work, with shovel and pick, digging anti-tank ditches in the farmland that should have been plowed. Faithful to the Nazi genius for destruction, German wrecking squads dismantled and hauled away everything that could have proved useful to the advancing Red Army: train tracks, electric cables, railroad and tram equipment, lumber, iron, whole factories. The Polish partisans of the Home Army, the old recruits who had been fighting against the Germans ever since their lightning attack of 1939, and the others who had chosen life

in the forests either out of love for their own ravaged country or to avoid deportation, down to the last few who had fled Warsaw in its death throes, all went on fighting with desperate determination.

Gedale's band moved forward by short marches, alternating them with cautious diversionary actions. Gedale had no difficulty obtaining money and ammunition, but it was becoming more and more difficult to exchange cash for provisions. The semi-abandoned fields yielded practically nothing, and the little that was left to the peasants was regularly decimated by requisitions from the Germans or by only slightly less feared requisitions from authentic partisans or bandits who claimed to be partisans.

At the beginning of October, two of the men from Slonim, who had been scouting ahead, brought back reports that at the station of Tunel, on a siding, a freight train had been halted; in all likelihood it was transporting food. It was a long train, so long that its last few cars stretched back into the tunnel that had given the village its name; it was guarded only by the "bluecoats" of the Polish police. Gedale ordered the band to set up camp a kilometer away, near the railroad line, and at night he went to the station with Mendel, Mottel, and Arie. There were only two bluecoats, one a long way off, at the head of the train, and the other back at the tail; this second bluecoat was not inside the tunnel but, rather, outside its mouth, so that he couldn't see the last few boxcars. Gedale told the other three men to wait for him quietly and vanished into the darkness. He returned a few minutes later:

"No, Mottel, for once there is no need of your skills. All it took was a little money. Hurry, run to Dov and come back with four strong men."

Mottel set off, and came back twenty minutes later with Pavel and three others: eight in all, nine with the bluecoat at the end of the train, who helped them uncouple the last car. He had seen it being loaded: it contained potatoes and turnips for forage and it was being sent to the German command in Kraków. Once the car had been unhooked, all nine of them placed their shoulders against it and pushed, but it didn't move an inch. They tried again, with Gedale issuing the order to push in a low voice to make sure their efforts were coordinated, but nothing happened. "Wait," whispered the bluecoat, and moved away.

"Did you cast a spell on him?" Mendel asked in admiration.

"No," said Gedale. "Along with the money, I promised him some potatoes for his family, and I offered to take him with us. He lives not far

from here."

The Pole took some time coming back. Gedale's men watched uneasily for his return, by the faint bluish glow of the blacked-out platform lights. Across from the station they could just make out a field: unfamiliar roundish shapes lay scattered across the ground. Mottel, his curiosity pricked, went to see what they were; they were pumpkins, nothing interesting or dangerous about them. Silently, the Pole came back, carrying a tool that he called "the slipper." It was a long lever that ended in a wedge-shaped steel shoe; when you lowered the lever the shoe lifted a few millimeters. "It's designed to move railcars," he explained. "You have them in every freight yard. Once you get the cars moving, they'll continue on their own." He wrapped a rag around the slipper to keep it from making noise, slid it under one of the train wheels, and lowered the lever. The freight car moved, imperceptibly, then it stopped.

"Good," whispered Gedale. "How long is the tunnel?"

"Six hundred meters. A little farther on there's a switch; a spur line runs from there through the forest and leads to an abandoned foundry. You'd better run the car onto the spur line: you can unload it there without anyone seeing you. Shall we go?"

But Gedale had something else in mind. He sent four men to gather a dozen pumpkins and put them up on the poles that supported an electric power line, one pumpkin per pole.

"What are they for?" asked Mendel.

"Nothing," Gedale replied. "What they're for is to make the Germans wonder what they're for. We might have just wasted a couple of minutes; but the Germans are methodical, and they're going to waste a lot more time than that."

The bluecoat told them all to get ready and then he applied the slipper again: "All right now, push." The railcar moved again, and this time it continued, silent and exceedingly slowly.

"Farther along it'll go faster," said the Pole. "The spur line runs downhill." Gedale sent Arie ahead to alert the band that the freight car was coming: they should go to the spur line and be ready to unload.

"But it's ten tons of freight!" said Mottel. "How can we unload it all?"

Gedale seemed unconcerned. "Someone will help us. We'll keep only a part for ourselves, we'll give the rest of it to the peasants."

They emerged from the tunnel and found themselves in a bank of fog, with the early light of dawn filtering through it. They saw human figures emerge from the fog, six, twelve, more and more: too many to be the vanguard of the band. An energetic voice shouted in Polish: "*Stój*." A dozen armed men, in uniform, stood barring the train track. Taking advantage of the surprise, the bluecoat ran off, vanishing into the fog; Gedale and the others did their best to halt the rolling freight car, but it continued another ten meters or so until Mottel climbed up into the brakeman's cabin and activated the hand brake.

The same voice as before repeated, "*Stój!*" this time reinforcing the order with a short burst of submachine-gun fire, and then added, "*Rece do góry!* Hands up!" Gedale obeyed, and after him so did all the others: they were armed only with handguns and knives, they had left their automatic weapons with the rest of the band. It was pointless even to think of offering resistance.

A slender young man stepped forward, with a serious face and regular features. He wore round wire-rimmed eyeglasses.

"Who is your leader?"

"I am," Gedale replied.

"Who are you? Where are you taking that freight car?"

"We're Jewish partisans; some of us are Russian, others are Polish. We come from far away. We took the freight car from the Germans."

"You'll have to prove that you're partisans. In any case, we're in charge of this district."

"You who?"

"We, the Armia Krajowa, the Polish Home Army. Come with us. If you try to escape, we'll shoot you."

"Lieutenant, we'll come with you and we won't try to escape; but before long the Germans will be here. Isn't it a pity to give them this freight car full of potatoes?"

"The Germans won't come here, or at least not right away. They're afraid of us; they attack us if they catch us out alone, but they won't venture into the forest. We'll take the freight car into the forest. What were you planning to do with the potatoes?"

"We were going to keep some and give the rest to the peasants."

"For now, we'll keep them for ourselves. Go on, keep pushing," said Edek, the lieutenant, but he detached six of his own men to help them and

to get the freight car moving faster. As they went, he fell into step next to Gedale and asked him again:

"How many of you are there?"

"You can see for yourself: there are eight of us."

"That's not true," said Edek. "You were seen marching a few days ago, and there were a great many more of you. There's no need for you to lie to me; we have nothing against you, as long as you don't bother us. There are Jews in our ranks, as well."

"There are thirty-eight of us," said Gedale. "Thirty or so are armed and fit for combat. Five are women."

"The women don't fight?"

"One woman fights and one man doesn't; in fact, two men don't."

"Why not?"

"One man is too young and he's not that bright. The other man is too old and he's been wounded."

Even if Gedale had persisted with his lie, it would have been pointless: the freight car was rolling silently, the fog had grown thicker, and the bulk of the band of the Gedalists, trustingly advancing toward Gedale, were well within sight of Edek's vanguard before they could think of trying to hide. The Polish partisans (roughly a hundred in number) surrounded them and ordered them to continue, with weapons and baggage; Gedale explained to Dov what had happened.

After walking for an hour they found themselves in the thick of the forest. Edek gave the order to halt: their quarters weren't far now. He sent a messenger, and in short order had organized the unloading of the freight car. Jews and Poles went to work energetically, one sack per man, shuttling back and forth between the freight car and the camp. The freight car was pushed all the way to the abandoned factory, the sacks were piled up in the camp storehouse, and the Gedalists, all of them, were locked into one of the half-underground wooden barracks that served as the base for Edek's detachment. The Polish partisans were well armed, efficient, chilly, and fair. They offered the Jews something to eat, but after the long night of excitement the Jews preferred sleeping to eating. The bulk of the Polish platoon went out, armed, early that morning; only a few sentries remained behind in the barrack, and the Gedalists were left in peace, the women on military cots, the men on clean straw. But they were obliged to hand over

their weapons “temporarily”; the arms were inventoried and stacked in another hut.

Edek and his men came back toward evening, and the ration was distributed: a grain-based soup, cans of beer, and tinned meat with a label in English.

“You people are rich,” said Dov, admiringly.

“They drop this stuff down to us by parachute,” said Edek. “The Americans drop it, but it comes from England; it’s our government in London that sends it. The Americans are always in a hurry and the drops are done in a pretty slapdash way: they’re flying all the way from Brindisi, in Italy, and they’re stretching their fuel to the maximum. They fly overhead, make the drop, and fly away again. It means that half the stuff winds up in German hands; but there’s always plenty for us because there are so few of us left.”

“Have a lot of your men been killed?” asked Mendel.

“Killed, or missing in action, and others who’ve just given up and gone home.”

“Why have they gone home? Aren’t they afraid of the Germans deporting them?”

“They’re afraid, but they leave all the same. They don’t know why they’re fighting anymore, or who they’re fighting for.”

“What about you, who are you fighting for?” asked Gedale.

“For Poland: for the freedom of Poland, but it’s a war of desperation. It’s hard to fight like this.”

“But Poland will be free: the Germans will leave, they’ve already lost, and they’re retreating on all fronts.”

Edek, through his spectacles, turned his gaze to his three interlocutors, Dov, Mendel, and Gedale. He was much younger than they were, but he seemed burdened by a weight unknown to the others.

“Where are you going?” he finally asked.

“We’re going far away,” Gedale replied. “We want to go on fighting the Germans until the war is over; and who knows, maybe even afterward. Then we’re going to try to leave. We want to go to Palestine; there’s nothing left for us in Europe. Hitler won the war against the Jews, and his pupils have done excellent work, too. Everyone has learned from his gospel: the Russians, the Lithuanians, the Ukrainians, the Croatians, and the Slovaks.” Gedale hesitated, then he added, “You’ve learned it, too; or

perhaps you already knew it. Tell me, lieutenant: are we your guests or your prisoners?"

"Give me a little time," Edek replied. "Soon, I'll be able to give you an answer. But meanwhile I wanted to tell you that the idea of the pumpkins was a good one."

"How do you know about the pumpkins?"

"Around here we have friends everywhere. We have friends among the railroad workers, too, and they told us that the Germans in the garrison still haven't dared to touch them. They've shut down the railroad line and have sent for a squad of explosives experts from Kraków. They're more worried about the pumpkins than about the railcar that you took away."

He opened two packs of Lucky Strikes and offered the cigarettes around to the astonished admiration of the Gedalists. Then he went on:

"You shouldn't be unjust, even if there have been Poles who were unjust. We weren't all enemies to you."

"Not all, but many," said Gedale.

Edek sighed. "Poland is a sad country. It's always been an unhappy country, crushed by neighbors who were too powerful. It is hard to be unhappy and not hate, and we have hated everyone for all the centuries of our servitude and our division. We've hated the Russians, the Germans, the Czechs, the Lithuanians, and the Ukrainians; and we've hated you, too, because you were scattered throughout our country, but you didn't want to become like us, dissolve into us, and we didn't understand you. We began to understand you when you revolted in Warsaw. You showed us the way; you taught us that it's possible to fight even in the midst of despair."

"But by then it was too late," said Gedale. "We were already all dead."

"Yes, it was too late. But now you are richer than we are—you know where you want to go. You have a destination and a hope."

"Why shouldn't you be able to hope, too?" asked Dov. "The war will end, and we'll build a new world, without slavery and without injustice."

Edek said, "The war will never end. From this war, a new war will arise, and war will go on forever. The Americans and the Russians will never be friends, and Poland has no friends, even if the Allies are helping us now. The Russians wish that we didn't exist, that we'd never been born. The Germans, when they invaded us in 1939, immediately deported and killed our professors, writers, and priests; but the Russians who were advancing from their borders did the same thing; what's more, they handed over to the

Gestapo the Polish Communists who had sought refuge in their country. They wanted to strip Poland of its soul, both the Germans and the Russians did; they didn't want Poland to have a soul when they were allies, and they don't want it now that they're enemies. The Russians were happy when the Warsaw revolt failed, they were happy that the Germans exterminated the insurgents: while we were dying, they were waiting on the far bank of the river.

Dov broke in: "Lieutenant, I'm Russian. Jewish, but still Russian, and many of us were born in Russia, and that tall young man you see down there is a Russian Christian who is traveling with us. This man"—and he pointed to Mendel—"and many others who are dead now were soldiers in the Red Army: I was one myself. Before we set out on our journey, we fought as Russians rather than as Jews: as Russians and for the Russians. It is the Russians who are liberating Europe. They are paying with their blood, they are dying by the millions, and the things that you say strike me as unjust. I myself, when I was tired and wounded, was cared for in Kiev, and then the Russians brought me back to my comrades."

"The Russians will drive the Nazis out of our country," said Edek, "but then they'll refuse to leave. It's a mistake to confuse wishes with reality. Stalin's Russia is the same thing as the tsars' Russia: it wants a Russian Poland, it doesn't want a Polish Poland. That is why ours is a war of desperation. We must defend ourselves and the populace from the Nazis, but we also have to watch our backs, because the Russians who are advancing want nothing to do with the Armia Krajowa. When they find us, they incorporate us piecemeal into their units; if we refuse to go, they disarm us and deport us to Siberia."

"Why would you refuse to go?" Dov asked.

"Because we're Polish. Because we want to prove to the world that we still exist. If necessary, we'll prove it by dying."

Mendel looked at Dov, and Dov returned his look. They were both remembering the words that Dov had shouted to Mendel at Novoselky, in the midst of the battle: "We're fighting for three lines in the history books." Mendel told Edek the story, and Edek replied, "It's stupid to be enemies."

A few days went by as Edek tried in vain to establish contact with his superior officers and obtain instructions on what to do next. The Poles had a modern, powerful radio set, but they seldom used it. After the collapse of Warsaw, the Armia Krajowa was in full crisis, perhaps more moral than material; contacts were vanishing one after another, and many of the leaders were dead or had been arrested by the Russians. A messenger finally came back, and Edek, with a wan smile, told Gedale, “It’s all right now. You’re no longer prisoners, you’re our guests; and soon you’ll become allies, provided you still want to.”

Edek was twenty-three and a medical student. He had just enrolled in his first year of medical school, in Kraków, in 1939, when the Germans summoned the entire faculty. Some of the professors had caught a whiff of something fishy and hadn’t showed up; the rest of them were deported immediately to Sachsenhausen. “After that, all of us, professors and students, began organizing a secret university, because we didn’t want our Polish culture to die. In much the same way, in those years, we had a secret government, a secret church, and a secret army: all of Poland lived underground. I studied, and at the same time I worked in a clandestine print shop; but I even had to study in hiding. Hitler and Himmler had decided that Poles needed no more than four years of elementary school; it was sufficient to learn to count to five hundred and sign their names, and unnecessary for them to know how to read and write—in fact it was harmful. So my fellow students and I studied anatomy and physiology out of textbooks, without ever getting so much as a glimpse of a microscope, without dissecting corpses, without setting foot in a hospital ward. But I, too, was there in Warsaw in August, and I saw more wounded, sick, and dead than an army doctor at the end of his career.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” said Gedale. “You’ll have had the practice before the theory. After all, we learn to walk and talk by doing it, don’t we? Peace will come and you’ll be a famous doctor, I feel certain of it.”

The inquisitive fondness that Gedale showed for all human beings seemed to have been multiplied tenfold in Edek’s case. Mendel asked him why and Gedale replied that he didn’t know. But then he thought it over and said, “Maybe it’s just the novelty of the thing. It’s been a long time since I met anyone with a pen in their breast pocket and a tie. There was no one like that in the forest.”

“But Edek doesn’t wear a tie!”

“He’s wearing a tie in spirit. It’s as if he were wearing one.”

They passed the long evenings of rain and waiting by talking and smoking; occasionally, Gedale would even play the violin. But there was no drinking in the Polish camp: Edek was a humane and reasonable commander, but there were certain areas in which he was quite rigid, and he had a number of minor obsessions. After one of his drunken men started a brawl several months earlier, Edek had forbidden alcohol, and he was intractable on this prohibition, with a puritanical rigor. He’d asked Gedale to impose the same prohibition on his men, lest they set a bad example, and Gedale had accepted, though with misgivings. He was also afraid of dogs. He wanted nothing to do with the two poor Gedalist dogs, the ones that had led the band through the Turov minefields and who knew every member of the band individually. He came up with the excuse that the dogs might reveal the camp’s position by barking at night, and, ignoring Gedale’s objections, he had them sold in a nearby village.

Edek was reserved and rarely asked questions, but he, too, was curious about the Gedalists, and especially about Gedale and his past.

“Eh, who knows what a great violinist I would have become!” Gedale said with a laugh. “My father insisted on it: he used to say the violin was useful, because, whatever happens, you can take it with you when you go; and talent is even more useful, plus it goes through customs duty free. You can travel the world, with the concerts and the money you earn; and maybe you’ll even become an American, like Jascha Heifetz. I liked playing, but not studying; instead of going to music lessons, I ran away and went ice skating in the winter, or swimming in the summer. My father was a small businessman, and he went bankrupt in 1923, so he started drinking and died when I was only twelve. We had no money, and my mother sent me to work; I was a clerk in a shoe store, but I kept on playing, just to console myself after a full day with customers’ feet in my hands. I also wrote poems: they were sad and not really all that good. I dedicated them to the customers who had dainty feet, but I’ve since lost them all.

“Playing music has always kept me company. I played instead of thinking; in fact, I have to tell you that thinking has never been my strong suit. I mean to say, thinking, seriously thinking, drawing the consequences from a given premise. Playing was my way of thinking, and, even now that

I’m in a different profession, well, I get my best ideas while I’m playing the violin.”

“The idea of the pumpkins, for instance?” Edek asked.

“No, no,” Gedale replied, modestly. “I got the idea of the pumpkins while looking at the pumpkins.”

“And how did you get the idea of taking up this new profession?”

“It came to me from heaven: a nun brought it to me.” While he was talking, Gedale had picked up his violin; without really playing it, he was caressing the strings with his bow, producing distracted, subdued notes. “That’s right, a nun. When the Germans took over Bialystok, my mother managed to get into a convent. At first I was reluctant to be shut in, I was with a girl, and we slept in a different place every night. I have to tell you: at the time I was already twenty-four years old, but I lived as if I were asleep, day by day, like an animal. I had no idea, either of the danger or of my duty.

“Then the Germans locked the Jews in the ghetto. My mother got word to me that I would be accepted into the convent as well, and I went there. My mother was Russian; she was a strong woman, she knew how to impose her will, and I liked having her boss me around. No, I wasn’t disguised: the nuns had given me a place to stay in the cellar. They never tried to baptize me, they’d taken us in out of pity, without ulterior motives, and at risk to themselves. They brought me food, and I was happy living in the convent: I was no warrior, I was a twenty-four-year-old child, good at selling shoes and playing the violin. I would’ve waited out the end of the war in that cellar: the war was other people’s business, it was for the Germans, the Russians. It was like a hurricane, and when a hurricane hits sensible people seek shelter.

“The nun who brought me food was young and cheerful, the way nuns can be cheerful. One day, it was in March 1943, along with the bread she brought me a note: it came from the ghetto, it was written in Yiddish, and it was signed by a friend of mine. It said, ‘Come be with us: your place is here.’ It said that the Germans were beginning to deport the children and the sick people from the ghetto and were sending them to Treblinka, that soon they would liquidate them all, and that it was necessary to prepare to resist. As I was reading, the nun watched me with a very serious face, and I understood that she knew what was written in the note. Then she asked me if there would be a reply: I told her that I’d think it over, and the next day I

asked her how she had got that note. She told me that there were many baptized Jews in the ghetto, and that the nuns had been given permission to take them medicine. I told her that I was ready to go and she told me to wait until night. She came to me before sunrise and told me to follow her; she led me to a small storeroom, she had a lantern in her hand, and she gave it to me to hold, then she said, 'Turn around, *panie*.' I could hear the rustling of her habit, and profane thoughts came into my mind; but then she allowed me to turn around, and she handed me two pistols. She gave me the contacts that would allow me to get into the ghetto and she wished me good luck. In the ghetto there were only a few young men who were armed but they were determined: they'd learned about rifles from an encyclopedia, and they'd learned how to shoot on the spot. We fought together for eight days; there were two hundred of us, nearly all of them are dead now. With five others, I made my way to Kosava and we joined forces with the fighters in that ghetto."

The knot of people around Edek and Gedale had been gradually growing. Not just Poles, but also a great many of the Jews had listening to that story, which not all of them knew. When Gedale finished, Edek uncrossed his legs, sat up straight on his stool, ran his hands through his hair, smoothed his trouser legs over his knees, and asked haughtily, "What are your political beliefs?"

Gedale extracted the equivalent of a laugh from his violin:

"Striped, dappled, and spotted, just like Laban's sheep!" He looked around the room and pointed out to the lieutenant, at the table, interspersed among the broad fair faces of the Polish soldiers, in the harsh light of the acetylene lamp, Arie's Caucasian mustache, Dov, with his neatly brushed head of white hair, Jozek with his cunning eyes, Line, fragile and tense, Mendel with his lined and weary face, Pavel, half witch doctor and half gladiator, the savage faces of the men from Ruzany and Blizna, Isidor and the two Rokheles, dropping from exhaustion: "As you can see, we are quite an assortment of merchandise."

Then he picked up his violin and went on:

"All kidding aside, lieutenant, I understand the reason for your question, but I'm in something of a bind about how to reply. We aren't orthodox, we aren't regulation, we aren't bound by any oath. None of us have had any time to think it over and come up with clear ideas; each of us has a harsh past behind us, different for each one. Those of us who were born in Russia

were suckled on communism with our mother's milk: that's right, their mothers and fathers turned them into Bolsheviks, because the October Revolution emancipated the Jews, it made them citizens with full rights. In their way, they have remained Communists, but none of us love Stalin anymore after the pact he signed with Hitler; and, for that matter, Stalin never loved us very much.

"As for me and the others who were born in Poland, we have a variety of ideas, but we have one thing in common, we and the Russian Jews. All of us—some more, some less; some earlier, some later—have felt that we were strangers in our homeland. We have all wished for a different homeland, a place where we could live like all other peoples, without feeling we were intruders and without being pointed out as foreigners, but none of us have ever thought of fencing in a field and saying 'This land is mine.' We're not interested in becoming landowners: what we want to do is make the sterile land of Palestine become fertile again, plant orange groves and olive trees in the desert and make it fruitful. We don't want Stalin's kolkhozes. We want communities in which all are free and equal, without constraint and without violence: where you can work by day and play the violin at night; where there is no money, but everyone works according to his ability and receives according to his needs. It seems like a dream, but it's not; this world has already been created by our brothers, more farsighted and courageous than us, who immigrated there long before Europe became one huge concentration camp.

"In that sense you could call us socialists, but we did not become partisans because of our political ideas. We are fighting to save ourselves from the Germans, for revenge, in order to blaze our way; but most of all—forgive me for using such a big important word—for dignity. Finally, I have to tell you this: many of us had never tasted freedom, and we've learned to appreciate it here, in the forests, in the marshes, and amid much danger, along with adventure and brotherhood."

"And you are one of them, aren't you?"

"I am one of them, and I regret nothing, not even the friends whom I watched die. If I hadn't found this profession, perhaps I would've remained a child: now I would be a twenty-seven-year-old child, and at the end of the war, if I survived, I would've gone back to writing poems and selling shoes."

"Or you would have become a famous violinist."

“That’s unlikely,” said Gedale. “A child doesn’t become a violinist: or, if he does, he remains nothing but a child violinist.”

Edek, who was twenty-three years old, looked seriously at Gedale who was twenty-seven: “Are you sure you haven’t remained something of a child?”

Gedale laid down his violin: “Not always; only when I want to be. Not here.”

“Who do you take your orders from?” Edek asked again.

“We’re an independent group, but we follow the instructions of the Jewish Combat Organization, where and when we’re able to establish contact, and their instructions are these: destroy German lines of communication; kill the Nazis who are responsible for massacres; move westward; and avoid contact with the Russians, because until now they’ve helped us, but it’s not clear what they’re going to want to do with us in the future.”

Edek said: “That’s fine with us.”

The war seemed far away. For many weeks it had rained without stopping, and the Polish camp was besieged by mud; apparently, operations had been suspended at the front as well. The rumble of artillery could no longer be heard, and the buzzing of aircraft had also become less frequent: strange airplanes, unreal, possibly friendly or perhaps enemy, inaccessible in their secret trails above the clouds. There had been no more parachute drops, and provisions were becoming scarce.

In early November it stopped raining, and soon after that Edek received a radio message. It was an urgent request for help from headquarters: in the Holy Cross Mountains, eighty kilometers northeast of there, an Armia Krajowa company had been surrounded by the Wehrmacht, and was in desperate straits. They needed to set out immediately to relieve them. Edek ordered seventy of his men to prepare for departure; and just as Gedale, a long year ago, had invited Dov to go out on a deadly hunting party, so now Edek invited Gedale and his men to take part in the expedition. Gedale accepted immediately, but without eagerness. This was the first time that he and his men had been asked to fight the Germans in a pitched battle, not against an isolated garrison, as in April at Lyuban, but against German

infantry and artillery, therefore experienced and well organized, and yet even at Lyuban dozens of Jews had been killed. On the other hand, this time they weren't alone: Edek's Poles were resolute, experienced, well armed, and driven by a hatred of the Germans that was greater even than that of the Jews.

Gedale selected twenty of his men, and the composite platoon set out. The fields were drenched with rain, Edek was in a hurry, and he chose the most direct route, in violation of all partisan rules: they marched along the railroad, three abreast, on the wooden ties, from sunset to dawn and even after dawn. There were no protective patrols along the column's flanks, no rearguard; the vanguard consisted of only six men, and Mendel was among them, as was Edek himself. Mendel was astonished at the recklessness of the operation, but Edek reassured him, he knew that countryside: the peasants would never report them, they supported the partisans, and those who did not feared their reprisals.

On November 16, they came within sight of Kielce: at Kielce there was a German barracks full of Ukrainian auxiliaries, and Edek was forced to go around the city, wasting precious time. Just beyond Kielce they encountered the first rolling terrain: dark wooded hillsides, swathed in strands of fog that drifted slowly in the wind, fraying across the tops of the fir trees. According to the information that Edek had received, the battlefield should be nearby, in the low ground between Górno and Bieliny, but there was no sign of battle; Edek ordered the men to rest for a few hours, until the first light of day.

By first light the fog had thickened. They could hear the occasional isolated gunshot, brief bursts of machine-gun fire, then silence, and in the silence a voice from a loudspeaker. It was faint, and came from a distance, probably from the far side of the encirclement. It was hard to understand; the words came through only in bits and pieces, subject to the shifting wind. The words were in Polish, the Germans urging the Poles to surrender. And the shooting resumed, faint and scattered; Edek gave the order to advance.

Halfway up the hillside, they took positions behind bushes and trees and opened fire in the direction they assumed the Germans were. It was a battle fought blindfolded; the fog was so dense that, strictly speaking, there was no need to shoot from shelter, but precisely because of this veil that surrounded them, and which limited visibility to no more than twenty meters or so, the sense of danger was even sharper: the attack could come

from anywhere. The German reaction was angry but short and poorly coordinated: a heavy machine gun opened fire, followed by a second one, both to the left of Edek's deployment. Mendel saw bits of bark flying off the trees ahead of him, sought shelter, and fired his submachine gun in the direction from which the bursts of gunfire seemed to be coming. Edek ordered a second salvo, longer this time: perhaps he was trying to give the Germans the impression that the detachment that had just arrived was stronger than it was, but they were just wasted bullets. A few minutes later, they heard the explosions of heavy artillery being fired, these, too, distant and off to their left, and a few seconds later the bursts of shells landing: they were falling randomly, ahead of them and behind; the shells behind them were closer, and one fell not far from Mendel, but it lodged in the soft earth without exploding; another one plummeted to his right, and Mendel saw the flash through the curtain of fog. He ran over and found Marian, Edek's right-hand man, on the site: the mortar shell had demolished a sapling, and two Poles lay dead in the churned-up soil. "They're not firing from an elevation," said Marian. "They're on the road to Górno. There can't be that many of them."

The bombardment ended suddenly, there was no more shooting, and around ten o'clock they heard the muffled roar of engines.

"They're leaving!" said Marian.

"Maybe they think we're stronger than we are," Mendel replied.

"I doubt it. But they don't like fog any more than we do."

The rumble of German vehicles grew fainter, and died away. Edek gave the order to advance in silence. From tree trunk to tree trunk, the men began climbing, without encountering resistance or any other sign of life. As they got a little higher up, the trees began to thin out, and then vanished entirely: the fog, too, had lifted, and the battlefield came into view. The hilltop was a barren heath, crisscrossed by faint trails and a single dirt road that led to a massive construction, possibly an old fortress. The ground was covered with dead bodies, some already cold and stiff, many of them mutilated or lacerated by horrible wounds. Not all of them were Poles from the Armia Krajowa: one compact group, which must have fought to the last man, was made up of Russian partisans; other bodies, on the edges of the field, were dead Wehrmacht soldiers.

"They're all dead. I don't understand who they were calling on to surrender," said Gedale. Without realizing it, he was speaking in a hushed

voice, as if in church.

"I don't know," Edek replied. "Maybe the shots we heard when we got here were from the last survivors."

Mendel said, "Earlier the fog was very thick, and they were calling on dead men to surrender."

"Maybe," said Marian, "the speech on the loudspeaker was recorded on a disc: the Germans have done it before."

They surveyed the battlefield, examining the bodies one by one: someone might still be alive. But no one was; some bodies bore in the back of the head or on the temple the marks of a final bullet. Inside the fortress, too, there was nothing but dead bodies, Russians and Poles, many of them barricaded in the guard tower, which had been demolished by an artillery shell. They noticed that some of the corpses were extremely thin. Why?

"Then the rumor we've heard was true," said Marian.

"What rumor?" asked Mendel.

"That in the Holy Cross Mountains there was a prison, and the Germans were starving their prisoners to death." In fact, in the fort's cellars they found hallways and cells, their wooden doors broken open. Mendel found words scrawled with charcoal on a wall, and he asked Edek to decipher them.

"They're three lines from a poem by one of our poets," said Edek. "This is what it says:

"Mary, don't have your baby in Poland,
Unless you want to see your son
Nailed to the cross as soon as he's born."

"When did this poet write those lines?" asked Gedale.

"I don't know. But for my country any century is as good as any other."

Mendel was silent, and felt vast and tangled thoughts sweeping through him. We're not alone, then. The sea of suffering has no shores, has no bottom, no one can plumb its depths. Here they are, the Poles, fanatics of the cross, the ones who stabbed our fathers and invaded Russia to throttle the revolution. And Edek, too, is Polish. And now they're dying just like us, alongside us. They've paid, aren't you happy? No, I'm not happy, the debt hasn't been reduced, it's only grown, no one will ever be able to pay it off. I just wish no one would die anymore. Not even the Germans? I don't know.

I'll think about it later, when it's all over. Maybe killing Germans is no different from when a surgeon performs an operation: cutting off an arm is a horrible thing, but if it has to be done you do it. Let the war end, Lord God in whom I do not believe. If you're there, end the war. Soon and everywhere. Hitler's already been beaten, these deaths are no good to anyone.

Standing next to him on the blood-spattered, rain-drenched heath, an ashen-faced Edek was looking at him.

"Are you praying, Jew?" he asked: but coming from Edek the word "Jew" had no venom. Why not? Because everyone is someone else's Jew, because the Poles are the Jews of the Germans and the Russians. Because Edek is a gentle man who learned to fight; he made a choice just as I did, and he is my brother, even if he is a Pole who has studied, and I'm a village Russian and a Jewish watchmaker. Mendel didn't answer Edek's question, and Edek went on: "You should be. I should be praying, too, but I'm no longer capable of it. I don't believe it's of any use, for me or anyone else. Perhaps you'll live and I will die, and if so tell others what you saw in the Holy Cross Mountains. Try to understand, tell others, try to make them understand. These men who died with us are Russians, but the ones who tear the rifles from our hands are also Russians. Tell others, you who are still awaiting the Messiah; perhaps he will come for you, but for the Poles he came in vain."

It was as if Edek were answering the questions that Mendel was asking himself, as if he were reading the depths of his mind, in the secret bed where thoughts are born. But that's not so strange, thought Mendel; two good clocks will tell the same time, even if they're different brands. As long as they're wound at the same time.

Edek and Gedale called the roll; four of the Poles were missing, and one of the Jews, Jozek, the counterfeiter. He hadn't died a counterfeiter's death. They found him at the bottom of a ravine, with his belly torn to shreds: he might have called for a long time but no one had heard him. Should they bury the dead? "Either everyone or no one," said Edek, "and we can't bury them all. Let's just remove the identification papers and the dog tags on those who have them." The bodies of many of the young men were without identification papers, and Edek and Marian recognized them as members of the Polish Peasant Battalions. They returned to the camp in silence, heads down, like an army in defeat. They were no longer in a hurry, and they

marched in scattered order, by night, through fields and woods. In the forest of Sobków they realized that they had lost their way; the only compass that the platoon possessed had been left in the pocket of Zbigniew, one of the dead Poles: no one had remembered to retrieve it. Reluctantly, Edek decided to wait for dawn, and then to follow one of the trails until they reached some village, where they could ask the peasants to show them the way. But in the foggy dawn Arie found a little bird, stiff with cold amid the roots of an ash tree, and said that the bird would show them the way. He scooped it up, warmed it by holding it against his chest beneath his shirt, gave it a few breadcrumbs that he'd softened with his spit, and when the bird had recovered he let it fly away. The bird vanished into the fog heading in a clear direction, without hesitation: "Is that south?" asked Marian. "No," Arie replied, "that's a starling, and when winter comes, starlings fly west. "I wish I were a starling," said Mottel. They got back to camp without further trouble, and Arie's prestige was enhanced.

Weeks of tension and inertia followed. The weather had turned cold, the freeze hardening the mud, and roads both big and small were soon filled with German convoys marching toward the front or heading back behind the lines. Motorized artillery units went past, along with "Tiger" tanks, already camouflaged in white in expectation of snow, troop trucks full of German soldiers, and Ukrainian auxiliary troops in trucks or on foot; there were offices staffed by military police or Gestapo in all the villages, and it became much more difficult for the partisans to maintain communications. German patrols halted all the young men they encountered and hustled them off to dig anti-tank pits, ramparts, and trenches: the messengers, men and women, moved around only at night. The sole channel of communication that Edek's unit had with the rest of the world was the radio, but the radio was silent, or it issued unsettling and contradictory reports.

Radio London was triumphant and ironic. It dismissed the Germans and the Japanese as defeated, but at the same time admitted that the Germans had attacked in force in the Ardennes forest: where on earth was the Ardennes? Would it all start over again, with the Germans flooding into France? The German radio was triumphant, too, the Führer was invincible, the real war was just beginning now, and Greater Germany possessed new weapons, secret and absolute, against which there was no defense.

Christmas passed, New Year's Day of 1945 went by. In the Polish camp uncertainty and discouragement, the partisans' two fiercest enemies, were

growing. Edek felt abandoned: he was receiving neither orders nor information, he no longer knew who was around him. Some of his men had vanished; they just left, silently, with or without their weapons. Within the camp, too, discipline grew slack; arguments broke out, and frequently degenerated into brawls. For the moment, friction between Poles and Jews had not yet appeared, but muttered words and sidelong glances suggested they could not be far off. In spite of Edek's orders, vodka had reappeared, hidden at first, but eventually in broad daylight. Lice were spreading too, a bad sign: defending against them was not easy, powders and medicines were lacking, and Edek was at a loss. Marian, sanguine and bullish, once a marshal in the Polish Army, held a public demonstration: he lit a small wood fire inside one of the huts, on a piece of sheet metal, and showed that if you hang your clothes a certain distance from the flames, the lice explode without weakening the fabric. But it was a vicious circle: lice are born of demoralization, and create further demoralization.

Line broke up with Mendel. It was sad, like all breakups, but no one was surprised: it had been in the air for a while, ever since the attack on the concentration camp in Chmielnik. Mendel suffered, but it was a dull, gray kind of suffering, without the arrow of despair. Line had never belonged to him, except in the flesh, nor had Mendel ever belonged to her. They had satiated each other frequently, with pleasure and with rage, but they talked only rarely, and their conversations almost inevitably got tangled up in misunderstanding or discord. Line never had doubts, and she refused to tolerate Mendel's doubts: when these surfaced (and they surfaced precisely at moments of weariness and truth, when their bodies were dissolving away from one another), Line grew harsh and Mendel felt afraid of her. He was also obscurely ashamed of himself, and it's difficult to love a woman who provokes shame and fear in you. In some confused and indistinct way, Mendel sensed that Line was right. No, she *wasn't* right, she was *in* the right, on the part of the right. A partisan, whether Jewish or Russian or Polish, a combatant must be like Line, not like Mendel. He or she must never doubt: doubt will resurface in the sights of your rifle, and, worse than fear, it will ruin your aim. There, Line killed Leonid and she feels no guilt. She'd kill me, too, if I'd been flayed alive the way he was, if I didn't have a thick skin, an armor. Not gleaming, resonant, but opaque and tenacious; blows reach me, but blunted. They dent without wounding. All the same, Line awakened his desire, and Mendel was hurt when he learned that she

had become Marian's woman. Hurt, and at the same time offended, and maliciously satisfied, and hypocritically indignant. A *shiksa*, after all, a woman who'll go with anyone, even with Polish men. Shame on you, Mendel, this isn't why you became a partisan. A Pole is as good as you; in fact, perhaps better than you, if Line chose Marian. Rivke would never have done that. No, in fact, she wouldn't have, but Rivke's no longer alive, Rivke's in Strelka buried beneath a meter of lime and a meter of dirt, Rivke is not of this world. She belonged to the world of order, to the world of the right things done at the right time: she cooked, she kept the house clean, because in those days men and women lived in a house. She did the accounting, even for me, and she encouraged me when I needed it: she even encouraged me the day that war broke out and I left for the front. She wasn't so particular about washing, the modern girls in Strelka washed more often than she did, she washed only once a month, as is prescribed, but we were a single flesh. A *balebusteh*, she was: the queen of the house. She commanded, and I didn't even notice.

With an indifferent eye, Mendel saw other casual and fleeting relationships develop in the camp. Sissl and Arie: fine, good for them, happiness and prosperity to them; let's hope he doesn't beat her, Georgians beat their wives, and Arie is more a Georgian than a Jew. Their bones are solid, and not just their bones: they'll have beautiful children, good *chalutzim*, excellent colonists for the land of Israel, if we ever get there. Let's also hope that no Pole looks at Sissl too intently, because Arie is quick with a knife.

Rokhele the Black and Pyotr. They were fine, too, this had been developing for quite a while. Pyotr, among the Poles, was even more isolated than the Jews, and a woman is the best remedy against loneliness. Or even half a woman: the situation was unclear, and in any case Mendel had no interest in investigating, but it seemed that the Black was also leading on the radio operator, Mietek. Too bad about Edek, more than any of the others Edek would have benefited from having a woman, or at least some kind of company, someone to share his suffering: but instead Edek seemed to be trying to isolate himself, to dig a burrow for himself, to build a wall between himself and the world.

Bella and Gedale: no one had anything to say against this couple. They'd been a couple forever, an incredibly stable couple, though no one could understand the reason. Gedale, so free in his words and deeds, so

unpredictable, seemed solidly moored to Bella, like a ship tied up to a wharf. Bella wasn't beautiful, she looked much older than Gedale, she didn't fight, she participated in the band's everyday activities lazily, grudgingly, criticizing the others (especially the women), fairly or unfairly. She brought along with her incongruous scraps of her previous bourgeois existence, about which no one knew anything: awkward, even physically cumbersome remnants, customs that everyone else had given up but which Bella intended to keep. It often happened, almost ritually, that when Gedale began to take flight, with a program, a plan, or even just an imaginative and cheerful line of conversation, Bella would bring him back to earth with an observation as dull as it was obvious. Then Gedale would speak to her with feigned irritation, as if they were both playing improvised parts: "Bella, why do you clip my wings?" After close to eight months of living together, and after many shared experiences, Mendel couldn't stop wondering what it was that kept Gedale so closely tied to Bella. For that matter, this was only one of the many aspects of Gedale that were hard to fathom, just as his actions were impossible to predict. Perhaps Gedale knew that he lacked internal brakes, and needed to find them outside of himself; perhaps he felt that embodied in Bella, at his side, he had the virtues and joys of peacetime, security, common sense, frugality, and comfort. Modest, colorless joys, but everyone, whether aware of it or not, missed them and hoped to find them again, once the slaughter and the journey were over.

Gedale was uneasy, but he hadn't given in to the wave of disappointment that, starting with the Poles, had swept through the Gedalists as well, to a greater or lesser degree. He reminded Mendel of the starling that Arie had found: like it, he was impatient to get moving again. He wandered through the camp, tormenting the radio operator, arguing with Edek, Dov, Line, and even Mendel. He still played the violin, but without his former transport: at times with boredom, at times with frenzy.

Rokhele the White was neither uneasy nor discouraged. She was no longer alone: ever since the band had found refuge in the Polish camp, she was increasingly unlikely to be found far from Isidor's side. At first, no one was surprised; after all, Isidor had a tendency to get himself in trouble, or at least to do foolish things, and it seemed natural that the White would act as a mother. Before that, it was Sissl who had looked after Isidor, and in fact a faint hint of rivalry had arisen between the two women, but now Sissl had other things to think about. As for the White herself, she seemed to need

someone who needed her. She kept an eye on the boy, making sure that he dressed warmly and kept himself clean, and when necessary scolding him with maternal authority.

Now, from early December on, both the two of them and the relationship that bound them together underwent a change that was hard to define but still visible to all. Isidor spoke less and better; he no longer ranted about impossible acts of vengeance, no longer carried a knife stuck in his belt, and instead he had asked Edek and Gedale to let him take part in target practice. His gaze had become more attentive, he tried to make himself useful, his stride had become brisker and more confident, and even his shoulders seemed to have broadened somewhat. He asked questions: few in number, but none of them foolish or childish. As for Rokhele, she seemed to have both matured and become more youthful. Or rather: before, she had seemed ageless, now she had an age; it was surprising and welcome to watch her return day by day to her twenty-six years, which had until then been mortified by shyness and mourning. She no longer kept her eyes turned toward the ground, and everyone noticed that she had beautiful eyes: large, brown, affectionate. Elegant she certainly was not (none of the five women could claim to be), but she was no longer a shapeless bundle, either; she could be seen with a needle, by lamplight, altering to fit her better the uniforms she'd worn for months without paying attention. Now the White, too, had hair, legs, breasts, a body. When a person ran into the two of them, walking around the camp barracks, Isidor was at Rokhele's side, no longer behind her; taller than her, he tilted his head imperceptibly in the woman's direction, as if to shelter her.

One night when Isidor was on the cleaning squad, the White took Mendel aside: she wanted to speak to him secretly.

"What do you want, Rokhele? What can I do for you?" asked Mendel.

"I want you to marry us," said the White, blushing.

Mendel opened his mouth, shut it again, and then said:

"What on earth are you thinking? I'm not a rabbi, and I'm not a mayor, either; you have no documents, as far as I know you could already both be married. And Isidor's only seventeen. Does this strike you as the right time to get married?"

The White said: "I know this is hardly the normal thing; I know that there are problems. But age doesn't count: a man can already be married at thirteen, it says so in the Talmud. And everyone knows that I'm a widow."

Mendel didn’t know what to say. “It’s complete nonsense, a *narishkeit*! A whim that you’ll have forgotten by tomorrow. And why did you come to me of all people? Above all, I’m not even a pious Jew. It makes no sense, it’s as if you’d asked me to fly or to cast a spell.”

“The reason I came to you is that you’re a just man, and because I’m living in sin.”

“If you’re living in sin, there’s nothing I can do about it: that’s something that has to do with the two of you. What’s more, if you ask me, what you are doing isn’t sin, sin is what the Germans are doing. And whether I’m a just man, that remains to be seen.”

Rokhele wouldn’t give up: “It’s like when you’re on a ship or on an island: if there’s no rabbi, anyone can perform the marriage. If it’s a just person all the better, but it could be anyone at all. In fact, he *has* to do it, it’s a *mitzvah*.”

Mendel drew on memories untouched for centuries:

“For the marriage to be valid we’ll need the Ketubah, the contract: you’ll have to promise to bring Isidor a dowry, and he’ll have to guarantee that he can support you. Support you—him, Isidor. Do you take that seriously?”

“The Ketubah is a formality, but marriage is a serious thing; and Isidor and I love each other.”

“Let me at least think it over until tomorrow. A matter of this sort costs me neither effort nor money, but it strikes me as a fraud: it’s as if you were to say to me, ‘My dear Mendel, please cheat me,’ do you see what I mean? And if I agree to do it, I’m the one committing the sin. Couldn’t you wait until the war is over? Then you could find a rabbi, and you could do things properly. I wouldn’t even know what words to say: I’d need to say them in Hebrew, right? And I’ve forgotten Hebrew: if I get it wrong you’ll think you’re a bride but instead you’ll still be unmarried.”

“I’ll dictate the words, and it makes no difference whether they are in Hebrew: any language will do, the Lord understands them all.”

“I don’t believe in the Lord,” said Mendel.

“That doesn’t matter. All that matters is that Isidor and I believe in him.”

“Still, I don’t understand why you’re in such a hurry.”

Rokhele the White said, “I’m pregnant.”

The following day Mendel reported this conversation to Gedale. He expected him to burst out laughing, but instead, Gedale, very seriously, replied that he had no doubt that Mendel ought to accept:

“I have to tell you, I played a part in this story. Isidor had never been with a woman. He told me that a long time ago, one day when I was making fun of him: it was the day we were at the windmill. I could see that he was suffering; he told me that he’d never had the courage. He was only thirteen years old when he had to hide underneath the stable, he was down there for four years, and you know the things that happened after that. I ought to help him, I decided: on the one hand it struck me as a *mitzvah*, and on the other hand the experiment aroused my curiosity. So I talked it over with Rokhele, who’d also been left alone, and I suggested she look after him. Well, she looked after him. But I never would have believed that things could move along so fast and so well.”

“Are you certain that this is a good thing?” asked Mendel.

“I don’t know, but I think so. It strikes me as a good sign, even if they’re a pair of nebbishes. In fact, precisely because they’re a pair of nebbishes.”

Feeling slightly ashamed, Mendel married Isidor and Rokhele the White as best he could.

10

January–February 1945

It was a good sign. The Gedalists, and a number of the Poles, who had asked to be invited, celebrated the wedding without much food but with plenty of good cheer. Gedale, of course, played the violin, essential to even the most modest of weddings. He had a vast and varied repertoire, which ranged from the *Kreutzer* Sonata to supremely frivolous ditties. The evening was already well advanced and Gedale was playing and singing the song of the Foolish Lad: the others were singing along softly. It wasn't obvious that Gedale meant to allude to Isidor; or, if he did, it wasn't a malicious allusion but, rather, a harmless and somewhat coarse joke, the kind that is customary at weddings. Perhaps the song had just come into his mind, through an association of ideas, but, for that matter, it's such a popular song that if you don't sing it at a party it's not really a party. The song itself is stupid, but it's also steeped in a strange tenderness, as of some bizarre and anxious dream that flowered in the warmth of a wooden cottage, next to a large porcelain stove, under the smoke-smudged beams of the ceiling; and above the ceiling you can guess at a dark and snowy sky, in which perhaps a large silvery fish is swimming, along with a bride dressed in white veils, and a green ram, its head down.

The Foolish Lad in the song, the *narisher bokher*, is indecisive: he spends the whole night ruminating over what girl to choose, because he's a fearful fool, and knows that by choosing one he'll humiliate all the others. Just how he makes up his mind isn't described, but then the Foolish Lad asks his *meydl* a series of absurd and pathetic questions (all night long?): What king has no land? What water carries no sand? What is faster than a

mouse, and taller than a house? And, last of all, what can burn without a flame, and what can weep without tears? These riddles are not unwarranted; they have a reason. They are the tortuous path that the timid boy has chosen to declare his love, and the clever girl understands that.

"Foolish Lad," she answers him melodiously, "the king with no land is the king of the deck of cards, and the water with no sand is the water of tears. Faster than the mouse is the cat, and taller than the house is its chimney. And love can burn without a flame, and a heart can weep without tears." This tenuous skirmish ends badly: while the boy continues to worry about whether this is really the girl of his heart, another man shows up and brutally carries her off.

It was a vacation for them all, Poles and Jews: a truce, a relief from tension and expectation. Even the austere Edek beat time with his knuckles on his mess kit, and the Poles, even though they didn't understand Yiddish, sang in unison the virtually meaningless chorus:

Tumbala-tumbala-tumbalalaika,
Tumbala-tumbala-tumbalalaika,
Tumbalalaika, shpil balalaika,
Tumbalalaika, freylekh zol zayn!

Others were beating their feet on the floor and their hands on the table; those closest to the bride and groom were affectionately elbowing them in the ribs and asking them ribald questions. Isidor and Rokhele, glistening with sweat and red with excitement, looked around self-consciously.

First a few, then all gave in to the hypnotic rhythm of the song and began to dance; holding hands, in a circle, mindlessly smiling, dipping their heads upward and to either side, pounding their feet to the rhythm: *freylekh zol zayn*, let joy reign! Even white-haired Dov, even the two timid newlyweds, even the overconfident Line, even the weavers from Slonim, clumsy though they were, even Mottel the cutthroat. Let joy reign! Before long, the small space between the benches and the walls of the hut was filled with dance and celebration.

Suddenly the earth trembled and everyone stopped. It wasn't an earthquake, it was a barrage of heavy artillery; immediately afterward, they heard formations of airplanes filling the sky with their din. A great uproar ensued; they all ran for their weapons, but neither Gedale nor Edek knew

what orders to give. Then they heard Marian shouting: “Don’t go outside! Stay under cover!” And in fact the walls of the huts, made of solid logs, could offer a certain degree of protection. The explosions became more frequent and deafening. Mendel listened carefully: his experience as a gunner told him that the shells were being fired from the east, and that they were exploding in the west, not far from Zarnowiec; they went screaming past overhead. So it was a Russian attack, there was no doubt about it, and a large-scale attack, perhaps the culminating attack. Over the thunderous roar, Dov’s voice could be heard: “It’s the front! It’s the front going past!” At that same instant Bogdan, the Pole who was outside on sentry duty, came into the hut. He was pushing before him a mud-spattered man with an unkempt beard, bundled in a long tattered overcoat. “Why don’t you see who this character is!” he said to Edek and Marian; but the two men, in frenzied conversation with the other Poles around them, ignored him. Bogdan repeated his request; then, his patience exhausted, he turned around to go back to his post, but Edek called him back. “No, you stay here, too, we have a decision to make.” Bogdan spoke to the Gedalists: “You people take care of this one, he must be one of yours. He’s not armed.”

The man looked around bewildered, confused by the explosions and the excited voices, dazzled by the acetylene lamps. Mottel asked him: “Who are you? Where do you come from?” At the sound of the Yiddish words, he started in astonishment; instead of answering, he asked, in turn, “Jews? Jews here?” He seemed like an animal caught in a trap. His eyes darted toward the door, Mendel restrained him with a gesture, and he recoiled in a defensive spasm: “Let me go! What do you want with me?” By this point, the only way to be heard in the hut was to shout; nonetheless, Mendel managed to understand that the man, whose name was Schmulek, had been stopped by the sentry as he was running past the checkpoint. In the darkness, he had been taken for a German. At the same time, he realized that the Poles were deliberating whether to stay there and wait for the arrival of the Red Army or scatter.

Once Schmulek had understood that neither the Jews were prisoners of the Poles, nor the Poles of the Jews, and that no one meant to detain him or cause him any harm, he burst into speech: they must all come with him, hurry, immediately. He had escaped a bomb by some miracle, he’d been buried by the churned-up dirt. As if to confirm his words, there was a loud explosion, incredibly close: the barrack door was blown in, and then sucked

back by the rushing air. The lights went out and the noise became deafening: now the bombs were falling heavily, near and far, and the walls of the hut were creaking ominously, as if about to collapse. It was impossible to tell whether these were bombs being dropped by planes or shells fired by artillery. Everyone piled outside chaotically, into the icy air lit up by the blasts: with the authority of a terrified man, Schmulek shouted at them to come with him, he had a shelter, nearby and safe. At random he grabbed Bella by one arm and dragged her away, tugging; Mendel and others followed them, more than a dozen of them perhaps; the others scattered into the forest.

Schmulek ran hunched over, from tree to tree, the others strung out behind him in single file, holding one another by the hand like blind people. Some of the trees were on fire. Mendel caught up with Schmulek and shouted into his ear, “Where are you taking us?” but he just kept on running. He led them to a log bunker that was partly underground; next to it was a well. Schmulek climbed over the edge, descended until only his head could be seen, and then said: “Come, all of you, this is the way.” By the reddish glow of the fires, Mendel and the others descended after him; embedded in the walls of the well were rusty iron spikes. Two or three meters down, there was a hole; they climbed in, feeling their way in the darkness, and found themselves in a tunnel that ran slightly downhill; farther along was a cavity dug into the clayey earth, with the ceiling held up by planks. There Schmulek stood panting, waiting for them with a glowing flashlight in his hand. “I live here,” he told Mendel.

Mendel looked around. Dov, Bella, Mottel, Line, and Pyotr were there; Gedale wasn’t, but six or seven of the survivors from Ruzany and Blizna were, along with four Poles he’d never met. Down there, the roar of the explosions was muffled; the air was damp and smelled of dirt. There were niches dug into the walls in which it was possible to dimly make out various objects: rolled-up blankets, vases, cooking pots. Along one wall ran a bench; the beaten-earth floor was covered with leafy branches and straw. “Sit down,” said Schmulek. “How long have you been here?” asked Dov. “Three years,” he replied.

Line broke in: “Are you alone?”

“I’m alone. Before, I had my nephew, just a boy. He went out looking for food and never came back. But six months ago there were twelve of us, last year there were forty of us, and two years ago more than a hundred.”

“All in here?” asked Line, incredulous and horrified.

“Look down there,” said Schmulek, raising the flashlight: “The tunnel continues, it branches, there are other dens. There are also two other exits, inside two oak trees hollowed out by lightning. We lived badly, but we were alive. If we could only have remained underground all the time, they’d never have found us, and only the ones who caught typhus would have died. But we had to go out, to find food, and that’s when they’d shoot us.”

“The Germans?”

“Everyone. Germans, Hungarians, Ukrainians. Sometimes the Poles, too: even though we were all Poles, we’d escaped from the ghettos around here. You’d never know: sometimes they’d let us go, other times they’d shoot at us as if we were rabbits, or else they might actually give us food. The last ones to come weren’t partisans, they were bandits, they only had knives. They caught us by surprise. They cut the throats of all who were left and carried off everything we possessed.”

“How did you survive?” asked Mendel.

“Pure luck,” said Schmulek. “In civilian life I bought and sold horses, I traveled all the villages of this area, I knew all the paths through the woods. I frequently worked as a guide for the partisans. In September I was working as a guide for a group of Russian soldiers who had escaped from a German concentration camp; they wanted to go to the Holy Cross Mountains, and I led them out of the forest. That was when the bandits came and massacred the rest. The boy happened to be out at the same time.”

“We found them, those Russian soldiers,” Mendel said. “They were surrounded by Germans; they were all killed. But now the war is about to end.”

“I don’t care whether the war ends. When this war comes to an end, the Jews of Poland will also come to an end. I don’t care about anything anymore. What I care about is the fact that you had the courage to pick up a rifle, and I lacked that courage.”

“That means nothing,” said Mendel. “You made yourself useful in other ways. Fighting isn’t something for old people.”

“How old do you think I am?”

“Fifty,” Dov ventured. But he was thinking seventy.

“I’m thirty-six,” said Schmulek.

Outside, the battle continued; in Schmulek’s lair they could hear nothing but a dull roar, interrupted now and again by louder explosions that made

the earth tremble, and which you heard with your whole body rather than with your ears. All the same, by midnight they were all asleep, even though they knew that these were decisive hours: their very anxiety and the tension of waiting had worn them out.

Mendel found himself awake by late morning, and he realized that what had awoken him was the silence. The earth was no longer trembling; there was no sound other than the heavy breathing of sleeping people. The darkness was absolute. He reached out and felt around him; to his left he recognized Bella's thin body, to his right the rough clothes and heavy belt of a Pole. It might be nothing more than a break in the fighting; or the Russians might have withdrawn, and now their shelter was in no-man's-land. But then his ears, sharpened by silence, caught an unlikely sound, something out of his childhood, something he hadn't heard in years. Bells: those were really bells, a faint, fragile pealing of bells, filtering down through the earth in which they were buried; a toy carillon that rang out in celebration, and meant that the war was over.

He was about to awaken his comrades, but he hesitated. Later, there was time, now he had other things to do. What things? He had accounting to do, his own accounts. He felt as if he'd escaped a storm at sea, as if he'd washed up alone on a deserted and unknown land. Not ready, not prepared, empty; tranquil and unwound, the way a clock that has run down is tranquil. Tranquil and not happy, a tranquil unhappiness. Swollen with memories: Leonid, the Uzbek, Venya's band, rivers and forests and marshes, the battle of the monastery, Ulybin, Dov's return. The girl from Valuets with her nanny goats, Line, Sissl. Mendel the womanless. He glimpsed, beyond his eyelids, Rivke's sharp face, her eyes sealed shut, her hair twisted like serpents. Rivke, underground, just like us. She is the one who blows all the other women away from me, like the chaff from the wheat. Always the *balebusteh*; who said that the dead have no power?

Crowded with memories, and at the same time filled with forgetfulness: his memories, even the recent ones, were faded, their outlines were uncertain, they piled up as he strained, as if someone were drawing designs on a blackboard and then half erasing them, only to draw new ones on top of the old. Maybe that's how somebody who's a hundred years old

remembers his life, or the patriarchs who were nine hundred years old. Maybe memory is like a pail; if you try to put more fruit into it than can fit, the fruit gets crushed.

In the meantime, the bells went on ringing, wherever they might be. In a village somewhere, the peasants must be celebrating, the Nazi nightmare was over for them, the worst was ended. I, too, should celebrate and ring my bells, thought Mendel, clutching his sleep so that it couldn't escape him. Our war is over, too, the time for dying and killing is over, and yet I'm not happy and I wish that my sleep would never end. Our war is over, and we're sealed in an underground lair, and we have to emerge and start walking again. This is the home of Schmulek who has no home, who has lost everything, even himself. And where is my home? It's nowhere. It's in the pack that I carry with me, and it's in the Heinkel that was shot down, and it's at Novoselky, it's in the camp at Turov and in Edek's camp, it's beyond the sea, in a fabled land, where milk and honey flow. A man enters his home and hangs up his clothes and his memories; where do you hang up your memories, Mendel son of Nachman?

One by one they all woke up, and they all asked questions but no one knew the answers. The front had gone by, there was no doubt about that; but what to do now? Go on waiting, as Schmulek recommended? Go out and meet the Russians? Go out and look for food? Send someone to scout?

Dov offered to go and see how things looked: his identity documents were in order, he spoke Russian, he was wearing a Russian uniform, he had Russian papers, and, finally, he was Russian, more official than Pyotr. He headed down the tunnel but came back immediately: he'd have to wait, someone was lowering a bucket into the well. The bucket went up full, Dov was able to leave, and he found himself in the midst of a platoon of soldiers who, naked from the belt up, were joyously washing themselves in the water that they poured into a watering trough. There was a handsbreadth of snow on the ground, churned up and half melted by the fires of the night. Not far away, other soldiers had lit a fire and were drying their clothes. They welcomed Dov with good-natured indifference:

"Hey, uncle! Where did you pop up from? What regiment are you with?"

"If you weren't careful we would have hauled you up in our bucket!"

"I'll tell you where he comes from: he got drunk and fell into the well."

“Or else they threw him in. Say, uncle: did the Germans throw you into the well? Or did you jump in to save yourself?”

“In this country you see some strange things,” said a Mongolian soldier thoughtfully. “Yesterday, in the middle of the battle, I saw a hare: instead of running away, it just sat there as if spellbound. And the day before that I saw a pretty girl in a barrel—”

“What was she doing in the barrel?”

“Nothing. She was just hiding in there.”

“And what did you do with her?”

“Nothing. I just said to her, ‘Good morning, *panienka,* forgive the intrusion,’ and I closed the lid.”

“You’re either a liar or an idiot, Afanasy; a hare is for roasting, and a pretty girl is for making love.”

“No, really, I was just trying to say that this is a strange place. Yesterday the hare, the day before yesterday, the girl, and today a white-haired solider pops out of a well. Come here, soldier: if you’re not a ghost, have a glass of vodka, and if you are a ghost, go back to where you came from.”

The platoon corporal went over to Dov, felt him, and said: “But you’re not even wet!”

“There’s an opening in the well,” said Dov. “Let me explain.”

The corporal said: “Come with me to headquarters: You can explain it all when you get there.”

Half an hour later, Dov and the corporal came back, accompanied by a lieutenant who wore an NKVD band on his arm; when they saw him, the soldiers fell silent and went back to washing. The lieutenant told Dov to go back down the well and tell all the others who were hidden down there to come out. They came out one by one, under the white light of the sky that threatened more snow, amid the silent astonishment of the Russians. The lieutenant ordered two soldiers to get dressed and get their weapons, and escort the group in the opposite direction of the way they had come with Schmulek during the night; that is, they took them back to the barracks of the Polish camp. Here they found Edek with Marian and almost all their men; Gedale was there, too, with the Gedalists who hadn’t followed Schmulek. Both the Poles and the Jews had been disarmed, and the hut into which they had been ushered was guarded by two Russian sentries.

Nothing happened all day long. At noon, two soldiers came and brought bread and sausage for everyone; in the evening a large pot of hot millet-

and-beef soup arrived. There were more than a hundred prisoners, and it was crowded in the hut. They complained to the guards, the corporal came and split them into two groups, one for each hut, which meant he had to double the guards. Neither the corporal nor the soldiers were hostile; some of them seemed curious, others annoyed, still others seemed almost apologetic.

The Poles were uneasy, and humiliated at having been forced to hand over their weapons.

"Be strong, Edek," said Gedale. "The worst is over. No matter what else, these men aren't going to treat us the way the Germans did. You saw for yourself, you can reason with them." Edek said nothing.

In the morning a barrel of ersatz coffee was delivered, and shortly thereafter, the lieutenant arrived, accompanied by a clerk. He seemed to be in a bad mood and in a hurry. He transcribed the personal information of each of them in a school notebook, and he had all of them show him their hands, front and back; he examined them closely. When he finished, he split the prisoners into three groups.

The first group consisted of most of the Poles.

"You are soldiers, and you're going to go on being soldiers. You'll be given uniforms and weapons, and you'll be enlisted in the Red Army." There was a buzz of commentary, murmurings, some objections; the sentries lowered the barrels of their submachine guns, and the objections died away.

"You'll be useful to us in another way," he said, speaking to the second group. This group was very meager: it included Edek with half a dozen former students and office clerks.

"I'm the commander of this platoon," said Edek, as pale as snow.

"There's no more platoon and there's no more commander," said the lieutenant. "The Armia Krajowa has been disbanded."

"Disbanded by whom? Disbanded by you!"

"No, no. It disbanded itself, there was no longer any reason for its existence. We are liberating Poland now. Haven't you heard the radio? No, not our radio, Radio London: it's been broadcasting a message from your commander for three days now. He sends you his greetings and his thanks, and he says that your war is over."

"Where are you going to send us?" Edek asked.

“I don’t know, and it’s none of my concern. I simply have orders to send you to local headquarters; there you’ll be given all the information you wish.”

The third group consisted of the Gedalists, plus Schmulek, that is, all the Jews plus Pyotr. Mendel hadn’t noticed before, but he now saw that Pyotr had doffed his worn partisan uniform, the one he’d had ever since the camp at Turov. He was tall and thin, like Gedale, and he wore the civilian clothing that Gedale had worn after the exploit in Sarny.

“As for the rest of you,” said the lieutenant, “for now there are no orders. You’re neither civilians nor soldiers, and you’re not prisoners of war, either; you’re men and women without documents.”

“Comrade lieutenant, we are partisans,” said Gedale.

“Partisans belong to partisan units. No one has ever heard of Jewish partisans, that’s a new entry. You don’t belong to any category. So for now you’ll stay here: I’ve requested further instructions. You’ll be given the same treatment we afford our own soldiers. Then we’ll see.”

Gedale’s band, restored after more than three months to its original state, experienced days of inertia and suspicion. Toward the end of January, looking out the barrack windows in the midst of a heavy snowfall, they saw the Poles of the second group leaving. For the occasion, the lieutenant had barred the doors; they had to be content with waving goodbye to Edek through the glass. As he climbed onto the truck, Edek waved his hand in their direction; the truck took off with a jerk, and Sissl burst into tears.

Unlike the others, Dov, Mendel, Arie, and Pyotr had all belonged to the Red Army, and they would have no difficulty clearing up their situation. Pyotr had no doubts: “They made no distinctions, and as far as I’m concerned, that’s fine. Clearly, the only ones the NKVD is interested in right now are the Poles: Stalin wants no Polish partisans in the way.”

“They took you for a Jew!” said Gedale with a smile. “And, as far as that goes, you deserved it.”

“I don’t know about that. The lieutenant asked me two or three questions, saw that I answered in Russian, and was satisfied.”

“Hm,” said Gedale, “if you ask me, your case hasn’t been settled yet.”

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s over,” Pyotr replied. “I’m staying with you.”

Dov had no doubts, either, but in the opposite sense. His decision remained the same, in fact it had been reinforced by the most recent adventures; he was sick of fighting and wandering, sick of uncertainty and living precariously; he wanted to return home, and he had a home to return to. A distant home, untouched by war, in a land that distance in space and time had rendered magical: the land of tigers and bears, where everyone was like him, hardheaded and simple. In that land, which Dov never tired of describing, the winter sky was purple and green; the aurora borealis trembled overhead, and when he was a child the terrible comet had burst forth from it. Mutoray, with its four thousand political exiles, nihilists and Samoyeds, was unlike anyplace else on earth.

Dov left in silence, sad but not in despair. He asked for a hearing with the Russian headquarters, declared his military position and history, at their request drew up a report in fine handwriting on the circumstances in which he’d been taken from Turov, treated at the hospital in Kiev, and returned to the partisan district, and waited. Two weeks later he said goodbye to them all, and decorously left the scene.

As for Mendel and Arie, they presented no problems of this kind, nor did the Russians create any. The front had quickly moved westward; the NKVD lieutenant stopped coming around, and the barracks were guarded with an increasingly light hand until it was no longer guarded at all. Gedale’s whole band was transferred in early February to a schoolhouse in the nearby town of Wolbrom, and there left to themselves. The Russian garrison, which in any case consisted of only an elderly captain and a few soldiers, ignored them, except to bring them supplies taken from the quartermaster’s storehouse: potatoes, turnips, barley, meat, and salt. The bread arrived from a bakery that had been requisitioned, but otherwise they had to do their own cooking on the site, and there were no utensils in the schoolhouse, nor had the Russians supplied them with any. Gedale made a regulation request, the captain promised, and nothing arrived. “Let’s go into the town and get the utensils ourselves,” said Gedale.

The expedition proved to be easier than expected. The little town was empty and sinister; it must have been bombarded, and then plundered repeatedly, but always in haste. In the wrecked houses, in the cellars, in the attics, in the air raid shelters, they found everything they needed. Not just

stock pots but chairs, quilts, mattresses, and furniture of every sort. Other furniture appeared every day in the marketplace that had spontaneously sprung up in the main square. Piles of half-broken furniture were sold off for firewood: supply was vast and prices were low. Before long the schoolhouse had been transformed into a livable shelter, however uninviting; but there were no stoves, either in the building or anywhere nearby, and the soup had to be cooked over an open fire in the courtyard, next to the sandpit for the long jump. On the other hand, in one of the classrooms the Gedalists erected a majestic king-sized bed for Rokhele the White and Isidor, surmounted by a canopy that they'd cobbled together from military blankets.

The Russian captain was a weary and melancholy man. Gedale and Mendel went to see him frequently, in an attempt to get some information from him about what the Russian authorities intended to do with them. He was courteous, distracted, and evasive; he knew nothing, no one knew anything, the war wasn't over, they'd have to wait until it was. In the war he'd lost two sons, and he'd had no news about his wife in Leningrad. They had enough to eat and to keep warm: they could wait, the way everyone else was waiting. He was waiting, too. Maybe the war wouldn't be over all that soon; no one could really know that, perhaps it would just keep on going, who could say? Against Japan, against America. A permit to leave? He couldn't issue permits, that was another administrative office; and, for that matter, leave to go where? To head where? There were bands of German and Polish rebels roaming the countryside, as well as bands of brigands; the Soviets had set up roadblocks on all the thoroughfares. They'd better not try to leave the city: they wouldn't get very far, the troops manning the roadblocks had orders to shoot on sight. He himself avoided going anywhere, unless duty required; it had already happened that Soviet soldiers had fired at one another.

But Gedale didn't take well to being shut in. He, and not only he, found that way of life to be empty, humiliating, and ridiculous. Men and women took turns cooking and cleaning, and there were still vast amounts of time to kill; paradoxically, in the middle of the city, with a roof over their heads, and a table around which to eat, they experienced a vague unease, an unease that was a longing for the forest and the open road. They felt inept, out of place: no longer at war, not yet at peace. In spite of the captain's instructions, they went out frequently, in small groups.

In Wolbrom the war was over, but it was still going on relentlessly not far away. Through the small town, and on the dirt road that ran around it, day and night, an endless column of Soviet military units were rumbling toward the Silesian front. During the day, rather than a modern army, it seemed that a horde was passing, a vast migration: men of all races, giant Vikings and stocky Laplanders, bronzed Caucasians and pale-skinned Siberians, on foot, on horseback, in troop trucks, on tractors, in large ox-drawn wagons, some of them even riding camels. There were uniformed soldiers and civilians, women dressed in every style imaginable, cows, sheep, horses, and mules: at night, the units stopped where they were, pitched tents, slaughtered livestock and roasted the meat over campfires. These improvised bivouacs were overrun with children bundled in oversized military uniforms; some of them wore pistols and knives in their belts, all had the red star pinned to enormous fur hats. Who were they? Where did they come from? Mendel and his comrades stopped to question them: they spoke Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish; some of them spoke Yiddish, too, while others simply refused to speak. They were sullen and savage, they were orphans of war. The Red Army, as it advanced through ravaged countries, had swept up thousands of them, from ruined cities or scattered in fields and forests, starving and rootless. The Soviets had no time to place them behind the lines nor did they have vehicles to transfer them farther away: they simply dragged them along, children of one and all; they, too, were soldiers, and in search of prey. They milled around the campfires; some of the soldiers gave them bread, soup, and meat, while others shooed them away in annoyance.

The troops that crossed the city in the hours of darkness were surprisingly different. Mendel, who still had the burning memory of units encircled and smashed to pieces, annihilated, in the huge battles of 1941 and 1942, could barely believe his eyes. There, this was the new Red Army that had broken Germany’s back; a completely different army, unrecognizable. A powerful, well-ordered, modern machine that rolled almost soundlessly down the main street of the blacked-out city. Giant tanks riding on trailers with rubber wheels; self-propelled artillery that they’d never seen or even dreamed of before; the legendary Katyushas, covered with tarpaulins that concealed their shape. Mixed in with the artillery and the armored units, teams of infantry were marching as well, in close order, singing as they went. They were not singing war songs; if anything, they

were melancholy and subdued. They weren't bloodthirsty, like the Germans, but, rather, expressed the grief of four years of massacre.

Mendel, the gunner Mendel, watched them go by with a shaken soul. In spite of everything, in spite of the disastrous and culpable defeat that had forced him to take to the woods, in spite of the contempt and the wrongs to which in other times he had been subjected, in spite of Ulybin, that was the army whose uniform, torn and faded, he still wore. A *krasnoarmeetz*: that's what he still was, even if he was a Jew, even if he was on his way to another land. Those soldiers who marched by singing, mild-mannered in peacetime but indomitable in war, those soldiers who looked like Pyotr, they were his comrades. He could feel his chest swell with a storm of conflicting emotions: pride, remorse, resentment, reverence, and gratitude. But one day he heard moans coming from a cellar; he went in with Pyotr, and saw ten soldiers of the Waffen-SS, lying half naked on their bellies: some of them were dragging themselves with their elbows, and each had a bloody cut midway down his back. "That's how the Siberians do things," said Pyotr. "When they find them they don't kill them, they just cut their spines." They climbed back out to the street and Pyotr added: "I wouldn't want to be a German. Eh no, in the next few months I wouldn't want to be a Berliner at all."

One morning they woke up and found a swastika drawn in tar on the façade of the schoolhouse; underneath it was written: "NSZ—Death to the Bolshevik Jews." Not long after that, they looked out the second-story window and saw three or four young men talking among themselves and looking up. That same evening, while they were sitting down to dinner, the window glass shattered and a bottle with a burning fuse rolled between the legs of the table. Pyotr was the quickest to take action: in a flash he grabbed the bottle, which was still intact, and threw it back out into the street. There was a thud, and a flaming puddle spread out across the cobblestones and burned for a long time, the smoky flames reaching all the way to their window. Gedale said:

"We need to find weapons and leave."

Finding weapons, too, was easier than they had expected: in different ways, Schmulek and Pavel took care of it. In his lair there were weapons, said Schmulek: there weren't many, but they were well kept, they'd been buried under the packed earth. He asked Gedale to send someone with him, set out at nightfall and was back by dawn with an assortment of pistols, hand grenades, ammunition, and a submachine gun. After Jozek's death, Pavel had taken his place as quartermaster, and he reported that buying weapons in the market was easier than buying butter and tobacco. Everyone was selling them, in broad daylight; the Russians themselves, both soldiers passing through and the civilians who followed in the army's wake, sold German light weapons they'd found in dumps or on the battlefield; other matériel was offered casually for sale by the Poles of the militias that the Russians had hastily assembled. Many of those Poles, immediately after enlisting, deserted with their weapons and joined bands that were preparing for guerrilla warfare; others sold or bartered their weapons in the marketplace. In just a few days, the Gedalists found themselves in possession of a large number of knives and a dozen mismatched firearms; it wasn't much, but it might be enough to ward off the Polish right-wing terrorists.

At the end of February, the Russian captain summoned Gedale, and kept him talking for more than an hour.

"He offered me cigarettes and something to drink," Gedale reported to his comrades. "He's not as distracted as he seems and, if you ask me, somebody gave him a suggestion. He'd heard about the Molotov cocktail, he says that times are tough and that he's worried about us. That there's no way for them to guarantee our safety, and that we would be well advised to see to our own self-defense: in other words, he knows about our weapons and he's fine with our having them. It's natural, he must like the NSZ as much as we do. He's said more than once that this is a nasty place; he said the same thing to me when we talked before, but that time he told me that leaving town was dangerous, while today he asked me why we want to stay on. 'You'd be free to keep traveling, by now the front has moved on: you could keep going, meet the Allies halfway. . . .' I told him that we want to go to Italy, and from there we'd try to find a passage to Palestine, and he

said that was a good idea, England needs to get out of Palestine, just as it needs to get out of Egypt and India: the colonial empires aren't long for this world. And that we should go to Palestine, to build a country for ourselves. He told me that many of his friends are Jews, and that he's even read Herzl's book. I doubt that's true, or else he didn't read it very carefully, because he told me that in the final analysis Herzl was a Russian, too, whereas he was actually Hungarian; but I didn't contradict him. To sum up: the captain is a sly old dog; the Russians are happy for us to go and annoy the British; and it's time for us to leave. But no official permits: when that topic came up he immediately changed his tune."

"We'll leave without permits," said Line with a shrug. "When have we ever had permits?"

Bella's nasal voice was heard: "The members of the NSZ may be a bunch of Fascists and cowards, but there is one point on which we're in agreement with them and with the Russians: they want to get rid of us, and we want to leave."

Pavel had developed the habit of leaving the schoolhouse early in the morning and not coming back until nightfall. In the course of just a few days the atmosphere at Wolbrom had changed: now the flow of troops heading into Germany was outweighed by the opposite flow, of soldiers coming back from the front. Some of them were on leave, but the majority were wounded or mutilated soldiers, hobbling along on jury-rigged crutches, sitting on the piles of rubble that lined the roads, with the pale beardless faces of teenagers. Pavel never returned empty-handed from his scouting expeditions: by now you could find anything on the black market. He brought back coffee, powdered milk, soap, and razor blades, powdered puddings, and vitamins, treasures that the Gedalists hadn't glimpsed in six years or had never seen before. One day he brought back a tall thin fellow with sandy blond hair, who spoke neither Russian nor Polish nor German, and only a few words of Yiddish. He'd found him on the rubble of the Wolbrom synagogue saying the morning prayer; he was a Jewish soldier from Chicago whom the Germans had taken prisoner in Normandy. The Red Army had liberated him. They celebrated together, but the American wasn't very good at communicating and even worse at drinking: after the first round of vodka he slid under the table, slept until noon the next day, and then left without even saying goodbye. Former prisoners from all

countries and of all races drifted along the roads, along with clusters of prostitutes.

On February 25, Pavel came home with five pairs of silk stockings, and an excited uproar ensued: the women all hastened to try them on, but they only really came close to fitting Sissl and Rokhele the Black; they were too big for the other Rokhele, Line, and Bella. Pavel silenced the din:

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t matter, tomorrow I’ll take them back and exchange them for new ones. I’ve got something else to tell you—I’ve found a truck!”

“You mean you bought one?” asked Isidor.

No, he hadn’t bought one. It turned out that behind the train station the Russians had established a scrap yard for demobilized equipment, and you could find anything you wanted there. Pavel knew nothing about these things, someone would have to go with him the next day to the dump. Who knew anything about trucks? Who knew how to drive one? The band had traveled more than a thousand kilometers on foot: wasn’t it time to ride in a truck?

“Still, we’ll have to pay for it,” said Mottel.

“I don’t think so,” said Pavel. “There’s no fence around the yard, there’s nothing but a ditch, and only one guard. The important thing is to move quickly: there’s already a huge crowd of people coming and going, this morning in fact I saw two young guys taking away a motorcycle. Who’ll come with me tomorrow morning?”

Everybody wanted to go with him, if for no other reason than to have some fun. Line and Arie pointed out that they had driven tractors; Pyotr and Mendel had military driver’s licenses, and, besides, back home Mendel had had occasion to fix both tractors and trucks. In an unaccustomed abuse of authority, Gedale said that he would go because he was the head of the band, but the most insistent of all was Isidor, who had no claim whatsoever. He wanted to go with Pavel at all costs: he had a disinterested and childish passion for machinery, machinery of any kind, and he said that he would learn how to drive the truck in the blink of an eye.

Mendel went, and he saw that Pavel hadn’t been exaggerating: in the junkyard there was really everything, and not merely junk. The Russians, supplied by the Allies with military matériel of all kinds, were not being too particular: the minute a piece of equipment or a vehicle caused trouble of any kind, they discarded it and took a new one. More damaged equipment

came in every day from the battle zone, by truck or by train; no one examined it or checked it, it was dumped in the junkyard, and there it lay to rust. The doleful metal cemetery was teeming with the curious, experts, and swarms of kids playing hide-and-seek.

There were plenty of trucks: of every make and in all states of repair. Mendel's eye fell on a row of Italian trucks; they were Lancia 3 Ro three-ton trucks, and they looked brand-new: perhaps they came from some German storage area. While Pavel did his best to distract the guard by offering him tobacco and chewing gum, Mendel got a closer look at the vehicles. They actually still had keys on the dashboards and seemed ready to drive away; Mendel tried turning on the ignition, but nothing happened. The explanation was soon found: the trucks had no batteries, and never had had any; the contacts of the electrical system were still covered with grease. When Pavel got back, Mendel told him:

"Go back to your man and keep him occupied. I'm going to go see if I can find a charged battery somewhere."

"But what should I say to him?"

"That's your problem. Tell him about when you were an actor."

While Pavel was dredging his memory and his imagination in an attempt to entertain the sentry without arousing his suspicions, Mendel began systematically scouting the other vehicles. He soon found what he was looking for, a Russian truck about the same size as the Lancias, in fairly good condition: it must have arrived recently. He opened the hood and touched both poles of the battery with his knife blade. There was a snapping sound and a blue flash—the battery was charged. He went back with Pavel to the schoolhouse, and waited as the hours slowly passed; it felt as if night would never come.

When darkness fell, they took their weapons and went back to the scrap yard. There was no sign of the sentry; either he was sleeping somewhere nearby or else he had gone thoughtlessly back to his barracks. Among the dark silhouettes of the vehicles and junked cars and trucks, however, a furtive population now scurried: like termites, they were dismantling and demolishing anything that might prove useful or marketable: car seats, cables, tires, auxiliary engines. Some of them were siphoning fuel out of the tanks; Pavel borrowed a hose, did the same thing, and poured some diesel fuel into the gas tank of the first Lancia 3 Ro in the line. Then Mendel removed the good battery and, with Pavel's help, dragged it to the truck.

Mendel installed it, hooked up the cables, they climbed into the cab, and he turned the key. He felt in the darkness for the headlight switch, and the headlights came on: ". . . and there was light," he thought to himself. He switched them off and started the engine: it turned over immediately, smooth and rounded; it responded obediently to the gas pedal. Perfect.

"We're all set!" said Pavel in an undertone.

"That remains to be seen," Mendel replied. "I've repaired plenty of beasts this size, but I've never driven one."

"Didn't you say that you had a driver's license?"

"Well, yes, I have a driver's license," said Mendel between clenched teeth. "In those days, they were handing them out to anyone, the Germans were in Borodino and Kaluga, six half-hour lessons and off you go. But then I only drove tractors and cars; it's quite another matter to drive at night. But now shut up, please."

"Just one more thing," said Pavel. "Don't go out the front gate. There's a guard hut there, someone might be inside. And now I'll shut up."

With furrowed brow, intent as a surgeon, Mendel pressed down the clutch pedal, put the shift into gear, and lifted his foot: the truck started off with a savage lurch. He switched the headlights back on, and with the engine racing he headed very slowly toward the far end of the yard, along a clear thoroughfare.

"Don't think I'm going to shift gears. I'll try that tomorrow: for today this is how we're going to travel."

The truck moved along toward the ditch, tipped forward, and then reared up majestically skyward. "We're out," said Pavel, inhaling the rainy air: he realized that he hadn't taken a breath for perhaps a minute. A voice shouted behind them: "*Stój!* Halt!" Pavel leaned out the side window and fired a burst of bullets into the air, more in celebration than to intimidate. When they reached the road, Mendel screwed up his courage and shifted into the second low gear: the engine's roar dropped slightly in pitch, and the truck's speed increased marginally. No one was following them, and they reached the schoolhouse in a few minutes.

Gedale, armed like them, was waiting in the street. He threw his arms around Mendel, laughing and reciting the blessing of the miracles. Mendel, his forehead beaded with sweat in spite of the cold, replied, "Better to say the other blessing, the one about narrowly averted dangers. There's no time to waste, let's leave immediately."

Rudely awakened, the Gedalists carried baggage and weapons downstairs and jammed into the back of the troop truck. Mendel restarted the engine. “To Zawiercie!” Gedale, who had taken a seat next to him in the cab, shouted out. Following the directional signs that the Russians had posted at the intersections, Mendel drove out of the city and found himself on a secondary road full of potholes and puddles. Step by step, and with plenty of grinding, he learned to shift into the higher gears, and soon they were traveling at a reasonable speed. The jolting became worse as well, but no one was complaining. He climbed a hill and started down the other side: the brakes responded and he felt reassured, but the tension of driving was exhausting him.

“I can’t keep it up much longer. Who’ll spell me?”

“We’ll see about that later,” Gedale shouted over the din of the engine and the clattering metal. “Right now just take care of getting out of town.”

Halfway down the hill they encountered a roadblock: a rough log, set atop two barrels on either side of the road.

“What should I do?”

“Don’t stop! Accelerate!”

The log flew aside like a piece of straw and they heard bursts of submachine-gun fire; from the back of the truck someone fired back with single shots. The truck continued through the night, and Gedale shouted in laughter:

“If not thus, how? And if not now, when?”

11

February–July 1945

It was comfortable in the cab, but the men and women crammed into the back of the truck were breathing, along with their first air of freedom, the chilly night wind: they were numbed by the cold and their uncomfortable positions and aching from the bumps. Some of them complained, but Gedale ignored them.

“How much fuel do we have?” he asked Mendel.

“It’s hard to say. Maybe enough for another thirty or forty kilometers, at most.”

They halted at dawn, on a secondary road. On either side were piles of junk, unbelievable both in quantity and in variety: the only wealth that war produces. There were trucks, armored cars, half-tracks, and the boats and pontoons used to cross rivers—all wrecked and overturned. There was a German cook wagon, intact: it would have been invaluable, but there was really no more room on the truck. A pity.

“We need to find diesel fuel,” said Gedale, “otherwise this outing will soon come to an end. Go on, spread out, unscrew the fuel caps and check the tanks.” The luckiest one was Isidor, who found an upright armored car, without wheels but with an almost full tank.

“Do you think it’s the right grade?” asked Mottel.

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Mendel. “But during wartime engines get used to anything.”

“Just like us,” sighed Rokhele the Black, stretching like a cat.

Gedale was impatient to get the truck off the road: in broad daylight it was far too visible, and he didn’t feel sure that the theft of the truck and the

violation of the checkpoint hadn't been reported. He walked back and forth nervously. "Hurry up and siphon that gas!" But it was no simple matter: no one had a rubber hose, and there was no way to procure one. Someone suggested turning the armored vehicle over, but Isidor said, "I'll take care of it." Before anyone could say a thing, he picked up a jerrican, pulled out the Luger that he'd been issued, and fired at the base of the gas tank. A jet of yellowish kerosene sprayed out of the bullet hole.

"What if it had exploded?" asked Pavel in retrospective fear.

"It didn't explode," said Isidor.

The sky was growing lighter, and a distant roar of artillery could be heard coming from the south: the way west was clear, the Germans had retreated well beyond Legnica (though Wrocław, under siege, was still holding out); on the other hand, along the entire Czechoslovakian border the fighting continued. They kept going for several days, traveling by night and hiding the truck during the daylight hours. Mendel got tired of driving all night, and asked for a replacement, but neither Pyotr nor Arie nor Line showed much enthusiasm for taking a turn. Isidor, on the other hand, could have wished for nothing better; he was more deeply in love with the truck than he was with Rokhele, he spent all his free hours cleaning the dust and mud off it, and he never missed an opportunity to stick his nose under the hood. He took a couple of practice lessons from Mendel and learned incredibly quickly, after which there was no tearing him away from the steering wheel. He was an excellent driver, and everyone was satisfied, especially Mendel.

No one was familiar with the area; at every crossroads Isidor slowed down and asked Gedale: "Which way do we go?" Gedale would check with Schmulek, then make a decision on instinct. It was practically pure chance that got them to Rawicz, at the border between Greater Poland and Silesia: after hiding the truck in the woods, they walked in small groups into the town, the first place they'd seen along their journey that hadn't been ravaged by war. Life hadn't yet returned to normal, but a few shops were open, there were newspapers for sale at the train station newsstand, colorful posters announced a romantic film being shown at the one movie theater. On the main street, a woman in a fur coat and high heels walked a small dog that looked more like a cat on a leash. The Gedalists felt dirty, uncivilized, and shy, but there were plenty of refugees in town, and nobody paid any attention to them. Gedale invited Bella, the White, and Isidor into

a café for a cup of coffee: they accepted, but they seemed to be sitting on pins and needles. Schmulek refused to go into town; he said he'd be glad to stay in the truck with three other men, to guard the vehicle and the weapons.

They bought various everyday wonders for which they'd felt the desire or need for some time now: stockings, toothbrushes, underwear, pots and pans. Pavel, who could also read Polish with some effort, found an old illustrated edition of *Les Misérables* on a used bookstall. He was obliged to hand it over to Bella when she asked to borrow it, but then Pyotr, with some excuse, persuaded Bella to give it to him. Nor did Pyotr keep possession of the book for long. Not only did he not understand a word of Polish; he couldn't even read the letters. In the days that followed, the book was passed from hand to hand and finally came to be considered community property.

Everyone was eager to go to the movies. Gedale was perhaps more eager than anyone else, but he had read in a Polish newspaper that the Americans had crossed the Rhine at Remagen and had taken Cologne. "We'll go meet them: we'll be safer with them. It's time to get going again." They reluctantly tore themselves away from the delights of city life; in Rawicz refugees, no matter what part of the world they came from, had an easy life. The streets were teeming with British, American, Australian, and New Zealand soldiers, all of them former prisoners of war; and then there were Frenchmen, Yugoslavians, and Italians, who had worked (voluntarily or otherwise) in the German factories. The populace was courteous and hospitable to them all, even to Gedale's Jews, who blended into the variegated background.

They left town late that night, heading for Glogau; they stopped to rest for a few hours in a narrow lane running between the fields, covered with blankets in the back of the truck, which felt like home by now. A little before dawn they started off again: just as they rounded a curve the truck's headlights framed another vehicle stopped before them, pointed in their direction, and Isidor was forced to jam on the brakes. "Turn hard, head into the fields!" Gedale shouted at him, but it was too late. A squadron of armed Russian soldiers had surrounded the truck; they were all forced to get out. Those Russians were in a terrible mood, because their troop truck was stuck in the mud: the tires were worn bald and no longer got any grip on the snow. Their corporal was furious. He was heaping contemptuous insults on

the driver, and, once he had the Gedalists in his hands, he unleashed all his anger upon them. He asked: “Where are you going?”

“To Glogau,” Gedale replied.

“Glogau my foot. Come on, help us out here. Didn’t you hear me? Get moving, you parasites, good for nothings, goddam foreigners!”

Speaking in Yiddish, Gedale said quickly:

“Hide the weapons under the blankets. Obey without arguing.” Then, speaking to Pavel and Mendel: “The two of you do the talking, in Russian; all you Poles, shut up.”

In the crisscrossing beams of the headlights of the two vehicles, a terrible confusion arose. Fifty men, which was the sum of the Russians plus the Gedalists, could not physically fit around the bogged-down truck, but the corporal, with a stream of insults and oaths, hurled back into the bedlam all those who tried to withdraw. They were useless efforts: the boots of the rescuers slipped in the mud, and in any case the truck was so heavy that human arms would certainly not be able to get it going again.

Mendel said to Gedale:

“Shall we offer to tow him out? Our tires are brand-new.”

“Give it a try. Maybe it will improve his mood and he’ll let us go.”

“Comrade corporal,” said Mendel, “if you have some stout rope or a chain we can try to tow you out with our truck.”

The Russian looked at him as if he were a talking horse. Mendel was forced to repeat his offer, after which the corporal immediately resumed insulting his men because they hadn’t come up with the idea first. There was rope, in fact there was a steel cable, stout but perhaps a little too short. It worked perfectly; Gedale’s truck, in the early dawn light, started backing slowly, hauling the Russian vehicle, nose to nose: the road was too narrow to allow them to turn the Lancia 3 Ro around, and driving out into the fields almost certainly meant getting stuck in the mud. Isidor, who was forced to drive with half his body extending out the window, did a splendid job, but the corporal, instead of expressing his gratitude, just went on cursing and shouting:

“Go faster, go faster!”

Finally, after about a kilometer, the country lane spilled them out onto a larger county road. They stopped, and Mendel got out to unhook the tow cable. From the cab of the truck, Gedale said:

“Say goodbye to them and wish them a safe journey; be as polite as you know how, and God forbid they think of searching us.”

“But what if they do think of searching us?”

“Then we’ll let them: you certainly aren’t suggesting we get in a fight with the Russians. We’ll see how things look and what lies to tell them.”

Things immediately looked bad, and there wasn’t even an opportunity to tell any lies. As soon as he set foot on the ground, and without a word, the corporal gestured to his soldiers, and once again they surrounded the truck. They made the entire band get out and they rummaged through the back of the truck, immediately finding the weapons concealed beneath the blankets, but not the pistols and knives that the Gedalists were carrying. There was no point in objecting or begging; the corporal wouldn’t listen, he broke them up into two groups and assigned them to each of the trucks, under heavy guard; then he sent one of his men to drive the Lancia 3 Ro and gave the signal to depart.

“Where are you taking us?” Pavel dared to ask.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to go to Glogau?” the corporal replied. “Well, that’s where we’re taking you. You should be pleased.” And all the way to Glogau he remained silent and refused to answer their questions.

Glogau, surmounted by a squat, dark fortress, was the first German city that the band had encountered. It was (and is) a mining town, and it struck them as grim, black with coal dust, surrounded by dozens of mine shafts, each of which had been transformed by the Germans into a small concentration camp. The Russians had occupied Glogau only a few weeks earlier; they had done nothing to change its appearance, nor had they altered its use, but now it was German prisoners of war, transferred in just a few hours from fighting on the front to working in the mines, who descended the shafts, rather than the slave laborers of the Nazi concentration camps. In these miniature concentration camps, the Russians gathered in wholesale all the displaced or suspicious people the Red Army found in the area.

They didn’t bother with details where the Gedalists were concerned. It was over in five minutes: they didn’t search them, much less interrogate them, the Lancia 3 Ro vanished, and for the first time the fighting men and women of Kosava, Lyuban, and Novoselky experienced the humiliating

siege of barbed wire. The enclosure to which they had been assigned already contained fifty or so prisoners—Polish, German, French, Dutch, and Greek Jews whom the Russians had liberated from the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. The barracks were heated, the Russians provided them with food at irregular intervals but invariably in large amounts, the front was moving farther away and by now the days were quickly growing longer, yet these former prisoners never emerged from their isolation. They spoke seldom and always in an undertone, and only rarely did they lift their eyes from the ground. The Gedalists tried unsuccessfully to establish a rapport with them: once their primary needs had been satisfied, they seemed to have no further wishes or interests or curiosity. They never asked questions, nor did they answer them. There were women among them: they still wore the striped suits and wooden clogs, and their hair had just started to grow back. As their second night in the camp was ending, Mendel left the barracks to visit the latrine. As he stepped across the threshold, he bumped into a human body and felt it sway, inert; it was still warm, and it swung on a noose from the rafters. The same thing happened over and over in the days that followed, like a silent obsession.

Schmulek left the Gedalists and joined the ranks of the former prisoners. In contrast, little by little, first Sissl, and then the other women of the band, and in the end all the Gedalists, managed to overcome the resistance of one of the women from the concentration camp. Her name was Francine and she came from Paris, but her journey had been a long one: first she had been deported to Auschwitz, and from there to a smaller concentration camp near Wrocław; finally, when the Russians were drawing closer, and the Germans had evacuated all the concentration camps in the area, subjecting the prisoners to a senseless march on foot toward a new prison, she had managed to escape. Francine was a doctor, but she had been unable to practice her profession in the concentration camp because she did not speak German well; all the same, she had learned enough to be able to tell what she had seen. She had been lucky: any Jew who was alive was a lucky person. But she'd been lucky in other ways as well; she still had her hair, which they had not cut because she was a doctor—the Germans have very precise rules.

Francine claimed to be a Jew, but she was different from any Jew the Gedalists had ever met before. In fact, they wouldn't even have believed her if they hadn't considered that there is no advantage to claiming to be a Jew

if you're not. She didn't speak Yiddish, she couldn't understand it, and she said that when she was in Paris she hadn't even known that it was a language; she had vaguely heard it mentioned, and she thought that it was a variety of broken Hebrew. She was thirty-seven years old; she had never been married, she had lived first with one man, then another; she was a pediatrician, and she liked the work she did, she had a clinic right in the heart of Paris, and in her day she had taken some magnificent vacations, Mediterranean cruises, trips to Italy and Spain, skiing and ice skating in the Dolomites. Of course, she had been in Auschwitz, but she preferred to talk about other things, about her life before that. Francine was tall and slender, and she had chestnut hair and a stern and ravaged face.

Her encounter with Gedale's band was full of reciprocal astonishment. Yes, in the concentration camp she had become reasonably well acquainted with Jewish women from Eastern Europe, but none of them were like the band's five women. She hadn't particularly cared for her companions, they had seemed foreign to her, a hundred times more alien than her French Christian girlfriends. She'd felt annoyance and compassion for their passivity, their ignorance, their primitive ways, the mute resignation with which they had gone into the gas—

Into the gas? That word was new. Francine had had to explain it, and she did so in simple words, without looking the Jewish fighters in the face as they questioned her, almost like judges. Into the gas, certainly, how could they not know about it? By the thousands, by the millions; she didn't even know how many, but the women in the concentration camp melted around her, day by day. In Auschwitz it was the rule to die, to live was an exception, and she in fact was an exception, every living Jew was a lucky person. But what about her? How had she survived?

"I don't know," she said. Francine, too, like Schmulek, like Edek, lowered her voice whenever she spoke about death. "I don't know: I met a Frenchwoman who was a doctor in the infirmary, she helped me, she gave me food, and for a while she got me work as a nurse. But that alone would not have been enough, many women ate more than me and died all the same, they let themselves sink to the bottom. I held out, and I don't know why; perhaps it was because I loved life more than they did, or because I thought that life had some meaning. It's a strange thing: it was easier to believe that there than it is here. In the concentration camp no one committed suicide. There was no time for that, there were other things to

think about, bread, boils. Here we have time, and people kill themselves. Partly out of shame."

"What shame?" Line asked. "You feel ashamed when you've done something wrong, and they did nothing wrong."

"Shame that they weren't dead," said Francine. "I have it, too: it's stupid but I have it. It's hard to explain. It's a feeling that the others died in your stead; as if you were alive free of charge, out of some privilege you never earned, out of some abuse you did to the dead. Being alive is not a crime, but we feel it as a crime."

Gedale never left Francine's side; Bella was jealous of her, and he ignored Bella's jealousy.

"Oh sure," Bella said, "that's just what he does, it's second nature to him. He likes foreign women, he's always chasing after the last one he's met."

Francine answered the questions that Gedale and the others asked her with irritable volubility. She'd been a nurse, that's right; she felt compassion for the sick women in her care, and yet she beat them sometimes. Not because she wanted to hurt them, it was more as a way of protecting herself, she couldn't explain it, protecting herself from their demands, their complaints. She knew about the gas, all the veterans knew about it, but she never told the new arrivals, it wouldn't have done any good. Escape? That would have been crazy: escape where? And she, who spoke only bad German and no Polish?

"Come with us," Sissl said to her, "now that it's all over, you can be our doctor."

"And in a few months a baby will be born. My son," Isidor added.

"I'm not like you," Francine replied, "I'm going back to France, that's my country." She saw that Bella was holding a novel in her hands, read the name Victor Hugo, and took it from her with a cry of joy: "Oh, a French book!" But she immediately saw the Polish title, indecipherable, and handed the book back to Bella, who resumed reading it with a great show of coldness. For a few days, Pavel did his best to court Francine, with all the charm of a bear; but she laughed at the French he'd picked up in the cabarets, and Pavel withdrew in undramatic defeat, indeed, boasting faintly between clenched teeth: "She wasn't really my type, I tried to make her understand. Too refined, too delicate: a bit of a *meshuggeneh*, probably the result of the trouble she's been through, but all she thinks about is food. I

saw her myself, all the crumbs she finds she sticks in her pocket. And she washes too much."

In the camp in Glogau, time passed in an odd way. The days were empty, all alike, and they slipped away boring and long, but in memory they flattened out, becoming short and blending one into the other. The weeks went by, the Russians were distracted, and frequently also drunk, but they issued no permits to leave the camp. Within the enclosure people were constantly coming and going: there was a steady arrival of prisoners of all nationalities and walks of life, other prisoners were released in accordance with indecipherable criteria. The Greeks were released, then the French, and Francine with them; the Poles and the Germans were left. The camp commander was kind, but he shrugged his shoulders: he knew nothing, it wasn't up to him, he simply executed the orders that he received from headquarters. Kind but firm; clearly, the war was won, but fighting was still going on, and not far away, either: around Wrocław, as well as in the mountains of the western Sudetenland. Orders were strict, no one was to clog up the roads.

"Just be patient for a few more days, and don't ask me for things that I can't give you. And don't try to escape; I'm asking you this as a favor."

Kind, firm, and curious. He called Gedale into his office, and then all the others one by one. He'd lost his left hand, and on his chest he wore a silver medal and a bronze one; he looked to be about forty, he was skinny and bald, with a dark complexion and bushy black eyebrows; he spoke in a tranquil and courteous voice and appeared very intelligent.

"If you ask me, Captain Smirnov hasn't been called Smirnov for very long," Gedale declared when he came back from his interview.

"What do you mean?" asked Mottel, who had not yet been summoned.

"I mean that he managed to change his name. That he is a Jew, but that he doesn't want anyone to know that. You can see what you think, when your turn comes, but take care."

"What should we say and what should we not say?" asked Line.

"Say as little as possible. That we're Jews is obvious. That we were armed is not something we can deny; if he asks you about it, admit that we are partisans, that's always better than being taken for bandits. Insist on the fact that we fought against the Germans: say where and when. Remain silent about Edek's band and on our contacts with the Jewish Combat Organization. Silence, if possible, about the truck, too, because there we

were clearly in the wrong; if worse comes to worst, say that we found it broken down and we fixed it. As for the rest, it's best to remain vague: where we're going and where we come from. Those of you who were in the Red Army should keep that to themselves: especially you, Pyotr; come up with a story that'll hold together. But I don't think he's with the police, I think he's curious on his own account, and he finds us interesting."

Mendel's turn came at the end of April, when the buds were already opening on the birch trees and the driving rain had washed the roofs of the barracks clean of coal dust. The war news was triumphant: Bratislava and Vienna had fallen, the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front were already fighting in the suburbs of Berlin. On the western front as well, Germany was in its death throes, the Americans were in Nuremberg, the French in Stuttgart and Berchtesgaden, and the British on the river Elbe. In Italy, the Allies had reached the Po, and in Genoa, Milan, and Turin the Italian partisans had expelled the Nazis even before the liberating troops could arrive.

Captain Smirnov was elegant in his neatly pressed uniform, and spoke unaccented Russian; he detained Mendel for almost two hours, offering him Irish whiskey and Cuban cigars. The fairy tale that Mendel had concocted, which was for that matter fairly implausible, proved to be unnecessary: Smirnov knew a great deal about him, not merely his first name, patronymic, and surname. He knew where and when he had gone missing, knew about what had happened in Novoselky and Turov. But he asked him a lot of questions about his encounter with Venyamin's band. Who had informed him? Ulybin himself? Polina Gelman? The two messengers in the airplane? Mendel was unable to find out.

"So it was this Venyamin who sent you all away? And why?"

Mendel kept things vague:

"I don't know. I couldn't say: a partisan commander has to be cautious and mistrustful, and all sorts of people were wandering around in those woods. Perhaps he didn't think we were fit to join his band, after all we didn't really know the area. . . ."

"Mendel Nachmanovich, or perhaps I should say, Mendel ben Nachman," said Smirnov, emphasizing the Hebrew patronymic, "you can speak freely with me. I'd like you to understand that I am not an inquisitor, even if I do gather information and ask questions. You see, I'd like to write your story, to make sure that it isn't lost. I'd like to write the stories of all of

you, of all the Jewish soldiers of the Red Army who made the same choices as you, and who remained Russians and Jews even when the Russians made it clear to them, in words or through their actions, that they had to decide, that it was impossible to be both. I don't know if I'll be able to do that, and even if I do write this book I don't know if I'll be able to publish it. Times can change, perhaps for the better, perhaps for the worse."

Mendel fell silent, astonished, perplexed, torn between reverence and suspicion. Out of age-old habit, he was mistrustful of those who showed benevolence and asked questions. Smirnov went on, "You don't trust me, and I can hardly blame you. I, too, know the things that you know; I, too, trust only a few people, and I often force myself to withstand the temptation to trust someone. Think it over; but there's one thing I want to tell you, I admire you and your comrades, and to a certain extent I envy you."

"You envy us? We're not enviable. We've walked a hard road. Why would you envy us?"

"Because your choices weren't forced upon you. Because you decided your own fate."

"Comrade captain," said Mendel, "the war isn't over yet, and we don't know whether this war will give birth to another. It may be too early to write our story."

"I know that," said Smirnov. "I know what a partisan war is. I know that a partisan might happen to have done, seen, or said things that he shouldn't tell others. But I also know that what you learned in the marshes and in the forests should not be lost; and it's not enough for it to survive in a book."

Smirnov had uttered these last words very distinctly, looking Mendel right in the eyes.

"What do you mean?" asked Mendel.

"I know where you're going, and I know that your war is not over. It will begin again, in a few years, I couldn't say just when, and no longer against the Germans. Not for Russia, but with Russia's help. People like you will be needed, for instance; you could teach others the things that you learned, on the Kursk front, at Novoselky, at Turov, and perhaps elsewhere, too. Think it over, gunner: think this over, too."

Mendel felt as if he'd been seized by an eagle and taken soaring into the sky.

"Comrade captain," he said, "this war isn't over yet and you're already talking to me about another one. All of us are tired, we've done and

withstood many things, and many of us are dead."

"I can hardly blame you. And if you were to tell me that you want to go back to being a watchmaker, I could hardly blame you for that, either. But think it over."

The captain poured out whiskey for Mendel and for himself, raised his glass, and said: *"L'chaim!"* Mendel's head jerked up sharply: this expression is the Hebrew equivalent of "To your health!" and it's used as a toast before drinking; but it has a broader application, because it means literally "To life!" Few Russians have ever heard it, and they usually pronounce it wrong; but Smirnov had perfectly enunciated the harsh breathing of the *ch.*

In the days that followed, Smirnov summoned one by one all the Gedalists for an interview, and he called some of them more than once. He was exceedingly courteous with them all, but endless discussions sprang up regarding his personality and his true identity. A converted Jew; a Jew in disguise; a Jew pretending to be a Christian, or a Christian pretending to be a Jew. A historian. A busybody. Many of them considered him to be ambiguous at best, others said in no uncertain terms that he was a spy from the NKVD, and that he was just a little cleverer than most; but most of the Gedalists, and among them Mendel and Gedale himself, trusted him and told him about the band's exploits and their own personal experiences, because, as the saying goes, "*Ibergekumeneh tsores iz gut tsu dertsailen*" ("It's good to recount past troubles"). The proverb applies in all the languages on earth, but in Yiddish it sounds especially appropriate.

In the tumultuous and memorable last days of the Second World War on the European fronts, in early May 1945, the Russian headquarters that administered the constellation of small concentration camps in Glogau vanished as if by magic. One night, without a word, they all simply left, including Captain Smirnov: no one knew whether they had been transferred or demobilized or simply absorbed by the collective frenzy of the Red Army, drunk with victory. There were no more sentries, the gates swung wide open, the storehouses had been looted; but, nailed to the outside of their barracks door, the Gedalists found a note that had been scrawled in haste:

We have to leave. Dig behind the kitchen chimney; there's a gift for you—we don't need it anymore. Good luck.

SMIRNOV

Behind the kitchens they found several hand grenades, three pistols, a German machine pistol, a small supply of ammunition, a military map of Saxony and Bavaria, and a wad of bills: eight hundred dollars. Gedale's band set off once again: no longer by night, no longer following furtive trails or traveling through deserted wildernesses, but on the roads of the Germany that had once been proud and prosperous and now lay devastated, between hedges of faces sealed shut, marked by a new sense of impotence, which gave new fuel to an old hatred. "Rule number one, we mustn't get separated," Gedale had told them; for the most part they went on foot, at times hitching a ride on a Soviet military vehicle, but only if there was enough room for them all. By now Rokhele the White was entering her seventh month of pregnancy. Gedale allowed her alone to be transported by the occasional horse-drawn wagon, but then the entire band marched along as an escort.

Against the indifferent backdrop of the countryside in springtime, those roads were teeming with a twofold humanity, afflicted or festive. German citizens, on foot or in wagons, were returning to the ruined cities, blind with weariness; other carts carried farmers, bringing goods for the black market. In contrast, Soviet soldiers, riding bicycles or motorcycles, driving military vehicles or requisitioned automobiles, drove at reckless speed in both directions, singing, playing music, shooting into the air. The Gedalists narrowly avoided being run over by a Dodge truck that carried two grand pianos: two uniformed officers were playing Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* in unison, with seriousness and commitment, while the driver zigzagged around the wagons, swerving sharply, sounding the siren at full blast, and ignoring the pedestrians in his path. Ex-prisoners of all nationalities were traveling, in groups or alone, men and women, civilians in tattered clothing, Allied soldiers in their khaki uniforms with the large letters KG on their backs: all of them on their way to be repatriated or simply searching for a place to sleep.

Toward the end of May, the band set up camp outside the village of Neuhaus, not far from Dresden. Once they began advancing into German territory, they noticed that it was virtually impossible to buy food in the

larger cities, which were in ruins, half deserted, and starving. Pavel, Rokhele the Black, and two other men, out on a foraging mission, knocked at the door of a farmhouse, twice, then a third time; no one answered. “Shall we go in?” Pavel suggested. The shutters over the windows had been recently painted, in vivid colors. They opened easily, but there were no windows behind them: there was a solid wall of reinforced concrete, and in place of a window there was the narrow aperture of a loophole. It wasn’t a farmhouse; it was a camouflaged bunker, now empty and abandoned.

The village, on the other hand, was swarming with people. It was surrounded by walls, and through the gates women and elderly men came and went with a furtive, famished look, pulling hand carts loaded with provisions or odds and ends. On either side of the gateway stood two hard-faced guards, dressed in civilian clothes, and apparently unarmed. “What do you want?” they asked the four, whom they had recognized as outsiders.

“To buy something to eat,” Pavel replied in his best German. One of the sentries nodded his head for them to proceed.

The village hadn’t been damaged. The cobblestone lanes ran between picturesque and bright-colored façades crisscrossed by half-beams painted black. The setting was serene, but the human presence was unsettling. The streets were thronged with people walking in all directions, apparently without destination or purpose: elderly people, children, cripples. There were no able-bodied men in sight. The windows, too, were filled with fearful and suspicious faces.

“It looks like a ghetto,” murmured Rokhele, who had been in Kosava.

“It is,” Pavel replied. “They must be refugees from Dresden. Now it’s their turn.” They had spoken in Yiddish, and perhaps a little too loudly, because a large, stout woman, wearing a pair of men’s boots, turned to an old man beside her and told him ostentatiously: “Look at them, back again, and more insolent than before.” Then, addressing the four Jews directly, she added, “This is not the place for you.”

“Then where is our place?” Pavel asked, in good faith.

“Behind barbed wire,” the woman replied.

Pavel, without thinking, grabbed the woman by the lapels of her coat, but he immediately released her because out of the corner of his eye he had seen that a crowd was gathering around them. At the same instant he heard a shot overhead, and Rokhele, at his side, staggered and fell forward. The crowd surrounding them vanished in an instant, and the windows, too,

emptied. Pavel knelt down next to the young woman: she was breathing, but her limbs were limp, inert. She wasn't bleeding; there were no visible wounds. "She fainted; let's get her out of here," he said to the two others.

At the camp, Sissl and Mendel examined her more carefully. There was a wound after all, practically invisible, hidden under her thick black hair: a clean hole just above her left temple. There was no exit wound, the bullet had remained in her skull. Her eyes were closed; Sissl lifted the lids and saw only the white of her eyes; the irises had rolled upward, and were concealed in the sockets. Rokhele's breathing was increasingly faint and irregular, and she no longer had a pulse. As long as she lived, no one dared to speak, as if in fear of breaking that soft whisper of breath; by evening she was dead. Gedale said, "Let's go, with all our weapons."

They set out at night, all of them; the only ones left in the camp were Bella and Sissl, who were digging the grave, and the White, saying the prayer for the dead over the body of her black sister. They didn't have many weapons, but rage was driving them, the way a tempest drives a ship. A woman, not yet twenty years old, and not even a combatant; a woman who had survived the ghetto and Treblinka, murdered in peacetime, treacherously, for no reason, by a German. An unarmed woman, a cheerful carefree hardworking woman, someone who accepted everything and never complained, the only one who had never experienced the paralysis of despair, the fireman on Mendel's train, Pyotr's woman. Pyotr was the most furious of them all, and the most clearheaded.

"To the Rathaus," he said tersely. "The important ones will be there." Rapidly and silently they reached the village gates; the sentries were no longer there, and they burst in, running through the empty streets, while distant images resurfaced in Mendel's mind, faded and insistent, images that trip you up instead of driving you forward. Simeon and Levi taking bloody revenge for the outrage perpetrated by the Shechemites against their sister Dinah. Was that vengeance just? Is there such a thing as just vengeance? There is no such thing; but you're a man, and vengeance calls out in your blood, and so you run and you destroy and you kill. Like them, like the Germans.

They surrounded the Rathaus. Pyotr was right: there was no electrical power in Neuhaus, the streets were dark, and most of the windows dark, too, but the second-floor windows of the city hall were faintly illuminated. Pyotr had asked for and been given the machine pistol that Smirnov had

bequeathed them; from the shadows where he was hiding, with two single shots, he killed the two men standing guard outside the front door. “Now, hurry!” he shouted. He ran to the door and tried frantically to break it down, first with the butt of the machine pistol, and then with his shoulder. The door was heavy and resisted, and already excited voices could be heard within. Arie and Mendel stood away from the façade and simultaneously hurled hand grenades through the illuminated windows; splinters of glass rained into the street, three long seconds went by, then two explosions were heard. All the windows on the second floor blew out, vomiting pieces of wood and paper. In the meantime, Mottel tried in vain to help Pyotr get the door open. “Wait!” he shouted; in a flash he climbed up to the ground-floor window, shattered the glass with a blow from his hip, and jumped inside. A few seconds later he could be heard firing three, then four shots with his pistol, and immediately afterward the door was unlocked from within. “You stay out here, and don’t let anyone get away!” Pyotr ordered four of the men from Ruzany; he and the others rushed up the staircase, striding over the body of an elderly man lying sideways across the steps. In the meeting hall stood four men, with their hands up; two others were dead, and a seventh man moaned in a corner, writhing weakly.

“Who is the burgomaster?” Gedale shouted; but Pyotr had already cut them down with a burst of machine-gun fire.

No one had tried to intervene, no one had escaped, and the four men standing guard hadn’t seen anyone approach. In the Rathaus cellars the Gedalists found bread, hams, and lard, and they returned to the camp loaded down and unharmed, but Gedale said, “We need to get out of here! Bury the Black, take down the tents, and let’s go immediately: the Americans are thirty kilometers away.”

They walked through the night, in haste, with remorse for the ease of their vengeance, and relief because it was all over. The White marched courageously, with the others taking turns helping her so that she would not fall behind. Mendel found himself walking at the head of the column, between Line and Gedale.

“Did you count them?” Line asked.

“Ten,” Gedale replied. “Two outside the front door, and Mottel killed one on the stairs, and seven in the meeting hall.”

“Ten against one,” said Mendel. “We’ve done just what they used to do: ten hostages for a German killed.”

“You’re reckoning wrong,” said Line. “The ten in Neuhaus shouldn’t be counted against Rokhele. They should be counted against the millions of Auschwitz. Remember what the Frenchwoman told us.”

Mendel said, “Blood isn’t paid for with blood. Blood is paid for with justice. Whoever shot the Black was an animal, and I don’t want to become an animal. If the Germans killed with gas, should we kill all the Germans with gas? If the Germans killed ten for one, and we do the same thing, we’ll become like them, and there will never again be peace.”

Gedale broke in: “You may be right, Mendel. But in that case, how do you explain the fact that I feel much better now?”

Mendel looked inside himself, then admitted: “Yes, I feel better, too, but that doesn’t prove a thing. The people in Neuhaus were refugees from Dresden. Smirnov told us: in Dresden, a hundred and forty thousand Germans were killed in a single night. That night, in Dresden, there was a firestorm that melted iron lampposts.”

“We didn’t bomb Dresden,” said Line.

“Enough,” said Mendel. “That was the last battle. Let’s keep walking, let’s go find the Americans.”

“Let’s see what they look like,” said Gedale, who didn’t seem too interested in the problems that were worrying Mendel. “The war is over: it’s hard to understand, we’ll understand it little by little, but it’s over. Tomorrow, day will dawn and we’ll no longer have to shoot or hide. It’s springtime, we have enough to eat, and all the roads are open. Let’s go find a place in the world where he can be born in peace.”

“He who?” asked Line.

“The baby. Our son, the son of two innocents.”

They ventured into no-man’s-land with conflicted souls. They were uncertain and shy, they felt they had been washed clean, like blank pages, children once again. Savage grown-up children, who had matured in hardship, and isolation, in bivouacs and wartime, misfits on the threshold of the West and of peace. There, beneath the soles of their patched boots, lay enemy soil, the land of the exterminator, Germania-Deutschland-Daychland-Niemcy: a tidy countryside, untouched by war, but look carefully, it’s only appearance, the real Germany is in the cities, the

Germany they had glimpsed in Glogau and Neuhaus, the Germany of Dresden, Berlin, and Hamburg, the Germany they had heard about with horror. That's the real Germany, the one that had become drunk on blood and had been forced to pay; a prostrate body, fatally wounded, already rotting. Naked: along with the barbaric glee of revenge, they felt a new uneasiness; they felt indiscreet and shameless, like someone who exposes a forbidden nudity.

On either side of the road they saw houses with shuttered windows, like dead eyes, eyes that are unwilling to see; some still covered by thatched roofs, others roofless, or with roofs charred and burned. Lopped-off belltowers, playing fields where the weeds were already growing. In town centers, heaps of rubble marked with signs that read "Don't walk here: human bodies"; long lines in front of the few open shops, and citizens busy erasing or chiseling away the symbols of the past, the eagles and swastikas that were meant to last for a thousand years. From the balconies strange red banners waved: they still bore the shadow of the black swastika that had been unstitched in haste; but soon, as they went on walking, the red banners were seen less frequently and finally disappeared. Gedale said to Mendel: "If your enemy falls, do not rejoice; but do not help him to his feet."

The line of demarcation between the two armies had not yet been consolidated. On the morning of the second day of their march they found themselves in a gentle landscape, green and brown, hilly, dotted with farms and large houses; in the fields the peasants were already at work. "Americans?" The peasants shrugged their shoulders mistrustfully and waved vaguely westward. "Russians?" No Russians; no Russians here.

They found themselves amid the Americans almost without noticing the transition. The first patrols they ran into glanced at the Gedalists' ragged caravan without interest: in Germany there was nothing but refugees, they had seen worse. Only in Scheibenberg did a patrol stop them and escort them to the command post. The little office, which had been set up on the ground floor of a large requisitioned house, was overflowing with people, nearly all of them Germans, who had been evacuated from bombed-out cities or were fleeing before the Red Army. The men of the band left their baggage (and the weapons hidden in their baggage) in Mottel's care and formed an orderly line.

"You speak for everyone," said Gedale to Pavel. Pavel was intimidated:

“But I don’t know English. I pretend to know it, but I just ape the words, the way actors and parrots do.”

“That doesn’t matter, they’ll question you in German. So you answer in bad German, tell them that we’re Italians, and that we’re going to Italy.”

“They won’t believe me. We don’t look like Italians.”

“Just give it a try. If it works, good; if it doesn’t work, we’ll see. We’re not risking much, Hitler’s gone now.”

The American sitting behind the desk was sweaty, shirtless, and bored, and he questioned Pavel in surprisingly good German; and in fact Pavel had to work hard to invent a language that would sound believable coming from an Italian. Fortunately, the American seemed entirely indifferent to what Pavel had to say, how he said it, the band, its makeup, its intentions, its past, and its future. After a few moments he said to Pavel: “Please be more concise”; after another minute he interrupted him and told him to wait outside the house, him and his comrades. Pavel walked outside, they all slung their knapsacks over their shoulders, and they left Scheibenberg “with hand raised.” Gedale said:

“The Americans may not all be so distracted, and we don’t know what agreements there might be between the Russians and the Americans. In any case, it might be best for those who still have Soviet uniforms and insignia, either on their clothing or in their baggage, to get rid of them; it would be no joke if they sent us back.”

They were no longer in any hurry. They continued westward, in short stages, stopping frequently to rest, in a setting that was always new, both idyllic and tragic. They were often overtaken by American military units, some motorized, others on foot, marching into the heart of Germany, or they met vast columns of German prisoners of war escorted by American soldiers, white or black, machine guns dangling lazily from their shoulders. At the train station in Chemnitz, halted on a stretch of siding, was a fifty-car freight train, its locomotive pointing toward the demarcation line; it was carrying the entire apparatus of a paper mill, the raw materials, the enormous rolls of newly produced paper, and the office furniture. Guarding the train was just one soldier, very young and fair-haired, in a Soviet uniform, lying on a sofa wedged in among the machinery; Pyotr greeted him in Russian, they struck up a conversation, and the young soldier told him that the paper mill was being sent to Russia, he knew not where; it was a gift from the Americans to the Russians, because all the factories in

Russia were kaput. The soldier asked Pyotr nothing. A short distance farther on was a bombed-out factory, possibly a machine-tool workshop; a team of prisoners of war was shoveling the rubble under the supervision of American officers and engineers. They were working not as laborers but, rather, as archeologists: using the tips of their shovels, with their bare hands, while the Americans bent over every metal artifact, examining it, labeling it, and setting it carefully aside.

Rokhele never complained, but she was tired and everyone was worried about her condition. She had a hard time walking: her ankles were more swollen every day, and so she was forced to give up wearing boots and butcher the uppers of the shoes that Mottel had found for her, and in the end she was reduced to walking in wooden clogs. For short distances they even carried her on a stretcher, but it was obvious that a different solution had to be found. In mid-June they arrived in Plauen, on the Berlin–Munich–Brenner railroad line, and Gedale sent Pavel and Mottel to investigate the situation. The situation was chaotic: trains came through at irregular intervals, on unpredictable schedules, loaded beyond any reasonable limit. They camped out in the waiting room, which had taken on the appearance of a public dormitory. In the band's treasury there was no longer enough money to buy tickets to the Brenner Pass for all of them, as Gedale would have preferred; more money had to be spent to get Rokhele the White a gynecological examination. She was admitted to a clinic and emerged excited about the cleanliness and tidiness she had seen; she was healthy, her pregnancy was proceeding normally, she was just a little tired. She could walk, yes, but not too much. In the meantime, most of the members of the band were roaming through the city, like tourists, but at the same time keeping an eye out for any barter that could bring in a little cash. "Sell heavy clothing, yes, because we're heading south and into summer," Gedale had said. "Kitchen utensils only at the right price; and weapons at no price whatsoever."

None of the Gedalists had any experience of city life; only Leonid had, and many of them regretted that he was not there. In Plauen they were overwhelmed and surprised by the contradictions: through rubble-clogged streets the milkman made his rounds with his little cart and his air horn, punctually, every morning at the same time. Coffee and meat were sold at astoundingly high prices, while silverware was cheap. Mottel bought a fine camera, loaded with film, for just a few marks; they arranged themselves

for a group photograph, some standing, others squatting in the front row, all of them with weapons in plain sight. No one wanted to miss being in the photo, so they had to ask a passerby to take the picture, against a backdrop of ruined houses. The trains operated poorly, but the Reisebüro, the city's one official travel agency, worked very well: the telephone line had been restored, and they knew more there than at the train station. Nonetheless, Gedale never ventured very far from the station. He could frequently be seen in the company of one of the railroad laborers; Gedale was generous with him, treating him to beers at the tavern, and one day they were spotted together in the little garden beside the station: Gedale was playing the violin and the German was playing the flute, both of them serious and intent. Gedale, without offering any explanation, insisted that no one wander off: they might be leaving soon, they all should be available at a few minutes' notice.

Instead, however, they spent a few more weeks at the station, in an atmosphere of laziness, of waiting for nothing in particular. It was hot, and in the station there was a Red Cross facility that distributed soup every day to anyone who wanted it; refugees and stragglers of every race and nationality trickled in and out all the time. Some of the townspeople of Plauen established cautious relations with the encamped Gedalists; they were curious but they never asked questions. The conversations were hobbled by linguistic friction; Yiddish speakers understand German speakers fairly well and vice versa, and, in addition, nearly all the Gedalists were comfortable speaking German, some more grammatically than others, and with Yiddish accents of varying strength, but the two languages, sister tongues in historical terms, appeared to their respective speakers each as a caricature of the other, just as apes appear to us humans caricatures of humanity (and no doubt that is how we appear to them). Perhaps this fact enters into the Germans' ancient resentment of the Ashkenazi Jews, as corrupters of Hochdeutsch, or High German. But other, deeper factors intervened to disrupt any reciprocal understanding. To the Germans, those foreign Jews, so different from the local bourgeois Jews who had allowed themselves with great discipline to be rounded up and slaughtered, were somehow suspect: too prompt, too vigorous, filthy, ragged, fierce, unpredictable, primitive, "Russian." To the Jews, it was impossible, and at the same time necessary, to distinguish between the headhunters they had fled, and upon whom they had wrought such passionate vengeance, and

these shy and introverted little old people, these courteous fair-haired children who peered in at the station doors as if through the bars of cages at the zoo. It's not them, no: but it's their fathers, their teachers, their children, they themselves yesterday and tomorrow. How to untangle the knot? It can't be done. Leave, as soon as possible. This land is burning hot: this manicured, order-loving land is burning hot; the mild, bland midsummer air is burning. Time to leave, time to leave: we didn't come all the way from the heart of Polesie just to fall asleep in the *Wartesaal* of Plauen an der Elster, to pass the time taking group photographs and eating Red Cross soup. But suddenly, on July 20, the signal arrived, in the middle of the night, granting a collective and unexpressed wish. Gedale rushed into the lobby, into the midst of the sleepers:

"Everyone on your feet immediately, with your baggage fastened. Follow me silently, we're leaving in fifteen minutes." In the ensuing hubbub, questions and hurried explanations went back and forth: they were all to follow him, it wasn't far, to a switching track. His friend, the flautist, the laborer, had performed a miracle. There it was, before them, almost new, as good as new, the train car that was going to carry them into Italy: bought, that's right; bought for just a few dollars, not strictly legally; a damaged car, recently repaired, still waiting to be tested—in other words, organized. Organized? That's right, that's what they say, that's what they said in the ghettos, in the concentration camps, in all of Nazi Europe: something that you procure illegally is said to have been organized. And the train would be coming any minute, the station bell was already ringing.

Everyone was ready in a flash, but Pavel was missing. Gedale cursed in Polish (because you can't curse in Yiddish) and sent one of his men running to look for him; he was found not far away, with a German prostitute, and led back to the station still buttoning his trousers. He, too, was cursing, in Russian, but he didn't object. They all climbed into the car without making noise.

"Who'll couple it to the train?" asked Mendel.

"He will. Ludwig. He promised me. If necessary, we'll give him a hand ourselves."

"But how did you manage to make friends with him?"

"With the violin. Just like that character, in ancient times, who tamed tigers with his lyre. Not that Ludwig is a tiger, he's kind and very talented,

it was a pleasure to play with him; and he was willing to do this service for us in exchange for very little."

"But he's still a German," Pavel grumbled.

"So, what does that have to do with it? He didn't go to war, he's always worked on the railroads, he plays the flute, and in 1933 he didn't vote for Hitler. Can you really say what you would have done if you had been born in Germany, to a pureblood mother and father, and you were taught in school all that *bubkes* about blood and soil?"

The women were readying a pallet, with blankets and straw, for the White in a corner of the railroad car. Bella turned to Gedale and said, "But still, tell the truth, you've always liked trains. I think that, if that nun in Bialystok hadn't got in the way, you wouldn't have become a violinist—you'd have gone to work for the railroad."

Gedale laughed happily and said that it really was true, he loved trains and all sorts of vehicles: "But this time the game has proved useful, we're going to Italy in a private car, all our own. Only heads of state travel this way!"

"*Nu*," said Isidor, thoughtfully, "you're still pretty young. Now that the war is over no one needs partisans anymore. Why shouldn't you work for the railroad? I'd like it, too, when we get to the land of Israel."

At that moment the clatter of wheels was heard, they saw the glow of the headlight on the tracks, and a long freight train entered the station. It screeched to a halt and sat motionless for half an hour, then it slowly began maneuvering: perched on the bumper of the last car, a man waved his lantern in greeting—it was him, Ludwig. The train rolled backward at walking speed, there was a jolt, followed by the crash of metal couplings. The train started off again, hauling the Gedalists' special car toward the Alps.

12

July–August 1945

They had never traveled like this before: not on foot but in a freight car hooked up to a train; not in the cold, not exposed to rifle fire, not starving, not scattered. Not legal, not yet, and who knows when they would be, but still there was a sign on the side of the car with the route: Munich–Innsbruck–Brenner–Verona: Ludwig had thought of everything. “Leave the car as little as you can,” said Gedale. “The less we’re seen the better, and the less likely it is that somebody decides to check on us.”

But nobody checked on them; on that entire line, and on most of Europe’s rail lines, there was still far too much to be done: tracks to be repaired, rubble to be removed, signals to be restored. The train traveled slowly, almost only by night; by day it sat interminably on sidings, roasting in the sun, to yield the right-of-way to other trains that took precedence. Few were passenger trains: they were freight trains that carried human beings, but packed in like freight; the hundreds of thousands of Italians, women and men, soldiers and civilians, paid workers and slaves, who had labored in the factories and camps of the ravaged Third Reich. Mixed in among them, less noisy, less numerous, eager not to be noticed, other passengers traveled, Germans who were swarming out of occupied Germany in order to escape Allied justice: SS soldiers, Gestapo, and Party officials. Paradoxically, for them, as for the Jews in transit, Italy was the place of least resistance, the best jumping-off point for more hospitable countries: South America, Syria, Egypt. Whether traveling openly or in disguise, with identity documents or without, this variegated tide was pushing south, toward the Brenner Pass: the Brenner Pass had become the

narrow neck of a vast funnel. Through the Brenner Pass you could reach Italy, a land with a mild climate and a notoriously open illegality; a friendly-mafioso country whose dual reputation had reached all the way to Norway and Ukraine and the sealed ghettos of Eastern Europe; a place of ignored prohibitions and anarchic tolerance, where every foreigner is welcomed like a brother.

When the train was halted in a station, they kept the doors closed, but they opened them when the train was in motion and during the frequent stops in the open countryside. Sitting on the floor, legs dangling, Mendel watched the landscape spread out solemnly before him: the fertile fields, the lakes, the forests, the farms, and the houses of the Upper Palatinate and then of Bavaria. Neither he nor any of his companions had ever lived in such a rich and civilized land. Behind them, as if dotted by their countless footsteps, the trail of their journey stretched out, endless, as if in a troubled dream, through marshes, fords, forests full of ambushes, snow, rivers, and deaths suffered and inflicted. He felt weary and alien. Alone now: without women, without a destination, without a homeland. Without friends? No, he couldn't say that; his companions remained, and they always would remain: they filled his emptiness. He didn't care where the train was taking him; he'd done his job, he'd performed his duty, not easily, not always willingly, but he'd done it. It was over, finished. The war had ended, and what is a gunner to do in peacetime? What does he know how to do? Be a watchmaker? Who could say? Shooting makes your fingers hard, insensitive, and your eyes get accustomed to looking into the distance, through the sights. No call reached him from the promised land, perhaps even there he'd have to walk and fight. Fine, it's my fate, I accept it, but it doesn't warm my heart. It's a duty, and you perform it, like the time I killed the Ukrainian from the auxiliary police. Duty is not a treasure. Neither is the future. But these people are, they are my treasure, I still have them. All of them: with their crudeness and their defects, even those who have offended me, even those whom I have offended. And the women, too, Sissl whom I stupidly abandoned, Line who knows what she wants, who wants everyone, and who left me; and Bella who is boring and slow, and Rokhele the White with her impudent belly, growing like a fruit.

He looked to either side and behind him. There was Pyotr, as candid as an infant, terrible in battle, crazy like any self-respecting Russian. Would you give your life for Pyotr? Certainly, I'd give my life, without hesitation:

as someone who's making a good trade wouldn't hesitate. He's better suited to being on the face of the earth than I am. He's coming to Italy with us, as cheerful and trusting as a child climbing onto a merry-go-round. He chose to fight with us and for us like the knights of days gone by, because he is generous, because he believes in the same Christ we don't believe in; and yet the patriarch must have told him, too, that we were the ones who nailed Him to the cross.

There was Gedale. It's strange that he's called Gedale: the Gedaliah of the Bible was a man of no consequence. Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldaean appointed him governor of Judaea, of the few Jews left in Judaea after the deportation: then as now, like the governors Hitler appointed. In other words he was a collaborator. And he was killed by Ishmael, a partisan, someone like us. If we are right, then Ishmael was right, and he did the right thing by killing that Gedale. . . . What stupid thoughts! A man can't be blamed for the name he bears: I'm called the Consoler but I don't console anyone, not even myself. Anyway, a different name would suit Gedale: for instance, Jubal, the one who invented the flute and the guitar; or Jabal, his brother, the first one to travel the world and live in tents; or Tubalcain, the third brother, who taught his fellow men to work copper and iron. They were all sons of Lamech. Lamech was a mysterious avenger, no one knows anymore what wrong he avenged. Lamech in Lyuban, Lamech in Chmielnik, Lamech in Neuhaus. Maybe Lamech, too, was a cheerful avenger, like Gedale; at night, in his tent, after taking vengeance, he played the flute with his sons. I don't understand Gedale, I couldn't predict any of his moves or any of his decisions, but Gedale is my brother.

And Line? What to say about Line? She isn't my sister: she's much more and much less, she's a mother-wife-daughter-friend-enemy-rival-teacher. She's been flesh of my flesh, I entered into her, a thousand years ago, on a windy night in a mill, when the war was still going on and the world was young and each of us was an angel with a sword in his hand. She's not happy, but she's certain, and I'm not happy or certain, and I'm a thousand years old, and I carry the world on my back. There she is beside me, she doesn't look at me, she stares at this German countryside and she always knows exactly what must be done. A thousand years ago, in the marshes, I knew it, too, and now she still knows it and I don't. She doesn't look at me, but I look at her, and I feel pleasure in looking at her, along with turmoil, and laceration, and yearning for my neighbor's wife. Line,

Emmeline, Rahab: the holy sinner of Jericho. Whose woman? Everyone's, which is to say no one's; she binds but is not bound. I don't care whose woman, but when I glimpse her body again in my memory, when I can imagine it beneath her clothing, I feel torn, and I want to begin again, and I know it's not possible and that's exactly why I feel torn. But I'd feel that anyway, even without Line, even without Sissl. Even without Rivke? No, Mendel, that you don't know, that you can't say. Without Rivke you'd be a different man, who knows how you'd think, you'd be a non-Mendel. Without Rivke, without the shadow of Rivke, you'd be ready for the future. Ready to live, to grow like a seed: there are seeds that take root in all soils, even the soil of the land of Israel, and Line is a seed of that kind, and so are all the others. They emerge from the water and shake themselves like dogs and dry off all their memories. They have no scars. Come now, how can you say that? They have them but they don't talk about them; perhaps each of them, right this second, is thinking the same thoughts you are.

The train had passed Innsbruck, and was straining to climb toward the Brenner Pass and the Italian border. Gedale, sitting in a corner of the car with his back to the wooden wall, was playing in his manner, subdued and distracted. He was playing a Gypsy tune, or perhaps it was Jewish, or Russian: alien peoples often come into contact in music, exchange music, and through music learn to know one another, not to be mistrustful. An unpretentious tune, heard a hundred times, second-rate, steeped in a vulgar nostalgia. Then, suddenly the rhythm grew livelier, and the tune, thus accelerated, became another: sharp, new, noble, and filled with hope. A happy, dancing rhythm urged you to follow along, bobbing your head and clapping your hands; and many members of the band, prickly-bearded, sun-baked, hardened by effort and by the war, did follow along, delighting in the noise, forgetful and savage. Now that the dangers were behind them, now that the war was over, and the road, the blood, and the ice, now that the Satan of Berlin was dead, the world was empty and aimless, waiting to be re-created, repeopled, as after the great flood. Climbing upward, climbing cheerfully toward the pass: ascent, *aliyah*, that's what it's called when you emerge from exile, from the depths, and climb toward the light. The rhythm of the violin, too, was climbing, faster and faster, becoming frenzied, orgiastic. Two of the Gedalists, then four of them, then ten went wild in the car, dancing in couples, in groups, shoulder to shoulder, pounding the heels

of their boots on the resonant floor. Gedale, too, had stood up, and was dancing as he played, spinning around and lifting his knees high.

Suddenly there was a sharp crack and the violin fell silent. Gedale stood with the bow in midair; the violin was broken. *Fidl kaput!* Pavel snickered; others laughed, too, but Gedale didn't laugh. He stood gazing at the veteran violin, the violin that had saved his life at Luninets, and perhaps other unknown times, buoying him to the surface, above boredom and despair; the violin that had been wounded in battle, pierced by bullets intended for him, that he had decorated with the Hungarian's bronze medal. "It's nothing, we'll fix it," said Rokhele the White; but she was wrong. Perhaps sunlight and harsh weather had rotted the wood, or perhaps Gedale himself had strained it too far in the reel he'd been playing: whatever the case, it couldn't be fixed. The bridge had caved in the instrument's delicate convex belly and penetrated it; the strings dangled, slack and humiliated. There was nothing to be done. Gedale stuck his arm out the door of the freight car, opened his hand, and let the violin drop onto the roadbed of the railroad tracks with a funereal crack.

The train reached the Brenner Pass at noon on July 25, 1945. During stops at the previous stations, Gedale had never failed to make sure the doors were closed, but now it seemed he had forgotten: and yet it was important, that was a border station, there would almost certainly be a check. Line took care of it, even before the train came to a halt; she had those sitting in the open doorway get up, closed both doors, tied them together from the inside with pieces of metal wire, and told everyone to be silent. At first there was a fair amount of turmoil on the platforms, but then there was silence outside as well, and the hours began to pass and impatience increased. The heat also increased, in the locked freight car standing motionless in the hot sun. The Gedalists, thirty-five people crammed into a few square meters, once again felt they were in a trap. Whispering could be heard:

"Are we already in Italy? Have we passed the boundary checkpoint?"

"Maybe they uncoupled the car."

"No, we would've heard the noise."

"Let's open up, get out, and take a look."

"Let's all get out and continue on foot."

But Line imposed silence; on the deserted platform there were footsteps and voices. Pavel peeked out through the crack in the doors:

“They’re soldiers. They look English.”

The voices came closer: there were four or five people, and they stopped to talk right outside the freight car. Pavel listened closely.

“But they’re not speaking English,” he said in a faint voice. Then someone rapped sharply twice with his knuckles on the door, and asked an incomprehensible question; but Line understood, made her way through the crowd, and replied. She replied in Hebrew: not in the embalmed liturgical Hebrew of the synagogues, which was familiar to everyone’s ears, but in the fluid, living Hebrew that has always been spoken in Palestine and that among them only Line understood and spoke. She had learned it from the Zionists in Kiev, before the heavens closed up again, before the flood. Line opened the doors.

Standing on the platform were four young men in clean, neatly pressed khaki uniforms. They wore odd loose shorts, low shoes, and woolen knee socks; on their heads were black berets with British insignia, but sewn onto the short-sleeved shirts was the six-pointed star, the Shield of David. English Jews? Jews who had been taken prisoner by the English? Englishmen disguised as Jews? For the Gedalists, a star on the chest was a symbol of slavery, it was the brand imposed by the Nazis on the Jews in the concentration camps. The perplexed Jews in the freight car and the unruffled Jews on the platform stood looking at one another in silence for a few instants. Then one of them, young and sturdy, with a cheerful pink-cheeked fair-skinned face, asked, in Hebrew: “Who here speaks Hebrew?”

“Just me,” Line replied. “The others speak Yiddish, Russian, and Polish.”

“Then we’ll speak Yiddish,” said the young man; but he spoke with an effort and haltingly. His three comrades showed that they’d understood but didn’t speak. “You needn’t be afraid of us. We’re with the Jewish Brigade, we come from the land of Israel but we belong to the British Army. We came up the Italian peninsula, fighting alongside the British, the Americans, the Poles, the Moroccans, and the Indians. Where do you come from?”

That was not an easy question; nearly all of them answered, in confusion, they came from Polesie, Bialystok, Kosava, from the ghettos, from the marshes, from the Caucasus, from the Red Army. The young man, whom his comrades called Chaim, gestured with his hands as if to calm the waters. “Young lady, you speak,” he said. Before speaking, Line consulted in a low voice with Gedale and Mendel: should she tell him everything?

should she tell the truth? These are strange soldiers: Jews but in British uniform. Whom do they obey? London or Tel Aviv? Should they be trusted? Gedale seemed undecided, in fact, indifferent.

"Do as you think best," he said, "and stick to generalities." Mendel said, "What right do they have to ask us questions? Take your time answering, and do your best to question them. Then we'll decide the best line to take."

Chaim was looking on. He smiled, then he laughed openly. "'The wise man hears one word and understands seven': as I told you, this uniform may be British, but the war is over now, and we think for ourselves. We're not here to block your path, if anything, for the exact opposite reason. We, and all the rest of our company, are traveling through Germany, Hungary, and Poland: we're searching for Jews who survived the concentration camps, Jews who were in hiding, the sick, the children."

"What will you do with them?"

"We'll help them, we'll care for them, we'll assemble them, and we'll escort them here, to Italy. My team was in Kraków two weeks ago; tomorrow we'll be in Mauthausen and Gusen, the day after tomorrow we'll be in Vienna."

"And do the British know what you're doing?"

Chaim shrugged: "Among them as well there are wise men, who understand and give us free rein. There are also fools, who notice nothing. And then there are sticklers for order; in fact, they're the biggest meddlers, and they often try to put spokes in our wheels. But we weren't born yesterday, and we know how to deal with them. Where do you want to go?"

"To the land of Israel; but we are weary, we have no money, and here's a woman who's about to give birth," said Line.

"Are you armed?"

Caught off guard, Line said no, but in such an unconvincing tone that Chaim was forced to laugh again:

"*Nu*, I told you we weren't born yesterday. Do you think that, with the work we've been doing for the past three months, we don't know how to tell a survivor from a refugee, and a refugee from a partisan? You have it written on your faces, just who you are; and why should you be ashamed of it?"

Mottel broke in: "No one's ashamed here, but we're not giving up our weapons."

“We’re certainly not going to take them away from you. I told you, we’re just passing through. But you should be reasonable. A little below the pass is our brigade headquarters; I don’t know if they’re interested in you, but the smartest thing would be to go in and hand over your weapons to them. Farther down, in Bolzano, is British headquarters, and they’re certain to search you; better to hand the weapons over to us than have them confiscate them, don’t you agree?”

Pavel said, “You may have your experience, but we have ours. And it’s our experience that weapons are always useful. In war and in peace, in Russia and in Poland and in Germany and in Italy. Two months ago, when the war was already over, the Germans killed one of our comrades, a woman, and we took revenge for her; how could we have done that if we hadn’t had weapons? And in Poland, under Russian occupation, the Polish Fascists threw a bomb right between our feet.”

Chaim said, “Let’s not act like enemies—we aren’t enemies. Come down out of that freight car, and let’s go sit in the meadow; they’ve unhitched the locomotive, it will be at least two hours until your train departs. You see, we have some important things to talk about.” They all got out of the freight car and went to sit in a circle in the meadow, in the resin-scented air, beneath a sky swept clean by the high winds.

“Where I come from, this is called a *kum-sitz,* a *come-and-sit,*” said Chaim, and then continued, “It’s the question of the lion and the fox. You come out of a terrible world. We don’t know that much about it: from the stories our fathers told us, and from what we’ve been able to see on our missions; but we know that each of you is alive by a miracle, and that you’ve left Gehenna behind. You and we have fought the same enemy, but in two different ways. You’ve had to do it on your own: you had to invent everything, defenses, weapons, allies, stratagems. We were luckier: we were part of a great army, organized and integrated. We had no enemies attacking on our flanks, but only straight ahead of us; we didn’t have to fight to obtain our weapons, they were issued to us, and we were also taught to use them. We’ve had hard battles, but supporting us there was always an organization behind the lines, kitchens, infirmaries, and a country that hailed us as liberators. In this country your weapons won’t be of any use to you.”

“Why won’t they be of use?” asked Mottel. “And why is this country different from the other countries? We’re foreigners here the same as we are

everywhere: in fact, we're more foreign here than in Russia and Poland, and a foreigner is an enemy."

"Italy is a strange country," said Chaim. "It takes a long time to understand the Italians, and even we, who came up through Italy from Brindisi to the Alps, still don't really understand them completely; but one thing is certain, in Italy foreigners aren't enemies. You might say that Italians are more enemies to themselves than they are to foreigners: it's odd but true. Perhaps it comes from the fact that the Italians don't like laws, and since Mussolini's laws, along with his policies and his propaganda, condemned foreigners, maybe that's exactly why the Italians helped them. The Italians don't like laws, in fact they like to disobey them: it's their game, just as the Russians' game is chess. They like to cheat; they don't especially like getting cheated, but they don't make a big thing of it: when somebody cheats them, they think, Look how clever he was, he outsmarted me, and they set about obtaining not revenge but, if anything, a rematch. Just like in chess, in fact."

"Then they'll probably cheat us, too," said Line.

"Probably, but that's the only real risk you run; that's why I said that you don't need your weapons here. But at this point I have to tell you the strangest thing of all: the Italians have been friendly to all foreigners, but to no one have they been friendlier than to us, the Jewish Brigade."

"Maybe they didn't realize you were Jews," said Mendel.

"They certainly did, and for that matter we didn't hide it. They helped us, not *in spite of the fact* that we were Jews but *because* we were. They helped their own Jews, too; when the Germans occupied Italy, they made great efforts to capture them, but they tracked down and killed only a fifth; all the others found shelter in the homes of Christians, and not only the Italian Jews but also many foreign Jews who had taken refuge in Italy."

"Maybe this happened because the Italians are good Christians," Mendel now suggested.

"That may well be," said Chaim, scratching his forehead, "but I'm not really sure. The Italians are strange Christians, too. They attend Mass but they curse. They pray to the Madonna and all the saints to grant them favors, but it seems to me that they don't especially believe in God. They know the Ten Commandments by heart, but they observe at most two or three. I believe that they help those in need because they're good people,

because they've suffered a lot themselves, and because they know that those who suffer should be helped."

"The Poles have suffered a lot, too, and yet . . ."

"I don't know what to say to you: we might come up with ten reasons, all of them right and all of them wrong. But there's one thing you should know: Italian Jews are as strange as Italian Catholics. They don't speak Yiddish—in fact, they don't even know what Yiddish is. They speak only Italian; rather, the Jews of Rome speak Roman, the Jews of Venice speak Venetian, and so on. They dress like the others, they have the same faces as the others. . . ."

"Then how do you tell them from the Christians when you see them in the street?"

"That's just it, you can't tell them apart. Isn't it a remarkable country? For that matter, there aren't that many of them; the Christians don't pay them much attention, and they aren't particularly concerned with being Jewish. In Italy there has never been a pogrom, not even when the Church of Rome was inciting the Christians to treat the Jews with contempt and accused them all of being usurers, not even when Mussolini issued the racial laws, not even when northern Italy was under German occupation; no one in Italy knows what a pogrom is, or even the meaning of the word. It's an oasis of a country. The Italian Jews were Fascists when all the Italians were Fascists and they applauded Mussolini; and when the Germans invaded some of them escaped to Switzerland, while others became partisans, but most of them went into hiding in the cities or in the countryside, and very few were found or betrayed, even though the Germans were offering great sums of money to those willing to collaborate. There, that's the country you're entering; a country of good people, people who don't much like to make war, but do like to trick you. And since to send you to Palestine we have to trick the British, this is the ideal place; you could call it a wharf in the perfect location, put here just for us."

To the Gedalists squatting or stretched out on the grass of the Brenner Pass, the idea of handing over their weapons, to anyone and for whatever reason, was distasteful; but in the presence of these four soldiers who came from Palestine, who wore Allied uniforms, and who appeared so confident in their speech, they did not dare to express their dissent. They remained silent for a while, and then they began to discuss among themselves in low voices. Chaim and his three comrades showed no signs of impatience; they

walked away a short distance and strolled around in the meadow. They came back a few minutes later and Chaim asked, “Who is your leader?”

Gedale raised his hand.

“I guess I’m the leader. I led the band, for better or worse, from White Russia to here; but you see, we have no ranks and we never have. I’ve almost never had to give orders. I’d make a suggestion, and occasionally someone else would, we’d talk it over and come to an agreement. But most of the time we were in agreement even without talking it over. That’s how we lived and fought for eighteen months, and we walked two thousand kilometers. I was the leader because I dreamed up things, because ideas and solutions came to my mind; but why should we have a leader now that the war is over and we’re entering a peaceful country?”

Chaim turned to his comrades and said something to them in Hebrew; they replied, and as they did there was no scorn or annoyance on their faces, but instead patience and respect. Chaim said:

“I understand you, or at least I think I do. You’re strange birds yourselves, even stranger than the Italians; but everyone is strange to another person, that’s in the order of things, and war is a great reshuffler. Fine, as far as your leader is concerned, do as you please; elect yourselves one, reappoint him”—and he pointed to Gedale, who shied away—“or do without. But the weapons are a different matter. We understand you perfectly, but the British and the Americans won’t understand you at all. They’re fed up with partisans; they were useful as long as there was fighting, but now they don’t want to hear about them. They even wanted to retire the Italian partisans, this past winter, before the war was over; and now medals and certificates as much as you like, but no more weapons. If they catch them carrying weapons, or find weapons in their homes, they put them in jail; so just imagine what they would do to foreign partisans, especially if they come from Russia. Trust me, be reasonable and give the weapons to us; we’ll be able to make good use of them. Come on, keep whatever weapons you can hide on your persons and hand over the rest. All right?”

Gedale hesitated for a moment, then he shrugged and said sullenly:

“My dear comrades, here we’re returning to the world of law and order.” He climbed back into the freight car and reemerged with Smirnov’s machine pistol and a few other weapons. The four soldiers weren’t that

strict; they asked for nothing more, and loaded everything onto the Jeep they'd parked nearby.

"All right. Now what's to become of us?" asked Gedale when they came back.

"It's a simple matter," said Chaim. "Now that you've been disarmed, or almost, you're not so strange anymore. Now you've become DPs."

"What have we become?" asked Line suspiciously. "What's a DP?"

"A DP is a 'displaced person': a refugee, someone uprooted, without a country."

"We aren't DPs," said Line. "We had a country, and it's not our fault we don't have it anymore; and we're going to build another. It's ahead of us, not behind. We've met plenty of refugees along the way, and they were nothing like us. We aren't DPs, we're partisans, and not in name alone. We built our future with our own hands."

"Calm down, girl," said Chaim. "This isn't the time to worry about definitions, you shouldn't give too much weight to words. You have to be flexible. The Allies are here now; sooner or later you're going to run into the Military Police. They're nothing like the Nazis, but they can be a pain in the neck, and they'll lock you up who knows where for who knows how long. They'll give you food and water, but you'll stay behind bars, maybe until the war with Japan is over; that is, if war between the Americans and the Russians hasn't started in the meantime. They won't ask you a lot of questions; as far as they're concerned a partisan is a Communist, and if he comes from the east he's twice as much a Communist: have I made myself clear? In other words, brothers in arms are a thing of the past. Would you like to wind up in a camp, right now?"

The Gedalists replied to the question with a confused mumbling, in which Chaim was able to make out a few scraps of words.

"Go into hiding? Don't even think of it, Italy isn't like the places you come from; especially northern Italy, it's as crowded as a henhouse. There aren't any forests, there aren't any marshes, and you don't know the terrain. The peasants wouldn't understand you, they'd take you for bandits, and bandits is what you would end up becoming. Try to be flexible, turn yourselves in."

"Where, how, and to whom?" asked Gedale.

"Try to make it to Milan without being noticed, and in Milan go to this address."

He wrote a few words on a piece of paper and handed it to Gedale, and then added:

"If we ever meet again, you'll tell me that I gave you good advice. Now get back into your car: they're reattaching the locomotive."

When they got out of the freight car in the Central Station in Milan, beneath the high steel-and-glass shed roof peppered with bomb holes, they thought that another war had broken out. There were people camped everywhere, between the tracks, on the platforms, on the stairways leading down to the piazza, on the escalators that no longer worked, and outside on the piazza itself. There were Italians dressed in rags coming home, foreigners dressed in rags waiting to leave for who knows where; there were Allied soldiers, white-skinned and black-skinned, in their elegant uniforms, and well-dressed Italian civilians, with suitcases and rucksacks, going on vacation. Around the piazza in front of the ugly stone façade a few trams were running, and the rare automobile; there were flower beds that had been transformed into war gardens, only to be plundered and abandoned, and were now overrun with weeds. Some tents had been pitched there, and in front of them women pinched with poverty were cooking meals over rudimentary fires. Other women were crowding around the little spigots, with basins, pots and pans, and whatever receptacles they could find. All around were bomb-damaged apartment buildings.

Only Pavel knew a few words of Italian, learned back in the days when he was traveling Europe as an actor. He showed the address to a passerby, who looked him in the face with mistrust and then replied angrily: "It's gone!" What was it that was gone? Was it the wrong address? Or had the building collapsed? The conversation was cumbersome, obstructed by recioprocal misunderstandings: "*Fascio, fascismo, fascisti, niente, finito*," the passerby kept repeating. Finally Pavel understood that that had once been the address of an important Fascist headquarters, but that it was no longer there; in any case, the Milanese explained as best he could how to get there. They'd have to walk three kilometers: what's three kilometers? A laughable distance. They started off, timid and curious; never, on their whole interminable journey, had they felt like such strangers.

It was early afternoon. They straggled along in a disorderly line, careful not to lose sight of Pavel, who was in the lead, but they frequently made him wait so they could look around. Blackened ruins alternated with tall, intact, showy buildings; many of the shops were open, the plate glass windows piled high with tempting merchandise, topped by incomprehensible signs. Only around the train station were there poor people; the passersby they encountered in the streets of the city center were well-dressed and replied affably to their questions, trying to understand and make themselves understood. Via Unione? Straight ahead, two more kilometers, one more. *Duomo, Duomo, non capire?* Piazza del Duomo, and keep going past that. In front of the massive cathedral, the Duomo, pockmarked by bombs, they came to a halt—gloomy, filthy, and intimidated, loaded down with their sun-faded bundles; furtively, Pyotr crossed himself, three fingers joined, Russian style.

In Via Unione they encountered an atmosphere that seemed more familiar. The Aid Office was teeming with refugees: Poles, Russians, Czechs, Hungarians, nearly all of them speaking Yiddish. They all needed everything, and the confusion was extreme. There were men, women, and children camped in the hallways, families that had built themselves shelters with sheets of plywood or hanging blankets. Up and down the corridor doors, behind the counter windows, women of all ages worked busily, breathless, sweating, tireless. None of them understood Yiddish and only a few understood German; improvised interpreters were shouting themselves hoarse in an effort to establish order and discipline. The air was muggy, with whiffs of latrines and of cooking. An arrow and a sign written in Yiddish pointed the way to the window the new arrivals were to apply to; they got in line and waited patiently.

The line moved forward slowly, and Mendel was mulling over various shapeless and conflicting thoughts. He, too, had never felt like such a stranger: a Russian in Italy, a Jew in the presence of the cathedral, a village watchmaker in a big city, a partisan in peacetime; a stranger by language and soul, a stranger estranged by years of life in the wild. And yet, never before, in any of the hundred places they had been through, had he breathed the air he was breathing here. A stranger, but accepted, and not by the kindly women of the Aid Office alone. Not merely tolerated, accepted; in the faces of the Italians they had spoken to ever since the Brenner Pass, there was occasionally a gleam of mistrust or cunning, but never the murky

shadow that separates you from the Russian or the Pole when they recognize you as a Jew. In this country everyone is like Pyotr: perhaps less courageous or subtler, or simply older. Subtle, like old people, who've seen it all.

Mendel and Pavel went up to the window side by side; behind the window was a woman who must have been about thirty, in a nicely pressed white blouse, small, pretty, polite, with chestnut hair, fresh from the hairdresser. She wore perfume, and alongside the scent of her perfume Mendel uneasily noticed the heavy, goatish odor of Pavel's sweaty body. The woman understood German and spoke it reasonably well: there were no major difficulties in communication, but Pavel proudly insisted on speaking Italian, and by so doing complicated the situation instead of simplifying it. Once again, name, age, place of birth, citizenship. Three or four of them answered at once, causing some confusion. The woman understood that they were a group, and without any sign of impatience asked Pavel to answer for them all: she spoke to him using the formal *Sie*, and this, too, was pleasant, as well as embarrassing, something that had never happened before. It really was an aid office: they were trying to help, to provide assistance, not get rid of them or lock them up in a box of barbed wire.

The woman wrote and wrote; thirty-five names are a lot, and the list was long. Exotic first and last names, bristling with consonants; she had to stop, check, have one repeated, ask the spelling. There, finished. The woman leaned out from the window to look at them. A group, a strange group; refugees unlike the usual ones, unlike the human wreckage that for days and days had been passing before her in that office. Dirty, tired, but upright; different in their gaze, in their speech, in their bearing.

"Have you always been together?" she asked Pavel in German.

Pavel wasn't going to miss an opportunity to show off. He summoned all the fragments of Italian that he'd picked up years before in his travels, overheard backstage, on trains, in the cheap hotels and whorehouses. He puffed out his chest:

"*Group, lovely signora, group. Always together, Russia, Polandia. Walk, walk. Forest, river, snow. Dead Germans, lots and lots. We all partizani, dammit. Not DP, we war, we partizani. All soldiers, dag nab it; even women.*"

The kind woman was perplexed. She asked the Gedalists to step to one side and wait, and she picked up the phone. She talked for a long time in an

emphatic tone of voice, but covering her mouth with one hand to keep from being overheard; when she was done with the call, she told Pavel that she hoped he'd be patient; they would have to spend another night camped out, they should make themselves as comfortable as possible in the hallways, but the following day she was sure she would find them a better place. What about washing up? That wouldn't be easy; no bathrooms, no showers, either, the building had just been refitted, but there was water, soap, and perhaps they could find three or four towels. Not very many for such a large group, of course, but what could you do about it, it wasn't her fault or her colleagues', they were all trying their hardest, sometimes putting in their own personal contributions. In her words and on her face Mendel glimpsed reverence, pity, fellow feeling, and anxiety.

"Where are you sending us?" he asked her in his best German.

The woman gave him a nice smile, and with her hands made a complicated and allusive gesture that Mendel didn't understand: "We're not going to send you to a refugee camp, but to a place that will suit you better."

Indeed, the following morning two trucks came to take them away. The woman reassured them, they wouldn't be going far, to a farm on the outskirts of Milan, a half-hour trip, no more; they would be comfortable there, better than in the city, with more room . . . more relaxed. . . . And that way you'll be more relaxed, too, thought Mendel. He asked her how it was that she spoke German: were there many Italians who spoke it? Very few, she replied, but she had been a German teacher: yes, she'd taught at a school, until Hitler came to power and she had fled to Switzerland. Switzerland is forty kilometers from Milan. She'd been interned in Switzerland with her husband and her young son; it wasn't bad there; she'd come back to Milan only a few weeks ago. She stood watching the show as the Gedalists clambered onto the trucks with their Gypsy-like assortment of luggage; she told them that she'd be in touch, waved goodbye, then went back into the office.

The farm had been damaged in the last days of the war and restored as well as possible. They found fifty or so Polish and Hungarian refugees

already in residence, but the dormitories were very large, suitable for at least two or three hundred people, and well equipped with cots and bunk beds. They looked around: no, for the first time there were no sentries, no barbed wire. Not a home, but close to it; no restrictions, if you want to go in you go in, if you want to leave you leave. Food provided at the right times of day, water, sunshine, meadows, a bed: practically a hotel, what more do you want? But there's always something more to be desired: nothing is ever as nice as you expect; but nothing is ever as bad as you expect, Mendel thought, recalling the days of hardworking fervor at Novoselky in the midst of the fog and the marshes, and the mindless intoxication of the battles.

There was a second enrollment, at a second window; a thin, no-nonsense young man, who spoke good Yiddish but who came from Tel Aviv, signed them in without too much paperwork, but he stopped when he came to Bella and Rokhele the White. No, not these women, they'll have to go back to Milan, they're not suited for farmwork; and especially not this one, what are they thinking in Via Unione, have they all lost their minds? What were they doing, sending a pregnant woman out to the farm? Line, Gedale, Pavel all started arguing, and especially Isidor, who was shouting louder than any of them: you can't separate us, we aren't refugees, we are a band, a single unit. If the White goes back to Milan, all of us are going back to Milan. An odd expression appeared on the young man's face, but he didn't insist.

But he was forced to insist the following day. There was work to be done, urgent work: the Gedalists realized that it was a strange sort of farm, where work in the fields didn't count for much, but where a great deal of merchandise always seemed to be coming and going. There were crates of foodstuffs and medicines, but some of them were far too heavy for the legends stenciled on the side in English to be believable. The young man said that he needed everyone to lend a hand loading the crates onto the trucks. Three or four of the men from Ruzany grumbled that they hadn't fought their way from Belorussia to Italy to work as porters, and one of them even muttered through clenched teeth: "Kapo." Zvi, the young foreman of the farm, ignored the insult, shrugged, and said, "When your ship arrives, these things will be useful for you as well," and then, with the help of two young Hungarians, he started vigorously loading the crates himself. At that, they all stopped complaining and got to work.

There were plenty of people coming and going on the farm as well; refugees of all ages arrived and departed, so that it was difficult to get to know anyone. All the same, the Gedalists quickly noticed that there were a few permanent residents: they did their best to keep a low profile, but they must be playing some essential role. Two in particular caught Mendel's eye. They were in their early thirties, athletic, and lithe in their movements; they rarely spoke, but to each other they spoke Russian. They were often seen leaving the farmyard with a group of young men carrying sickles, pitchforks, and rakes, and vanishing in the direction of the river. They never came back before nightfall; from the woods along the river, gunshots could occasionally be heard.

"Who are those two?" Mendel asked Zvi.

"Instructors: they're from the Red Army. Two very smart boys. And if any of you . . ."

"We'll talk it over later," said Mendel without making any commitment. "We just got here; let us catch our breath. And after all, I doubt that any of us really have much left to learn."

"*Nu*, that's not what I meant, in fact, the opposite. I meant that you'd have a great deal to teach us," said Zvi, enunciating carefully. Mendel was reminded of the offer that Smirnov had made at the camp in Glogau, and how he, out of weariness, had turned it down. No, he had no regrets. No, in good conscience; we did our part, I and all the others. In any case, not now: we're still winded, we haven't yet learned to breathe the air in this country.

Two days later a letter from Milan was delivered to the farm: it was written in German, addressed to Signor Pavel Yurevich Levinski, and signed by Signora Adele S.; it emanated the same scent as the kind woman from Via Unione, and it contained an invitation to tea, Sunday afternoon at five, in her home on Via Monforte. It was not limited to Pavel alone, but said, vaguely, "You and a few of your friends"; not too many, evidently, not the whole band—which was reasonable. There was great excitement, and the band split into three factions: those who wanted to go to the tea party, those who didn't want to go at any cost, and those who remained uncertain or indifferent. Pavel himself wanted to go, as did Bella, Gedale, Line, and a fair number of others, driven by a variety of motives. Pavel, because he considered himself indispensable as an interpreter, and because the envelope was addressed to him; Bella and Gedale, out of curiosity; Line, for ideological reasons, and specifically because she alone in the band had had

a Zionist education; and the others because they hoped there would be something good to eat. Among those who didn't want to go were Pyotr and Arie, out of shyness and because they didn't speak German; the White, because for the past few days she had been having pains in her belly; Isidor, because he didn't want to be far from the White; and Mottel, because, he said, the lady's *goyische* manners made him uncomfortable, and he couldn't picture himself in a drawing room.

In the end Pavel, Bella, Line, Gedale, and Mendel went. Mendel, to tell the truth, had been one of those who were uncertain, but the other four had insisted that he come: that it was a singular chance to see how people lived in Italy, that they would have fun and be distracted, that it would be an opportunity to learn useful information, and that, above all, whether he liked it or not, he was the crucial man in the band, the one who best represented it and who had taken part in all its exploits—and hadn't he been a soldier in the Red Army? Certainly that would be important to the Italians, or at least interesting.

They put on their best clothes. Line, who had nothing but the shapeless military clothing that she'd been wearing since Novoselky, said that she would go to the reception just as she was: "If I dressed differently, it would be as if I were putting on a disguise. As if I were telling a lie. If they want me, they have to take me as I am."

But everyone tried to persuade her to dress up a little, especially Bella and Zvi. Zvi dug out of the farm's warehouse a white silk blouse, a pleated ivory skirt, a leather belt, a pair of nylon stockings, and a pair of cork-soled sandals. Line let them talk her into it and withdrew with her trousseau; a few minutes later a never-before-seen creature emerged from the dressing room, like a butterfly from a cocoon. Practically unrecognizable: smaller than the Line everyone knew, younger, almost a child, clumsy in the skirt, for she hadn't worn one in years, and the high-heeled orthopedic sandals; but her level brown eyes, wide-set, and her thin, straight, short nose remained the same, as did the tense pallor of her cheeks, which no amount of sun and wind seemed able to tan. The fine nylon mesh made her muscular legs and ankles graceful; Bella ran her hand over them, as if to make sure they weren't bare.

There were many guests in Signora S.'s drawing room, all of them Italian. Some were elegantly dressed, others wore shabby old outfits, and others still were in Allied uniforms. Only two or three of them understood

German and no one spoke Yiddish, and so the conversation immediately became tangled. The five members of the band, as if to defend themselves from attack, tried to stick together, but they managed it only for a few minutes: before long each had been singled out, and, at the center of a knot of curious guests, was subjected to a hail of melodious and incomprehensible questions. Pavel and the hostess were busy translating, but without much success, supply was so greatly outweighed by demand. Through a space between two backs, Mendel glimpsed Line surrounded by five or six well-dressed men. “Like wild animals at the zoo!” the girl whispered to him in Yiddish.

“Ferocious animals,” Mendel replied. “If they knew everything we’ve done, they’d be afraid of us.”

The lady of the house was on edge. They belonged to her, those five: they constituted a find, a discovery, and she expected monopoly control. Every word uttered by them belonged to her and must be preserved; she took great pains to tag after them amid the press of her guests, asking people to repeat remarks she hadn’t heard. But she was on edge for another reason as well: she was a fine and well-mannered lady, and some of the stories the five were telling wounded her ears. Pavel and Gedale, in particular, showed no restraint. Of course, these things exist, they happened, war is no joke, even less of a joke was the war that these poor people had experienced; still, in the drawing room, and really, in *her* drawing room. . . . Yes, all right, acts of valor, reprisals against the Germans, sabotage, marches through the snow; but did they have to talk about lice, foot wrappings, and people hanging themselves in the latrines? She was almost beginning to regret inviting them: mainly because of Pavel, who unfortunately knew a few words of Italian, but, for who knows what reason, seemed to have a distinct preference for curses and dirty words. No doubt about it, her friends would laugh and laugh about this, and they’d be sure to tell the story to half of Milan. After a while, she took shelter on a sofa in the corner, next to Bella, who seemed less crude than the others, didn’t say much, and ate bonbons while admiring the paintings hanging on the wall. Every so often she glanced at the clock: her husband was late. If only he’d hurry up and get home! He’d help her take control of the party, in such a way that every guest, local or exotic, would get what he or she deserved, and there would be no transgressions.

Signor S. arrived a little before six o'clock and extended his apologies to one and all: the train had departed Lugano on time, but then it had been delayed at the border for the usual checks. He kissed his wife and apologized to her as well. He was stout, affable, noisy, and bald, with a crown of fair hair ringing the back of his head. He, too, spoke German, but his command of the language was colloquial, his grammar rudimentary, because he'd learned it on the road. He owned a business and was often out of the country. He found himself face-to-face with Mendel and immediately started telling him about his own concerns as if he'd known him all his life, as is customary among those who have a high opinion of themselves and little interest in the people to whom they are speaking. How inconvenient it was to travel, how difficult it was to reestablish old business contacts. . . . Mendel thought of the way he and his people had traveled and the rabbit that the Uzbek had bartered for salt, but he said nothing. Finally, the other man broke off: "But you must be thirsty, come, come with me!"

He grabbed Mendel by the wrist and towed him over to the refreshment table. Mendel allowed him to, in a daze; he felt an intense sensation of unreality, as in the dreams you have on too full a stomach. He seized the moment in which S. was raising his cup to his lips, and found the courage to ask him the questions that had been buzzing through his head ever since the party had started. Who were all those people? Were he and his wife really Jews? And was that their house? Hadn't the Germans come to Milan, too? How had they saved themselves, along with all the lovely things that he saw all around him? Were all Italian Jews as wealthy as they were? Or all Italians? Did they all have beautiful homes like this?

His host gazed at him with an odd expression, almost as if Mendel had asked stupid or inopportune questions, and then patiently replied, the way you do with children who are not too bright. But of course they were Jews, everyone with the surname S. was a Jew. No, not all of the guests: but after all, was that such an important question? They were friends, that was all, nice people, who were interested in meeting them, seeing that they had come from so far away. And the place belonged to him, why not? He'd earned good money, before the war, and even during the first few years of the war, before the Nazis came. After that, the apartment had been requisitioned, and a high Fascist official had been quartered in it, but the minute he got back from Switzerland he'd pulled some strings and taken it back. Eh, no, not everyone had a place like his: neither Christians nor Jews.

Not everyone, but lots of people did, after all, Milan is a wealthy city. Wealthy and generous, many Jews had remained in the city, in hiding or with false identity documents; neighbors and friends who met them pretended not to know them, but in secret they brought them food.

A big man with a light and youthful voice broke into their conversation, and although he neither spoke nor understood German, he behaved in an extremely friendly fashion toward Mendel. He asked to be introduced to him; S. did as requested, mispronouncing Mendel's name, and then said to Mendel, "This is the lawyer Longo." The lawyer proved to be more discreet than the master of the house; he listened in respectful silence to the stories that Mendel told in an abridged version and which the master of the house translated phrase by phrase. In the end, he said to the latter: "They must be tired, these friends of yours; they probably need some rest. Ask them if they would like to be my guests, in Varazze; I have plenty of room in my villa, and perhaps they've never been to the beach!"

This invitation caught Mendel by surprise. He hesitated, stalled for time, and tried to edge closer to his comrades to see what they had to say. He no, he would not have accepted, he felt distant, alien, disagreeable, and wild; he felt as if he still carried the sepulchral odor of Schmulek's lair. All the same, if the others said yes, he would, too. Bella, Line, and Gedale were also inclined to say no: they came up with vague pretexts, but in fact they were intimidated, they didn't feel up to the role that was assigned to them. Pavel, on the other hand, would have liked to accept, but not alone; and so he went along with the majority opinion, and they all thanked the lawyer and declined the invitation, happy that their inept words were being translated into Signora S.'s harmonious Italian. "Still, I wouldn't have minded seeing the sea," Bella whispered to Gedale.

The lady of the house took advantage of the fact that all five of them were in one place to introduce them to another friend of hers, a tall bony young man with an energetic air about him who wore military-looking trousers and shirt but without insignia. "This is Francesco, a colleague of yours!" she said with an allusive smile; Francesco on the other hand remained serious. "He was a partisan, too," the lady went on. "In Valtellina, in the Alps, in other words, on those mountains you can see out there. A brave young man; too bad that he's a Communist."

With the hostess's help, the conversation proceeded, labored and contorted, but when Francesco heard that Mendel had been in the Red

Army, he stepped up to him and threw his arms around him: “From the day Germany attacked you, I had no doubt that it would be defeated. Tell him that, Adele. Tell him that we fought, too, but if the Soviet Union hadn’t held out it would have meant the end of Europe.” The hostess translated as best she could, but she added some thoughts of her own: “He’s a sweet boy, but he’s hardheaded and he has some strange ideas. If it was up to him, he wouldn’t think twice: dictatorship of the proletariat, all land to the peasants, all factories to the workers, and that’s the end of it. At most, for us, his friends, a seat on the local soviet.”

Francesco partly understood, chose not to go any further, and with the same serious expression had her say that his party had been the backbone of the Italian Resistance and the true voice of the Italian people; then he told her to ask Mendel why he and his friends were leaving their country. Mendel was confused. He had some vague ideas about what had happened in Italy during the war, and he was astonished that the woman would say so openly that her friend was a Communist: could she have been joking? And was she also joking when she referred to her fear of communism? Or was she really afraid? And, if so, was she right to be afraid? Now, however, he would have to answer that Francesco’s question. How could he explain to him that being a Jew in Russia or in Poland was not the same as being a Jew in Switzerland or on Via Monforte in Milan? He would have had to tell him their whole story. He decided only to say that he and his comrades had nothing against Stalin, indeed, they were grateful to him for having beaten Hitler; but that their homes had been destroyed, they had a void behind them, and they hoped to find a new home in Palestine. The woman translated, and it was Mendel’s impression that the translation was longer than the original; a dubious expression appeared on Francesco’s face and he walked away. To Mendel, even the Italians’ faces were unclear to him; their expressions, their grimaces, were illegible to him, or at least he was afraid he was reading them wrong. Francesco. A partisan, a fellow warrior. How long did you fight, Francesco? Sixteen months, eighteen: from when Venyamin’s radio on the banks of the Dnieper announced that Mussolini was in prison, from when Dov learned that Italy had capitulated. How far did you walk, Francesco? How many friends did you lose? Where is your home? In Milan, perhaps, or up in those mountains whose name I can’t repeat; but you have a home, the home you fought for, along with your ideas. A home, land underneath your feet, a sky over your head that belongs

to you and never changes. A mother and a father; a girlfriend or a wife. You have someone or something you want to live for. If I spoke your language I could try to explain.

Behind him, Signora Adele was talking to Line:

". . . but now they're the ones who help us the most. The weapons come from them, via Czechoslovakia. It's the Italian Communist Party that orders the strikes; when the British try to halt a refugee ship, all the longshoreman go on strike, and the British have to let it sail. . . ."

Mendel felt disoriented: in a drawing room filled with lovely objects and courteous people, and at the same time a pawn in a cruel and gigantic game. Perhaps he always had been, always had been a pawn, ever since he'd gone missing, since he'd met Leonid: you think you're making a decision and instead you're obeying the destiny that someone else has already written for you. Who? Stalin, or Roosevelt, or the God of Armies. He turned to Gedale:

"Let's go, Gedale: let's take our leave. This place isn't for us."

"What?" asked Gedale in astonishment: maybe he was afraid he hadn't understood, or perhaps he was following another chain of thought. Just then, the phone rang in the corner where Bella was sitting, and the woman went to answer. After a short while, she hung up the receiver and said to Mendel, "It's Zvi, from the farm. Your comrade, the one you call the White, isn't well. They had to take her into the city; she's in a clinic, not far from here."

All five of them drove to the obstetric clinic, crammed into the lawyer Longo's automobile. It was a private clinic, orderly and clean, but much of the window glass had been replaced with plywood panels, and crossed strips of paper had been glued to the others. Rokhele was in a room with three other women; she was pale and calm, and she was complaining in a weak voice: maybe they'd given her a tranquilizer. In the hallway, outside the door of the room, stood Isidor, nervous and scowling, alongside Izu, the bare-handed fisherman, and three of his compatriots from Blizna, the roughest members of the band. Isidor was walking up and down, and he had a pistol stuck in his belt. Two of his comrades were sitting on the floor and seemed drunk; the other two were having a conversation by the window. Mendel spotted the bulge of a knife handle through the leather of their worn boots. On the windowsill stood a bottle of red wine and two country rolls.

“How is she?” Bella whispered to Isidor. Without lowering his voice, Isidor replied, “She’s not well. She’s in pain, she was screaming a little while ago. But now they’ve given her an injection.” At the end of the corridor two nuns peeped out, exchanged a few words, and promptly vanished.

“Come away, she’s in good hands,” said Mendel. “What’s the point of staying here?”

“I’m not moving,” said Isidor. The four others said nothing; they limited themselves to giving Mendel and the others a hostile glance.

“You aren’t doing any good and you’re causing trouble,” said Line.

“I’m not moving,” Isidor said again. “I’m staying here. I don’t trust them.”

The five of them stepped over to one side. “What should we do?” Gedale asked.

“There are too many of us here,” said Mendel. “I’ll stay here to see what happens; I’ll try to calm them down. You go downstairs and head back to the farm; the lawyer is waiting. If things go badly I’ll call you on the phone.”

“I’ll stay, too,” said Line unexpectedly. “A woman can be useful.” Gedale, Bella, and Pavel left; Line and Mendel sat down in the waiting room. Through the half-open door they could keep an eye on the five men camped out in the corridor.

“Is Isidor drunk, too?” asked Line.

“I don’t think so,” Mendel replied. “He’s just acting tough because he’s afraid.”

“Afraid about the baby? About Rokhele?”

“Yes, but maybe not just about that. He’s a boy, and he needs to feel important. Gedale was wrong to let him drive the truck.”

Line, in her unaccustomed woman’s clothing, seemed to have changed within as well. She replied in a subdued tone:

“When was that? In February, right? There was still snow on the ground.”

“It was in early March, when we left Wolbrom; yes, it must have been the first of March.”

“It’s hard to keep your memories straight, isn’t it? Doesn’t that happen to you, too?”

Mendel nodded his head yes, without a word. A nurse came in and said something to them in Italian; neither Line nor Mendel understood, the nurse shrugged her shoulders and left. Line went into Rokhele's room and came out again immediately:

"She's sleeping," she said. "She seems comfortable, but her pulse is racing."

"Could that be true for all women when they have a baby?"

"I don't know," Line replied. She was silent, then she went on:

"There's something wrong with us. Do you think it's right for a man to become a father at the age of seventeen?"

"Maybe it's never right to become a father," said Mendel.

"Hush, Mendel. Chase those thoughts away. Tonight a child is going to be born."

"Do you believe that our thoughts can touch it? Make it be born different somehow?"

"Who knows?" said Line. "When a child is born, it's such a delicate thing! Where was it conceived?"

Mendel calculated mentally:

"When we were with Edek, near Tunel. In November. Will it be a Polish baby? Or Ukrainian like Rokhele? Or Italian?"

"*Narisher bokher, vos darfst du fregn?*" Line said with a laugh, quoting from the song that had marked the passage of the front: "Foolish Lad, how can you ask?" Strangely, Mendel was by no means offended at being called that name: if anything, he felt tenderness. This new Line was no longer Rahab but the pitying-clever *meydl* of the song.

"How can you ask?" Line went on, laying her hand on Mendel's forearm: "A baby is a baby; it only becomes something else later. Why are you worried? After all, it's not even our child."

"Right. It's not even our child."

"We were born, too," Line suddenly blurted out. Mendel gave her a questioning glance, and Line tried to clarify the thought:

"Given birth, expelled. Russia conceived us, nourished us, let us grow in the darkness, as in a womb; then she had labor pains, and then contractions, and then she shot us out, and now here we are, new and naked, like newborn babies. Doesn't it seem that way to you?"

"*Narishe meydl, vos darfst du fregn?*" Mendel replied, feeling an affectionate smile on his lips and a light film before his eyes.

There was movement in the corridor, footsteps, whispering. Mendel got up and went to look through the crack in the door: the White was breathing heavily and moaning at intervals. Suddenly she writhed and yelled loudly twice, three times. The four men from Blizna leaped to their feet, bellicose and sleepy; Isidor knelt down beside the bed, then strode out into the corridor. He came back a minute later, dragging a nun and the doctor who was on duty. All three of them were frightened, for different reasons. Isidor was shouting in Yiddish:

"This woman must not die, Mr. Doctor, do you understand? She's my wife, we came here all the way from Russia, we fought and we walked. And the baby is my son, he has to be born. He mustn't die, understood? You'll be in trouble if the woman or the baby dies: we are partisans. Go on, Mr. Doctor, do what you have to, and be careful how you do it."

Line walked over to Isidor to try to calm him down and reassure him, but Isidor, who kept his hand on the handle of the pistol shoved into his belt, pushed her away roughly. The doctor didn't understand Yiddish, but he understood what a pistol in the hand of a terrified young man could mean; he spoke rapidly to the nun, then he took a step toward the telephone in the corner of the hallway, but Isidor cut him off. Then he and the nun took the gurney that was standing nearby, moved the White onto it as she went on screaming, and headed off toward the delivery room. Isidor nodded to his men and followed them; Mendel and Line followed Isidor.

Isidor didn't dare force his way into the delivery room. The seven of them sat down outside the door, and the hours began to go by. More than once, Mendel tried to calm Isidor down and persuade him to hand over the pistol. He might even have tried to grab it out of Isidor's hands if he hadn't seen that Isidore's four compatriots were right behind him. His efforts were unsuccessful: Isidor stood in front of him without hearing a word he said, arrogant at first, then straining to hear the muffled sounds that came from the delivery room.

Sitting next to Line, Mendel looked at her knees, sticking out from beneath her skirt. It was the first time he'd seen them: never before, except with the vision in his fingertips, trembling with desire, in the darkness of their pallets, a different one every night, or through the opaque cloth of her trousers. Don't give in. Don't give in to her. Don't start all over again, be sensible, resist. You wouldn't live beside her for a lifetime, she isn't a woman for a lifetime, and you're not even thirty yet. When you're thirty,

life can begin again. Like a book, when you've finished the first volume. Start over from where? From here, from today, from this Milanese dawn rising behind the frosted glass: from this morning. This is a good place to start living. Maybe you should've done what they did, they were right after all, the two nebbishes; they didn't do it the way you did with Line, they closed their eyes and let go and the seed of man was not spilt and a woman conceived.

A nun walked past, pushing a trolley. Line, who had been dozing, shook herself and said:

"It's a while since we stayed up all night."

"It's a while since we spent the night together," Mendel replied. No, I wouldn't live a lifetime with Line, but I can't leave her and I don't want to leave her. I'll carry her with me forever, inside me, even if we're separated, the way I was separated from Rivke.

Outside, they could hear the city awakening, the screeching of trams, the shutters of the shops being rolled up. A nurse emerged from the delivery room, followed by the doctor himself, who went back in almost immediately. Isidor, no longer truculent but now imploring, asked questions that were understood in spite of the language. The doctor made reassuring gestures, held up his wristwatch: it would be two hours, one hour. Repeated screaming could be heard, the hum of a motor, then silence. Finally, in broad daylight, a nurse with a cheerful face emerged, carrying a little bundle. "It's a boy, it's a boy," she laughed. No one understood, she looked around and found Izu, the hairy one, close at hand, and jerked on his beard: "A boy, like this one!"

They all got to their feet. Mendel and Line embraced Isidor, whose eyes, red from lack of sleep, were suddenly glistening. The doctor came out, too, slapped Isidor on the back, and headed down the hall, but he ran into a colleague who was walking along with a newspaper held out before him, and he stopped to talk. Other doctors, nuns, and nurses gathered around the two men. Mendel, too, ventured closer and managed to see that the newspaper, which consisted of a single sheet of paper, had a headline in a very large type size, but he didn't understand what it said. That newspaper bore the date of Tuesday, August 7, 1945, and it gave the news of the first atomic bomb, dropped on Hiroshima.

Turin, January 11–December 20, 1981

Author’s Note

This book had its origin in something a friend told me many years ago: that in Milan, in the summer of 1945, he had volunteered in the Aid Office described in the last chapter. During that period, amid a stream of refugees and people returning home, groups similar to the one I decided to describe actually arrived in Italy: men and women whom years of suffering had hardened but not humiliated, survivors of a civilization (little known in Italy) that Nazism had destroyed to its roots, people who were exhausted but conscious of their dignity.

I did not intend to write a true story but sought, rather, to reconstruct a plausible yet imaginary itinerary for one of these groups. In large part, the events that I’ve described really happened, although not always in the places and times I assigned them. It’s true that Jewish partisans fought the Germans, almost always in desperate circumstances, sometimes incorporated into more or less regular Soviet or Polish bands, sometimes in formations made up only of Jews. There were roving bands, like Venyamin’s, which variously accepted or rejected (or sometimes disarmed or killed) Jewish fighters. It’s true that groups of Jews, totaling ten or fifteen thousand people, survived for long periods, some until the end of the war, in fortified encampments like the one I arbitrarily situated in Novoselky, or even (incredible as it seems) in catacombs like the one where I placed Schmulek. “Diversionary” actions, like the railroad sabotage and the hijacking of the parachute drops, are widely documented in the literature on the partisan war in Eastern Europe.

The characters, on the other hand, with the sole exception of Polina, the girl pilot, are all invented. In particular, the figure of the songwriter Martin Fontasch is imaginary, but in fact many Jewish cantors and poets, both celebrated and humble, were killed, like Martin, and not only in the years 1939–45, and not only by the Nazis. Thus the song of the “Gedalists” is also invented, but its refrain, along with the title of the book, was suggested to me by some words that I found in the *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers),*

a collection of sayings of famous rabbis that was edited in the second century AD and is part of the Talmud. We read there (ch. 1, para. 13): “He [Rabbi Hillel] said also: ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me? and when I think of myself, what am I? and if not now, when?’ ” Naturally, the interpretation that I attribute to my characters is not the orthodox one.

Since I had to reconstruct a time, a background, and a language that I knew only superficially, I had ample recourse to documents, and there are many books that I found extremely valuable. I cite the principal ones:

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I thank the authors, along with all those who encouraged me with their opinions, and whose criticisms served as a rudder. I owe particular thanks to Emilio Vita Finzi, who recounted the kernel of this story and without whom the book wouldn’t have been written, and to Giorgio Vaccarino, who affectionately followed me and made available to me his prodigious archive.

Translator's Afterword

If Not Now, When? is widely considered to be Primo Levi's only real novel. One other book, *The Wrench*, can be called novelistic, but Levi himself commented that he wrote a novel only "after thirty-five years of apprenticeship, and patent or camouflaged autobiographical writing." If we date the beginning of this thirty-five years to 1947, when *If This Is a Man* was first published in Italy, Levi was clearly referring to *If Not Now, When?*, which appeared in Italy in 1982.

And in fact *If Not Now, When?* has a rich and varied cast of characters, while *The Wrench* is told largely in the voice of a single narrator. "Writing a novel is quite another matter," Levi went on. "It is a form of super-writing: you no longer touch earth, you're in flight, with all the thrills, terrors, and excitements of an early aviator in a biplane made of canvas, twine, and plywood; or perhaps, more accurately, in a tethered balloon whose moorings have been cut. The initial sensation, destined to wane soon enough, is of boundless, almost licentious freedom."

It is worth noting, however, that this self-proclaimed sense of freedom is very short-lived. In fact, the entire narrative arc of *If Not Now, When?* seems to be one of conditional freedom at best. In theory, the plot might seem to be a succession of ripping yarns: the protagonists sabotage one train, hijack another, fight pitched battles, tap phone wires, steal a truck, steal log rafts, and, in short, are out in the world fighting for their lives, instead of slaving in camps. But there are pitfalls everywhere; one of the most demoralizing, tellingly, is a cocktail party in an expensive apartment in Milan. Indeed, the sense of freedom seems to narrow as the characters return to civilization and to the author's home territory.

Though Levi notes that, at least in theory, creating characters is an act of unbridled freedom, he qualifies this by adding, "But only theoretically, because you're tied more closely to them than might appear. Each of these phantoms is born of your flesh, has your blood in its veins, for better or worse. You propagated it through budding. Even worse, it's a gauge, it

gives indications about a part of you, the tensions inside you, like those glass telltales that are cemented into a wall to determine whether a crack is likely to spread. They're your way of saying 'me': when you move them or have them speak, you think twice about what you're doing, for they might say too much. They might even outlive you, perpetuating your bad habits and errors."

Only one of the characters, and certainly not the most likable, manages to break free of these invisible chains that seem to weigh them all down, even in the vast openness of the Russian steppes. In an encampment on the banks of the Gorin River, the actor Pavel "picked up a piece of charcoal, and drew a mustache on his upper lip, pulled a shock of wet hair over his forehead, saluted the crowd with his arm held out straight before him at eye level, and began to hold forth." Speaking first in German, he works up to a frenzy, inciting Germany's soldiers to fight to the death, "labeling them, variously, heroes of Greater Germany, sons of bitches, dogs of heaven, defenders of our blood and soil, and assholes." Then, in an intense, Führer-like fury, he breaks into "a doglike snarl" and, "as if an abscess had burst, he stopped talking in German and went on in Yiddish, and everyone bent double with laughter: it was extraordinary to hear Hitler, in the throes of his ranting, using the language of the outcasts to incite someone to slaughter someone else; it wasn't clear whether he was calling on the Germans to slaughter the Jews or the other way around." The character's abrupt lapse into an almost primeval Yiddish suggests something both profound and provocative.

Interestingly, having moved from German rabble-rouser to Yiddish split personality, Pavel in the end reverts to the language of his puppet master, Levi himself: "Pavel, with great dignity, instead of reprising his routine (which, he explained, he'd first tried out in 1937 in a Warsaw cabaret), sang *''O sole mio,'* in a language that no one understood and which he claimed was Italian."

It becomes apparent not only to the reader but, especially, to the translator, that the farther the band of refugees ventures into the more exotic regions of Western Europe, the closer the book seems to come home—that is, to Levi's "home," though not his own Turin but the larger metropolis of Milan. The group's ultimate destination of Palestine remains beyond, in the future, in a realm that perhaps belongs chiefly to the newborn child.



Volume III



Collected Poems

Translated by Jonathan Galassi

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These translations are for Deborah Harris
— J.G.

Footnotes printed in roman type are Levi's own. Those in italics were supplied by the translator, and draw on information from two biographies: *Primo Levi: The Double Bond* by Carole Angier (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) and *Primo Levi: A Life* by Ian Thomson (Henry Holt, 2003).

AT AN UNCERTAIN HOUR

To Lucia

In all civilizations, even those still without writing, many individuals, both celebrated and unknown, feel, and yield to, the need to express themselves poetically: so they secrete poetic matter, robust or bloodless, eternal or ephemeral, for themselves, or those closest to them, or for the universe. Poetry was certainly born before prose. Who among us has never written poems?

I am a man. And I, too, at irregular intervals, “at an uncertain hour,” have given in to this urge: it seems to be written into our genetic heritage. At certain moments, poetry has seemed to me more appropriate than prose for conveying an idea or an image. I can’t say why, and I’ve never given it any thought: I don’t know much about theories of poetics, I don’t read much poetry by others, I don’t believe in the sacredness of art, nor do I believe these lines of mine are excellent. I can only assure the eventual reader that on rare occasions (normally no more than once a year) individual stimuli have naturally assumed a certain form which my rational half continues to consider unnatural.

Crescenzago[1]

Maybe you never thought of it,
But the sun also rises at Crescenzago.
It rises, and looks out for a field,
Or forest, hill, or lake;
And doesn’t find them. With its ugly face
It sucks fog from the dry Naviglio.

The wind rushes out of the mountains,
Running free across the endless plain.
But when it notices the smokestack here
It suddenly turns tail and flees
Because the smoke’s so black and poisonous
The wind’s afraid that it will stop its breath.

The old women sit and spend the hours
And count the falling rain.
The faces of the children are the color
Of the dead dust in the streets,
And here the women never sing,
But the tram whistles, harsh, relentless.

In Crescenzago there’s a window,
And at it stands a girl who’s going pale.
She always holds her needle and her thread,
She sews and mends and always eyes the clock.
And when the whistle blows at the day’s end

She sighs and weeps; this is her life.

When the siren sounds at dawn
They slip out of their rumpled beds.
They come into the street with their mouths full,
With dull eyes and ringing ears;
They pump the tires of their bicycles
And light up half a cigarette.

From morning till night they make
The menacing black steamroller heave,
Or spend the whole day eyeing
The hand that quivers on the dial.
Saturday nights they make love in the ditch
Beside the crossing keeper’s house.

Crescenzago, February 1943

---

1. *A suburb in the “industrial sumplands north of Milan” (Thomson, 119) where Levi went to work every day at A. Wander, Ltd., a Swiss drug company. See also the chapter “Phosphorus” of* The Periodic Table, *where “Giulia Vineis” darns stockings while she waits to get off work.*

Buna[1]

Wounded feet and cursed earth,
The line long in the gray mornings.
Buna's thousand chimneys smoke,
A day like every other day awaits us.
The sirens are terrific in the dawn:
"You, multitude with wasted faces,
Another day of suffering begins
On the monotonous horror of the mud."

I see you in my heart, exhausted comrade;
Suffering comrade, I can read your eyes.
In your breast you have cold hunger nothing
The last courage has been broken in you.
Gray companion, you were a strong man,
A woman traveled next to you.
Empty comrade who has no more name,
A desert who has no more tears,

So poor that you have no more pain,
So exhausted you have no more fear,
Spent man who was a strong man once:
If we were to meet again
Up in the sweet world under the sun,
With what face would we confront each other?

December 28, 1945

1. The name of the factory where I worked while I was a prisoner. ♦ *"Buna was a vast plant at Monowitz, or Auschwitz III, established by the German chemical giant I.G. Farben and 'as big as a city,' Primo said, covering an area of about twelve square miles, and employing about 40,000 workers in all" (Angier, 303). Its main product was meant to be the synthetic rubber called Buna, but in fact, owing to sabotage and Allied bombing, none was ever produced.*

Singing[1]

. . . But then when we began to sing
Those good old silly songs of ours,
It was as if everything
Was still the way it used to be.

A day was nothing but a day:
And seven of them make a week.
Killing was something wrong to us;
Dying, something far away.

And the months pass rather fast,
But there are still so many left!
We were merely young again:
Not martyrs, infamous, or saints.

This and much else came to mind
While we kept on singing;
But they were things like clouds,
And not easy to explain.

January 3, 1946

1. Cf. Siegfried Sassoon, “Everyone sang.”

February 25, 1944[1]

I’d like to believe something beyond,
Beyond death destroyed you.
I’d like to be able to say the fierceness
With which we wanted then,
We who were already drowned,
To be able someday to walk again together
Free under the sun.

January 9, 1946

---

1. Cf. *Inferno* III:57, *Purgatory* V:134, and T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*: “I had not thought death had undone so many.” ◆ *Thomson (225) calls this a love poem secretly addressed to Vanda Maestro, a fellow chemistry student at Turin University arrested with Levi at Amay, with whom he had fallen in love on their journey to Auschwitz. She was gassed there on October 30, 1944.*

Song of the Crow I

“I’ve come from very far away
To bring bad news.
I crossed the mountain,
I flew through the low cloud,
I saw my belly mirrored in the pond.
I flew without rest,
A hundred miles without rest,
To find your window,
To find your ear,
To bring you the sad news
To take the joy from your sleep,
To spoil your bread and wine,
To sit in your heart each evening.”
So he sang obscenely dancing
Outside the window, on the snow.
When he stopped, he stared malevolent,
Etched a cross on the ground with his beak,
And spread his black wings.

January 9, 1946

Shemà[1]

You who live safe
In your heated houses
You who come home at night to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider if this is a man,
Who toils in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for half a loaf
Who dies by a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
With no hair and no name
With no more strength to remember
With empty eyes and a womb as cold
As a frog in winter.

Ponder that this happened:
I consign these words to you.
Carve them into your hearts
At home or on the street,
Going to bed or rising:
Tell them to your children.
Or may your house fall down,
May illness make you helpless,
And your children turn their eyes from you.

January 10, 1946

---

1. Shemà means “Hear” in Hebrew. It is the first word of the basic prayer of Judaism, which affirms the unity of God. Some lines of this poem paraphrase it. ♦ *Originally titled “Psalm,” this poem was written as the Nuremberg trials were getting underway. It eventually became the epigraph to* If This Is a Man*, and is the source of its title.*

Get Up[1]

In the savage nights we dreamed
Dense and violent dreams
Dreamed with soul and body:
Of returning; eating; telling.
Until the dawn command
Resounded curt and low:
"Wstawać";
And our hearts broke in our breasts.

Now we're home again.
Our bellies are full,
We've finished telling.
It's time. Soon we'll hear again
The strange command:
"Wstawać."

January 11, 1946

---

1. *Wstawać* means "get up" in Polish. ◆ *This poem was eventually used as the epigraph for* The Truce *(1963).*

Monday

What is sadder than a train?
That leaves on time,
That only makes one sound,
That only goes one way.
Nothing’s sadder than a train.

Unless it is a cart horse.
It’s locked between two poles.
It can’t even look askance.
Its whole life is plodding.

And a man? Isn’t a man sad?
If he lives alone for long
If he thinks time is over,
A man’s a sad thing, too.

January 17, 1946

Another Monday[1]

“I’ll tell you who’s going to hell:
American journalists,
Math teachers,
Senators and sacristans,
Accountants and pharmacists
(Most if not all);
Cats, financiers,
Executives,
Whoever gets up early
Without having to.

“And here’s who’s going to heaven:
Fishermen and soldiers,
Babies, naturally,
Horses, lovers,
Cooks and railway men,
Russians and inventors;
Wine tasters;
Charlatans and shoeshine boys,
People on the first train in the morning
Yawning into their scarves.”

So Minos snarls horrifically
From the megaphones of Porta Nuova
In the anguish of Monday morning
That one has to know to understand.

Avigliana, January 28, 1946

---

1. For the last line, cf. *Vita Nuova*, XXVI, “Tanto gentile . . .” ◆ *In January 1946 Levi became assistant head of the research laboratory at DUCO-Montecatini, a subsidiary of Dupont situated in Avigliana, a few miles outside Turin, which manufactured paints and varnishes. Minos, with his giant tail, sits at the entrance to the second circle of hell in Dante’s* Inferno.

After R. M. Rilke[1]

Lord, it is time: the wine's fermenting now.
The time has come to have a house,
Or to go without one a long time.
The time has come to not be alone,
Or we'll live alone for a long time:
We'll spend the hours at our books,
Or writing letters to far away,
Long letters from our solitude;
And we'll pace up and down the avenues,
Restless, while the leaves fall.

January 29, 1946

1. Cf. "Herbsttag," from *Das Buch der Bilder*.

Ostjuden[1]

Our fathers on this earth,
Merchants of many gifts,
Shrewd wise men whose fertile progeny
God sowed across the world
As mad Ulysses sowed salt in the furrows:
I have found you everywhere,
As many as the sands of the sea,
You stiff-necked people,
Poor tenacious human seed.

February 7, 1946

---

1. In Nazi Germany, this was the name for Polish and Russian Jews, traditionally used by Gentiles and German Jews alike.

Sunset at Fòssoli[1]

I know what it means not to come back.
Through barbed wire I've seen
The sun go down and die.
I've felt the old poet's words
Tear at my flesh:
"Suns can set and rise again:
For us, once our brief light is spent,
There's one endless night to sleep."

February 7, 1946

---

1. Cf. Catullus, V, 4. Fòssoli, near Carpi, was the site of the transit camp for prisoners bound for deportation.

February 11, 1946[1]

I looked for you in the stars
When as a child I questioned them.
I asked the mountains for you
But all they gave me were a few moments
of solitude and short-lived peace.
Since you weren't there, those long evenings
I contemplated the mad blasphemy
That the world was one of God's mistakes,
And I was one of the world's.
But when, in the face of death,
I shouted no with every fiber,
That I wasn't through,
That I still had too much to do,
It was because you were there in front of me,
You with me beside you, as today,
A man a woman under the sun.
I came back because you were there.

February 11, 1946

1. *Though addressed to his future wife, Lucia Morpurgo, the poem (Thomson, 228) is shadowed by the lyric "February 25, 1944," for Vanda Maestro.*

The Glacier

We stopped, and dared to look
Into the grieving green jaws below,
And the courage in our hearts went slack
As happens when one loses hope.
A sad power sleeps in him;
And when, in the silence of the moon,
At night he sometimes screams and roars,
It’s because, torpid giant dreamer that he is,
He’s trying to turn over but cannot
In his bed of stone.

Avigliana, March 15, 1946

The Witch[1]

A long time under the covers
She hugged the wax to her breast
Until it was soft and warm.
Then she got up, and gently, carefully,
With a loving patient hand
Molded the living effigy
Of the man who was in her heart.
When she was done, she threw oak
And grape and olive leaves on the fire
With his image, so it would melt.

She felt she was dying from the pain
Because the charm had worked,
And only then could she cry.

Avigliana, March 23, 1946

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1. *The poem is based on the tales of Felice Fantino, an associate of Levi at DUCO who loved to tell about the* settimina*, or wise woman, to be found in every Piedmontese village (Thomson, 220).*

Avigliana

Woe unto him who wastes the full moon,
Which comes just once a month.
Damn this place,
Damn this stupid full moon
Shining placid and serene
Just as if you were with me.

. . . And there's even a nightingale,
As in the books of the last century;
But I chased him away,
Far away, on the other side of the ditch:
Him singing while I'm alone
Is truly something unacceptable.

The fireflies, I've let them stay
(There were so many, all down the path):
Not because their name resembles yours,
But they are little things so mild and dear
That they make all thought evaporate.
And if we want to separate one day,
Or if one day we want to marry,
I hope that day will be in June,
And that fireflies will be everywhere
The way they are tonight, when you're not here.

June 28, 1946

Wait

This is the time of lightning without thunder,
This is the time of unheard voices,
Restless sleep and pointless sleeplessness.
Comrade, let’s not forget the days
Of long easy silences,
Of friendly streets at night,
And calm contemplation,
Before the leaves fall,
Before the sky shuts down again,
Before the familiar clang of iron feet
Rouses us again
Outside our doors.

January 2, 1949

Epitaph[1]

You, traveler on the hill, one among many
Who leave marks on this no longer lonely snow,
Listen to me: pause for a few moments
Here where my comrades buried me without tears:
Where every summer, fed by me, the tender field grass
Grows thicker and greener than elsewhere.
It's not many years that I've been lying here, Micca the partisan,
Killed by my comrades for my not insignificant crime,
And I hadn't lived many more when the shadow took me.

Passerby, I don't ask forgiveness of you or others,
No prayer or lament, no special observance.
I ask just one thing: that this peace of mine will last,
That heat and cold will alternate above me always,
And no new blood filtered through the soil
Seeps down with its deadly warmth
To wake to new pain these bones now turned to stone.

October 6, 1952

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1. *The poem recalls the two teenage partisans who were executed on the eve of Levi's arrest in Amay (Angier, 598).*

Song of the Crow II[1]

“What is the number of your days? I’ve counted them:
Few and brief, and each one heavy with cares;
With anguish about the inevitable night,
When nothing saves you from yourself;
With fear of the dawn that follows,
With waiting for me, who wait for you,
With me who (hopeless, hopeless to escape!)
Will chase you to the ends of the earth,
Riding your horse,
Darkening the bridge of your ship
With my little black shadow,
Sitting at the table where you sit,
Certain guest at every haven,
Sure companion of your every rest.

“Till what was prophesied has been accomplished,
Until your strength disintegrates,
Until you too end
Not with a bang but in silence,
The way the trees go bare in November,
The way one finds a clock stopped.”

August 22, 1953

1. Cf. T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*: “This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.”

They Were a Hundred

They were a hundred men at arms.
When the sun rose in the sky,
They all took a step forward.
Hours passed, without a sound:
They didn’t bat an eye.
When the bells rang,
All of them took a step ahead.
So the day went, it was evening,
But when the first star blossomed in the sky,
All at once, they took a step ahead.
“Get back, get away, foul ghosts:
Back to your old night.”
But no one answered; so, instead,
They took a step ahead, all in a ring.

March 1, 1959

For Adolf Eichmann

The wind runs free across our plains,
The live sea beats eternal on our beaches.
Man feeds the earth, the earth gives him flowers and fruit:
He lives in torment and in joy, he hopes and fears, he bears sweet children.

. . . And you have come, our precious enemy,
Abandoned creature, man encircled by death.
What can you say now, before our congregation?
Will you swear by a god? What god?
Will you leap joyfully into the grave?
Or will you grieve the way the busy man grieves at last,
Whose life was short for his too long art,
For your sad, unfinished art,
For the thirteen million still alive?

O son of death, we do not wish you death.
May you live longer than anyone ever lived:
May you live sleepless for five million nights,
And every night may you be visited by the suffering of everyone who saw
The door that closed off the way back click shut,
The dark around him grow, the air thicken with death.

July 20, 1960

The Last Epiphany[1]

Your land was closest to my heart:
So I sent you message after message.
I came down among you in strange and different guises,
But you didn't recognize me in any of them.

I rang your bell at night, a pale Jew fleeing,
Barefoot, in rags, hunted like a wild animal:
You called the cops, you fingered me to the spies,
And said in your heart: "So be it. It is God's will."

I came to you as a mad old crone,
Trembling, my throat full of a silent cry.
You talked of blood, of the generations to come,
But my ashes were all that came out your door.

Little orphan boy of the Polish plain
I lay at your feet, begging bread.
But you were afraid of some future vendetta of mine,
And turned your eyes away, and gave me death.

And I came as a prisoner, as a slave in chains,
To be sold, to be whipped.
You turned your back on the livid slave in rags.
Now I come as a judge. Do you recognize me now?

November 20, 1960

1. Translation from the “Dies Irae” cycle of Werner Bergengrün.

Arrival[1]

Happy the man who's come to port,
Who leaves behind him seas and storms,
Whose dreams are dead or never born;
Who sits and drinks by the fire
At the beer hall in Bremen, and is at peace.
Happy the man like a flame gone out,
Happy the man like estuary sand,
Who has laid down his burden and wiped his brow
And rests by the side of the road.
He doesn't fear or hope or wait,
But stares intently at the setting sun.

September 10, 1964

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1. Cf. H. Heine, *Buch der Lieder,* "Die Nordsee," II, 9: *"Glücklich der Mann, der den Hafen erreicht hat . . ."*

Lilith[1]

Lilith our second relation
Created by God with the same clay
That was used for Adam.
Lilith lives amid the undertow,
But she comes out with the new moon
And restless flies across the snowy nights
Undecided between earth and sky.
She whips and whirls,
Brushes suddenly against the windows
Where newborns sleep.
She's searching for them, searching to destroy them:
Which is why you'll hang the medal
With the three words over their beds.
But everything about her is useless: all her desires.
She mated with Adam, after sin,
But gave birth only
To spirits without bodies or peace.
It's written in the great book
That she's a lovely woman to her waist;
The rest is will-o'-the-wisp and pallid light.

May 25, 1965

1. For the legends about Lilith, see the story by the same name, in my collection *Lilith and Other Stories* (1981).

In the Beginning[1]

Fellow men for whom a year is long,
A century a venerable goal,
Exhausted earning your bread,
Worn out, enraged, deluded, sick, and lost;
Hear, and be consoled and mocked:
Twenty billion years ago,
Splendid, moving through both space and time,
There was a globe of flame, alone, eternal,
Our common father and our executioner,
And it exploded, and all change began.
Even now, the faint echo from this one catastrophe reversal
Sounds from the far ends of the universe.
Everything was born from that one spasm:
The same abyss that embraces us and taunts us,
The same time that gives us life and ruins us,
Everything each of us has thought,
The eyes of every woman we have loved,
Suns by the thousand, too,
And this hand that writes.

August 13, 1970

1. “*Bereshit,*” “in the beginning,” is the first word of Holy Scripture. On the big bang, to which allusion is made, see for example *Scientific American*, June 1970.

Via Cigna

In this city there’s no meaner street.
It’s fog and night; the shadows on the sidewalks
Crossed by beams of headlights
As if steeped in nothing, clots
Of nothing, yet still like us.
Maybe the sun no longer is.
Maybe it will be dark forever: yet
The Pleiades smiled on other nights.
Maybe this is the eternity that awaits us:
Not the bosom of the Father but clutch,
Brake, clutch, shift into first.
Maybe eternity is traffic lights.
Maybe it was better to spend life
In one night, like a drone.

February 2, 1973

The Dark Stars[1]

No one should sing again of love or war.

The order the cosmos took its name from has been dissolved;
The heavenly legions are a snarl of monsters,
The universe besieges us, blind, violent, and strange.
The sky is scattered with horrible dead suns,
Dense sediment of shattered atoms.
Only despairing heaviness emanates from them,
Not energy, not messages, not particles, not light;
Light itself falls back, broken by its own weight,
And all of us human seed we live and die for nothing,
And the heavens perpetually roil in vain.

November 30, 1974

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1. Cf. *Scientific American*, December 1974. ◆ *A dark star is a theoretical star that has a surface escape velocity that equals or exceeds the speed of light.*

Farewell

It’s grown late, dear ones;
So I won’t take bread or wine from you
But only a few hours of silence,
The tales of the fisherman Peter,
The musky scent of this lake,
The ancient odor of burned shoots,
The screeching gossip of the gulls,
The free gold of the lichens on the roof tiles,
And a bed, to sleep alone in.
In return, I’ll leave you nebbish[1] lines like these,
Made to be read by five or seven readers:
Then we’ll go, each driven by his worries,
Since, as I was saying, it’s grown late.

Anguillara, December 28, 1974

1. “Nebbish” is a Yiddish word. It means “stupid, useless, inept.”

Pliny[1]

Don’t hold me back, friends, let me sail.
I won’t go far; just to the other shore.
I want to examine up close that dark cloud
Rising over Vesuvius shaped like a pine tree,
And learn where this strange brightness is coming from.
You don’t want to come, too, nephew? Fine, stay and study.
Copy the notes I left you yesterday.
You mustn’t fear the ash; ash on ash,
We’re ash ourselves, don’t you remember Epicurus?
Quick, ready the vessel, night is falling,
Night at noon, a portent never seen.
Sister, don’t be afraid, I’m careful and experienced,
The years that bent me were not spent in vain.
I’ll come back soon, for sure, just give me time
To sail across, observe the phenomena, and return,
So that tomorrow I can write a new chapter
For my books, which I hope will live
Centuries after the atoms of this old body
Will spin dissolved in the universe’s vortices,
Or live again in an eagle, a girl, a flower.
Sailors, obey, launch the ship into the sea.

May 23, 1978

1. Pliny the Elder died in *ad* 79, during the eruption of Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii, having gone too near the volcano.

The Girl of Pompeii

Since the anguish of each belongs to us all
We’re still living yours, scrawny little girl
Clinging convulsively to your mother
As if you wanted to get back inside her
When the sky went black that afternoon.
To no avail, because the sky, turned poison,
Infiltrated the shut windows of your quiet
House with its thick walls to find you
Happy before in your song and timid laughter.
The centuries have passed, the ash has turned to stone,
Locking in these gentle limbs forever.
So you stay with us, contorted plaster cast,
Endless agony, horrific witness
To how our proud seed matters to the gods.
But there’s nothing left for us of your far-away sister,
The girl from Holland walled up in four walls
Who wrote about her childhood without a tomorrow:
Her quiet ashes have been spread by the wind,
Her brief life held inside a crumpled notebook.
Nothing’s left of the Hiroshima schoolgirl,
Shadow transfixed on the wall by the light of a thousand suns,
Victim sacrificed on the altar of fear.
Masters of the earth lords of new poisons,
Sad secret guardians of definitive thunder,
The afflictions heaven offers us are sufficient.
Stop and consider before you push the button.

November 20, 1978

Huayna Capac[1]

Woe to you, messenger, if you lie to your old sovereign.
There are no ships like the ones you describe,
Larger than my palace, driven by the storm.
These dragons you rave about do not exist,
Armored in bronze, gleaming, silver-footed.
Your bearded soldiers don't exist: they're phantoms.
Awake or asleep, your mind conceived them,
Or maybe a god sent them to delude you;
This often happens in times of calamity
When the ancient certainties lose shape,
Virtues are denied, faith fades.
The red plague doesn't come from them; it was here already,
It's not a portent, not an evil sign.
I don't want to hear you. Gather your slaves and go,
Descend the valley, run across the plain;
Thrust your scepter between your enemy half brothers
Huáscar and Atahualpa, sons of my youth.
Halt the war that's bloodying the kingdom,
So the shrewd stranger won't profit from it.
He asked for gold? Give him a hundredweight,
A thousand. If hate has torn apart this empire of the Sun,
Gold will inject hate into the other half of the world,
Where the intruder nurses his monsters.
Give him Inca gold: it will be the happiest of gifts.

December 8, 1978

1. Huayna Capac, the Inca emperor, died in 1527, soon after Francisco Pizarro first landed at Tumbes. It’s said that a messenger of his had dined on board the Spanish ship, and that Huayna Capac, now dying, had had word of the strangers’ arrival.

The Gulls of Settimo[1]

Bend on bend, year after year,
The lords of the sky have come upriver,
Along the banks, up from its turbulent mouths.
They've forgotten backwash and salt water,
Shrewd, patient hunting, greedy crabs.
Above Crespino, Polesella, Ostiglia,
The newborns, more determined than the old,
Beyond Luzzara, beyond wasted Viadana,
Bloated with our ignoble
Waste, fatter at every turn,
They've explored Caorso's mists,
The lazy tributaries between Cremona and Piacenza,
Borne on the tepid breath of the autostrada,
Shrieking their mournful, brief salute.
They've halted at the mouth of the Ticino,
Built nests under the bridge at Valenza,
Near mounds of tar and leftover polyethylene.
They've sailed to nowhere, beyond Casale and Chivasso,
Fleeing the sea, drawn on by our abundance.
Now they drift restless over Settimo Torinese:
Past forgotten, they pick over our waste.

April 9, 1979

1. *SIVA (Società Industriale Vernici e Affini), the paint factory where Levi began working in 1948, moved to the suburb of Settimo Torinese in 1953.*

Annunciation

Don’t be dismayed, woman, by my wild appearance:
I’ve come from very far, in headlong flight;
Maybe the whirlwinds ruffled my feathers.
I’m an angel, yes, not a bird of prey;
An angel, but not the one in your pictures,
Come down in another time to promise another Lord.
I come with news for you, but wait till the heaving
In my chest, the loathing of the void and dark, subside.
Someone sleeps in you who will rupture much sleep;
He’s still unformed, but soon you’ll be caressing his limbs,
He’ll have the power of speech and the eyes of a fascinator,
He’ll preach abomination, and all will believe him.
They’ll follow him in droves, and kiss his footprints,
Rejoicing and savage, singing and bleeding.
He’ll carry the lie to the ends of the earth,
He’ll evangelize with curse and pitchfork.
He’ll reign in terror, suspecting poison
In spring water, in the air of the high plains,
He’ll see ambush in the bright eyes of infants.
He’ll die dissatisfied with slaughter, having sown hatred.
This is the seed that grows in you. Woman, rejoice.

June 22, 1979

To the Valley

The carriages trundle toward the valley,
Smoke from the brush hangs blue and bitter,
A bee, the last one, pointlessly noses the autumn crocuses;
Slow, waterlogged, the landslides shudder.
Mist rises quickly among the larches, as if called:
I’ve followed it in vain with my heavy, fleshy step,
Soon it will fall again as rain: the season’s over,
Our half of the world wends toward winter.
And soon all our seasons will be over:
How long will these good limbs of mine obey me?
It’s grown late to live and love,
To see into the sky and understand the world.
It’s time to go down
To the valley, with shut, silent faces,
To shelter in the shadows of our troubles.

September 5, 1979

Heart of Wood

My next-door neighbor’s sturdy:
A horse chestnut on Corso Re Umberto;
My age but he doesn’t seem it,
He shelters sparrows and crows, and has no shame
Putting out buds and leaves in April,
Fragile flowers in May, and in September
Burrs with harmless spines
That hold shiny, tannic chestnuts.
An impostor, but naïve: he wants to seem
Like his fine mountain brother’s rival,
Lord of sweet fruit and rare mushrooms.
It’s not a happy life. The number 8
And 19 trams run across his roots
Every five minutes, leaving him deaf,
And he grows twisted, as if he wants to escape.
Year after year, he sucks up gentle poisons
From the methane-saturated subsoil;
He’s drenched by dog piss,
The striations on his bark get clogged
With the avenues’ polluted dust;
Under his bark hang desiccated
Chrysalises that will never be butterflies.
Still, in his slow-witted wooden heart
He senses and enjoys the changing seasons.

May 10, 1980

First Atlas

Abyssal Abyssinia, iridescent irate Ireland,
Steel-blue Sweden,
Finland final end of every land,
Poland near the pole, pale color of snow.
Angular Mongoloid Mongolia,
Coarse Corsica of course, index finger
Pointing at Liguria’s pulled-in stomach.
Argentina jingling jingle bells
Hung on the necks of a thousand argent cows,
Brazil grilled on the braziers of the tropics,
Harried Hungary, brown bowl of goulash.
Italy buffo boot with too tall heel,
Ancona black abscess halfway up the calf,
Blood-black Bolivia, land of bulletins,
Germany turquoise territory of germs and germination,
Fringed Greece heavy udder ringed
With unnumbered squirts of rosy milk,
Unintimidated England, austere lithe lady,
Hobbled, tawny, proud of her feathered hat.
Black Sea cat that coddles its kitten the Sea of Azov
The Baltic praying, kneeling on the ice,
Caspian, bear dancing on marsh mud.
Toxic Tuscany, upended tub,
Handle caught in the brown of a Tuscan cigar.
China cynical oblique stamped on yellow silk
Behind the great wall of bright China ink,

Panama of straw hats, well glued, woven.
Uruguay Paraguay twin little parrots,
Africa and South America ugly iron lances
Raised to menace orphan Antarctica.
None of the countries written into your destiny
Will speak the language of your first atlas to you.

June 28, 1980

July 12, 1980[1]

Be patient, my weary lady,
Patient with the things of this world,
With your fellow travelers, me included,
From the moment I was allotted to you.
After so many years, accept a few gnarled lines
For this important birthday.
Be patient, my impatient lady,
Pulverized and macerated, flayed,
Who flay yourself a little every day
So the raw flesh hurts you even more.
It’s no longer time to live alone.
Please, accept these fourteen lines;
They’re my rough way of telling you you’re loved,
And that I wouldn’t be in the world without you.

July 12, 1980

1. *Written for the sixtieth birthday of his wife, Lucia.*

Brown Swarm[1]

Who could have chosen a more ridiculous route?
In Corso San Martino there's an anthill
Half a meter from the tramline,
And there, right up against the rail
A long brown swarm is growing,
One ant after another,
Perhaps to find their way, their fate.
In sum, these stupid sisters
Obstinate industrious lunatics
Have dug their city here in ours,
Traced their track on top of ours,
And scramble unsuspecting
Tireless on their little errands
Not thinking of
        I don't want to write it,
I don't want to write about this swarm,
I don't want to write about any brown swarm.

August 13, 1980

1. Cf. *Purgatory* XXVI:34.

Autobiography

"Once I was both boy and girl,
bush,
bird and silent fish jumping out of the
sea."
FROM A FRAGMENT BY EMPEDOCLES

I'm old like the world, I who speak to you.
In the dark of origins
I swarmed in the blind furrows of the sea,
Blind myself: but already I wanted the light
When I was still lying in the sea floor's filth.
I swilled salt with a thousand infinitesimal throats;
I was a fish, sleek and fast. I avoided traps,
I showed my young the sidewise tracks of the crab.
Taller than a tower, I offended the sky,
The mountains trembled at my storming step
And my brute hulk obstructed the valleys:
The rocks of your time still sport
The incredible mark of my scales.
I sang to the moon the liquid song of the toad,
And my patient hunger perforated wood.
Impetuous skittish stag
I ran through woods that are ashes today, and gloried in my strength.
I was drunk cicada, astute horrendous tarantula,
And salamander and scorpion and unicorn and asp.

I suffered the whip
And heat and cold and the desperation of the yoke,
The donkey’s silent vertigo at the millstone.
I was a girl, hesitant in the dance;
Geometer, I sought the secret of the circle
And the dubious ways of clouds and winds:
I knew tears and laughter and many loves.
Don’t deride me, then, men of Agrigento,
If this old body is engraved with strange signs.

November 12, 1980

Voices[1]

Voices still forever, or since yesterday, or just now quieted;
If you cock your ear you can still catch their echo.
Hoarse voices of those who can speak no longer,
Voices that speak and no longer say a thing,
Voices that believe they're saying something,
Voices that speak and are not understood:
Choruses and cymbals to smuggle
A meaning into the message with no meaning,
Pure babble that pretends
That silence isn't silence.
À vous parle, compaings de galle:
I speak for you, raucous companions
Drunk like me on words:
Words-as-swords and words-as-poison
Key and picklock words,
Words of salt, mask and nepenthe.
The place we're going to is quiet
Or deaf. The limbo of the lonely and the deaf.
    You'll have to run the last lap deaf,
    You'll have to run the last lap on your own.

February 10, 1981

1. Cf. F. Villon, *Le Testament*, l. 1720.

Unfinished Business

Sir, please accept my resignation
As of next month,
And, if it seems right, plan on replacing me.
I’m leaving much unfinished work,
Whether out of laziness or actual problems.
I was supposed to tell someone something,
But I no longer know what and to whom: I’ve forgotten.
I was also supposed to donate something—
A wise word, a gift, a kiss;
I put it off from one day to the next. I’m sorry.
I’ll do it in the short time that remains.
I’m afraid I’ve neglected important clients.
I was meant to visit
Distant cities, islands, desert lands;
You’ll have to cut them from the program
Or entrust them to my successor.
I was supposed to plant trees and I didn’t;
To build myself a house,
Maybe not beautiful, but based on plans.
Mainly, I had in mind
A marvelous book, kind sir,
Which would have revealed many secrets,
Alleviated pains and fears,
Eased doubts, given many
The gift of tears and laughter.
You’ll find its outline in my drawer,

Down below, with the unfinished business;
I didn’t have the time to write it out, which is a shame,
It would have been a fundamental work.

April 19, 1981

Partigia[1]

Where are you, partisans of all the valleys,
Tarzan, Curly, Sparrow Hawk, Arrow, Ulysses?
Many sleep in honored graves,
Those still living are white haired
And tell their grandchildren
How, in that long-gone time of certainties,
They broke the Germans' siege
There where the chairlift rises.
Some speculate in property,
Others nibble at their government pensions
Or grow wrinkled at town meetings.
Rise and stand, old men: for us there is no discharge.
Let's meet again. Let's go back into the mountains,
Slow, out of breath, stiff-kneed,
With many winters in our curving spines.
The steep trail will be difficult for us,
The cot, the bread.
We'll stare without knowing each other,
Mistrustful, argumentative, and dour.
Just as then, we'll be watching out
So the enemy won't surprise us at dawn.
What enemy? Everyone's everyone's enemy,
Everyone's riven by his own frontier,
The right hand the enemy of the left.
Rise and stand, old men, your own worst enemies:
Our war is never over.

July 23, 1981

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1. Abbreviation prevalent in Piedmontese for *partigiano* (modeled on *burgu* for “borghese,” *Juve* for “Juventus,” *prepu* for “prepotente,” *cumenda* for “commendatore,” etc.) to designate a partisan, especially one without compunctions, decisive, swift-handed.

Arachne

I’m going to weave myself another web,
Be patient. I’ve got long patience and a little mind,
Eight legs and a hundred eyes,
But a thousand spinning teats,
And don’t like fasting,
I like flies and males.
I’ll rest for four days, seven,
Hiding in my hole,
Until I feel my abdomen get heavy
With good viscous shiny thread,
And I’ll weave myself another web,
Just like the one you shredded, passerby,
Just like the project printed
On the minimal ribbon of my memory.
I’ll sit in the center
And wait for a male to come,
Suspicious but drunk with desire,
To fill my stomach and my womb
At one and the same time.
Fast and furious, as soon as it gets dark,
Quickly quickly, knot by knot,
I’ll weave myself another web.

October 29, 1981

2000

A thousand and a thousand: a finish line,
A white wool string, no longer that far off,
Or maybe black or red. Who can say?
It’s bad luck to know. We’re not allowed
To ask about the Babylonian numbers.

January 11, 1982

Passover[1]

Tell me: how is this night
Different from all other nights?
Tell me, how is this Passover
Different from other Passovers?
Light the light, unbar the door
So that the traveler may enter,
Be he Gentile or Jew:
Perhaps the prophet is hidden under his rags.
Enter and sit with us,
Listen, drink, and sing and celebrate Passover.
Eat the bread of affliction,
Lamb, sweet mortar, and bitter herbs.
This is the night of differences,
When we put our elbows on the table,
Because the forbidden is prescribed
So that evil may turn into good.
We'll spend the evening telling tales
Of age-old wonderful events,
And because of all the wine
The hills will prance like rams.
Tonight the wise, the heathen, the fool, and the child
Ask each other questions,
And time changes direction,
Today flows back into yesterday,
Like a river silted up at its mouth.
Each of us has been a slave in Egypt,

Has soaked straw and clay with sweat
And crossed the sea with dry feet:
You, too, stranger.
This year in fear and shame,
Next year in strength and justice.

April 9, 1982

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1. Contains various references to the traditional Jewish ritual of Passover.

In Mothballs

Late and alone an old keel rocks,
Among the many new ones, in the slicked,
Oil-iridescent water of the harbor.
Its wood is leprous, its iron rusty orange.
Its hull knocks blind against the dock, obese
Like a belly pregnant with nothing.
Under the water's surface
You see soft seaweed, and the slow, slow drills
Of teredos and stubborn barnacles.
On the torrid deck, white splotches
Of calcined gull guano,
Tar oxidized by sun, and useless paint,
And brown stains, I'm afraid, of human excrement,
With spider lines of salt; I didn't know
Spiders too nested in mothballed ships.
I can't say what prey they're after, but they must know their work.
The tiller creaks and lazily obeys
The secret whims of all the little currents.
On the stern that saw the world,
A name and motto no longer legible.
But the mooring line is new,
Yellow and red nylon, taut and glossy,
Just in case the mad old dame
Had the wild idea of going to sea.

June 27, 1982

Old Mole[1]

What's so strange? I didn't like the sky,
So chose to live alone and in the dark.
I was given good hands to dig with,
Concave, clawed, but sensitive and strong.
Now I voyage sleepless,
Unseen under the meadows,
Where I never feel the cold or heat
Or wind or rain or day or night or snow
And where my eyes are no longer any use.
I dig and turn up tasty roots,
Tubers, rotten wood, mushroom hyphae,
And if a boulder blocks my way
I find my way around it, laboring but calm,
Because I always know where I want to go.
I find earthworms, slugs and salamanders,
A truffle once,
Another time a viper, a good meal,
And treasures buried by who knows whom.
In the past I used to chase the females,
And when I heard one digging
I'd dig my way to her:
No longer; if it happens, I change course.
But the new moon excites me,
And sometimes then I entertain myself
emerging suddenly to scare the dogs.

September 22, 1982

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1. Cf. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, act I, scene 3. ♦ *Thomson (427) calls this "surely a veiled portrait of Kafka."*

A Bridge

It’s not like other bridges,
Which survive the snowfall of the centuries
So flocks can cross to water and pasture
Or revelers can go from place to place.
This is a different kind of bridge,
Happy if you stop halfway
And stare into the depths and ask yourself
If it’s worthwhile to be alive tomorrow.
It’s dull but alive
And never at rest.
Maybe because a poison slowly
Drips from its hollow pier,
An old maliciousness I won’t describe;
Or maybe, as they said it late at night,
Because it’s the product of a dirty deal.
Which is here why you never see the current
Tranquilly reflect the bridge’s span,
But only cresting waves and eddies.
Which is why it’s always scoured by sand,
Screaming, stone on stone,
And pushes pushes pushes against the banks
To break the earth’s crust open.

November 25, 1982

The Work

Look, it’s finished: nothing more to do.
How my pen is heavy in my hand!
It was so light a little while ago,
Live as quicksilver:
All I had to do was follow it,
It led my hand
The way a man who sees will lead the blind,
The way a woman leads you to the dance floor.
Enough, the work is done,
Perfected, spherical.
If I took another word away
There would be a hole that oozes lymph.
If I were to add one
It would stick out like an ugly mole.
If I were to change one it would grate
Like a dog barking at a concert.
What now? How to let it go?
Every work that’s born you die a little.

January 15, 1983

A Mouse

A mouse got in, I don’t know through what hole;
Not quiet, as they usually are,
But presumptuous, arrogant, bombastic.
It was talkative, sententious, condescending:
It climbed to the top of the bookcase
And preached me a sermon
Citing Plutarch, Nietzsche, and Dante:
That I mustn’t waste time,
Blah, blah, that time is growing short,
That wasted time won’t come again,
That time is money,
And that he who has time shouldn’t wait for time
Because life is short and art is long,
And that at my back he seemed to hear
Some winged, scythed chariot hurrying near.
Such shamelessness! Such insolence!
It made the gorge rise in my throat.
Does a mouse know what time is?
He’s the one who’s wasting it for me
With his cheeky lecturing.
If he’s a mouse then let him preach to mice.
I told him to get lost:
I know what time is very well,
It plays a part in lots of equations in physics,
Even squared in some instances,
Or with a negative exponent.

I can take care of myself,
I don’t need someone else to run my life:
Prima caritas incipit ab ego.[1]

January 15, 1983

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1. Charity begins at home.

Nachtwache[1]

“Watchman, what of the night?”

“I’ve heard the owl repeat
Its hollow warning note,
The bat shriek as it hunted,
the slither of the water snake
Under the pond’s sodden leaves.
I’ve heard wine-soaked voices,
Garbled, angry, while I dozed,
From the bar next to the chapel.
I’ve heard lovers whispering,
The laughter and breathlessness of satisfied longing;
Adolescents murmuring in their sleep,
Others tossing sleepless with desire.
I’ve seen silent heat lightning,
I’ve seen the nightly terror
Of the girl who’s lost her mind
And can’t tell bed from bier.
I’ve heard the raucous heaving
Of a lonely old man wrestling with death,
Of a woman torn in childbirth,
The wail of a newborn.
Lie down and sleep, citizen,
All is well: this night’s half over.”

August 10, 1983

1. “Night watchman” in German (it was a technical term in the Lager). The first line is from Isaiah 22:11.

Agave

I’m not useful and not beautiful,
I have neither happy colors nor odor;
My roots eat into cement,
And my leaves, which are edged with needles,
Watch out for me, as sharp as swords.
I’m silent. I speak only my plant language,
Hard for you, a man, to understand.
It’s a tongue that’s out of use,
Exotic, since I come from far away,
From a cruel country
Full of wind, of poisons and volcanoes.
I waited many years before expressing
This very tall, despairing flower of mine,
Ugly, woody, rigid, but aimed at the sky.
It’s our way of shouting,
I’m going to die tomorrow. Now do you hear me?

September 10, 1983

Meleagrina[1]

You, impulsive, lumbering hotblood,
What do you know of these soft limbs of mine
Beyond their taste? Yet they
Feel cool and warm,
And impurity and purity in the bosom of the sea;
They contract and expand, obeying
Silent inner rhythms,
They enjoy their food, and cry out in hunger
As yours do, stranger of lightning movements.
And if, walled up among my rocky valves,
I, like you, had memory and feeling,
And, cemented to my shoal, divined the sky?
I'm more like you than you think,
Condemned to secrete secrete
Tears sperm mother-of-pearl and pearl.
Like you, if a shard should harm my mantle
I repair it day by day in silence.

September 30, 1983

1. The meleagrina (pearl oyster) is a different species from the common edible oyster.

The Snail

Why hurry, when you're well defended?
Is one place better than another
As long as it has damp and grass?
Why run and run adventure's risks,
When it's enough to close up and find peace?
And if the universe becomes unfriendly
It knows to shut itself up silently
Behind its shell of gleaming limestone
Denying the world and denying itself to it.
But when the meadow's drenched in dew,
Or rain has softened the earth,
Every trail is its highway,
Paved with lovely shining spume
Bridge from leaf to leaf and stone to stone.
It travels careful safe and secret,
Tests its way with telescopic eyes
Graceful repellent logarithmic.
Now it's found its boy/girl mate
And fearfully
Throbbing tense outside its shell it tastes
The shy delights of double love.

December 7, 1983

A Profession

All you have to do is wait, your ballpoint poised:
The lines will buzz around you, like drunk moths;
One comes near the flame, you grab it.
No, it’s not over, one is not enough,
But it’s a lot already, the work’s started.
The others compete to land nearby,
Lined up or in a circle, ordered or disordered,
Simple and silent, obedient to your command:
You’re the boss, without a doubt.
If it’s a good day, you order them in droves.
Fine work, no? It’s time-honored,
Sixty centuries old and ever new,
With strict rules or relaxed ones,
Or no rules, as you like.
You sense you’re in good company,
Not lazy, not lost, not always useless,
Sandaled and togaed,
Cloaked in linen, crowned with laurel.
Just be careful that you don’t presume.

January 2, 1984

Flight[1]

Rock and sand and no water
Sand stitched with his footsteps
Numberless all the way to the horizon:
He was fleeing, though no one was chasing.
Crushed and scattered rubble
Stone eroded by wind
Split by frost after frost,
Dry wind and no water.
No water for him
Who needed only water,
Water to erase
Water savage dream
Impossible water to make him pure again.
Leaden rayless sun
Sky and dunes and no water
Ironic water made by mirages
Precious water poured off in sweat
And up above the untapped water of the clouds.
    He found the well and went down,
He plunged his hands in and the water went red.
No one could ever drink it again.

January 12, 1984

1. Cf. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 332: “Rock and no water and the sandy road.”

The Survivor[1]

To B.V.

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till his ghastly tale is told,
His heart within him burns.
He sees his comrades' faces
livid at first light,
gray with cement dust,
Vague in the mist,
Dyed by death in their restless sleep:
At night they grind their jaws
Under the heavy burden of their dreams
Chewing a nonexistent turnip.
"Back, away from here, drowned people,
Go. I haven't stolen anyone's place,
I haven't usurped the bread of anyone,
No one died for me. No one.
Go back to your haze.
It's not my fault if I live and breathe
And eat and drink and sleep and put on clothes."

February 4, 1984

1. Cf. S. T. Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, l. 582, and *Inferno* XXXIII:141. ♦ *B.V. is Bruno Vasari, "Levi's unidentified antagonist in* The Drowned and the Saved *and the chairman of the Turin branch of the National Association of Ex-Deportees" (Thomson, 506). Vasari's memoir of survival in Mauthausen,* Bivouac of Death*, had been published in Italy in 1945. Vasari believed that "ex-deportees had survived the Nazi camps not by cunning or brutality but by force of their virtue."*

The Elephant[1]

Dig: you'll find my absurd
Bones in this snowy place.
I was tired of the burden and the road
And missed the warmth and grass.
You'll find Punic coins and arms
Buried by avalanches: absurd, absurd!
My history and History are absurd:
What did Carthage and Rome matter to me?
Now my lovely ivory, our pride,
Noble, curved like the moon,
Lies in shards with the pebbles in the stream:
It wasn't made for piercing breastplates
But for digging roots and pleasing women.
We fight only for females,
And intelligently, without spilling blood.
You want my story? It's briefly told.
A shrewd Indian nursed and tamed me,
An Egyptian shackled me and sold me,
A Phoenician dressed me in armor
And set a tower on my rump.
It was absurd that I, a tower of flesh,
Invulnerable, gentle, terrifying,
Caught in these unfriendly mountains,
Should slip on ice of yours I'd never seen.
For us, when we fall, there's no salvation.
A daring blind man tried for a long time

To find my heart with his lance point.
At these peaks livid in the sunset
I hurled my useless
Dying trumpet blast: “Absurd, absurd.”

March 23, 1984

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1. The “daring blind man” is Hannibal, who is said to have contracted an eye disease while crossing the Alps.

Sidereus Nuncius

I’ve seen two-horned Venus
Navigating suavely in the sky.
I’ve seen valleys and mountains on the Moon
And three-bodied Saturn,
I, Galileo, first among humans;
Four stars orbiting Jupiter,
And the Milky Way disintegrating
Into infinite legions of new worlds.
I’ve seen, though I did not believe, ominous spots
Infecting the face of the Sun.
I built this telescope myself,
A learned man but with wise hands:
I polished its mirrors, I aimed it at the Sky
The way you’d aim a bombard.
I was the one who broke Heaven open
Before the Sun burned my eyes.

Before the Sun burned my eyes
I had to bend and say
I didn’t see what I saw.
He who chained me to the earth
Didn’t loose earthquakes or lightning,
He had a low, flat voice,
He had a face like everyman.
The vulture that gnaws at me every evening
Has the face of everyman.

April 11, 1984

Give Us

Give us something to destroy,
A crown, a quiet place,
A trusted friend, a magistrate,
A phone booth,
A journalist, a renegade,
A fan of the opposing team,
A lamppost, a manhole cover, a bench.
Give us something to deface,
A plaster wall, the Mona Lisa,
A mudguard, a gravestone,
Give us something to defile,
A timid girl,
A flower bed, ourselves.
Don’t despise us, we are heralds and prophets.
Give us something that burns, offends, cuts, breaks, befouls,
That makes us feel we exist.
Give us a club or a Nagant,
Give us a syringe or a Suzuki.
Pity us.

April 30, 1984

Chess I

Only my age-old enemy
The abominable black queen
Has had nerve like mine
Protecting her hapless king.
Mine is hapless and tired too, of course:
He cowered first
Behind his line of fine pawns,
Then fled across the chessboard
Off-kilter, ridiculous, in little faltering moves:
Battles are not for kings.
But I!
If I had not been there!
Castles and knights are fine, but I!
Potent and prepared, direct, diagonal,
Far-reaching like a catapult,
I sailed through their defenses;
They had to bow their heads,
The fraudulent and haughty blacks.
Victory intoxicates like wine.

Now it’s all over.
The skill and hate are spent.
A great hand has swept us away,
Weak and strong, wise, foolish, careful,
White and black thrown together, lifeless.
With a clatter of pebbles it tossed us

Into the dark wood box
And shut the top.
When will we play again?

May 9, 1984

Pious[1]

Pious bull my ass. Pious under duress,
Pious against my will, pious against nature,
Pious in Arcadia, pious by euphemism.
It takes a lot of nerve to call me pious
And even dedicate a sonnet to me.
You are pious, professor,
Learned in Greek and Latin, Nobel Laureate,
Who beats on the shut gates with flowering branches
Faute de mieux
While I bend to the yoke, imagine how gladly.
Had you been present when they made me pious
Your desire to write poems
And eat boiled meat for lunch would have left you.
Oh think that I don't see, here in the meadow,
My brother whole, erect, enraged,
Who with a single shudder of his flanks
Inseminates my sister cow?
Oy gevalt! Unheard-of violence,
The violence of making me nonviolent.

May 18, 1984

1. An allusion to well-known lines by Carducci, “*T’amo, pio bove*” (I love you, pious bull).*Gewalt* means “violence” in German; in Yiddish the term is used principally as an interjection, to express extreme and desperate protest.

Chess II

. . . So, in the middle of the game,
When it’s almost over,
You’d like to change the rules?
You know very well it isn’t done.
Castling out of check?
Or even, if I’ve understood you right,
Changing the moves you made at the beginning?
No, you agreed to these rules
When you sat down at the board.
Once you’ve touched a piece you’ve made your move:
This game of ours is serious.
No bargaining, obfuscation, trickery.
Make your move, your time is almost up;
Don’t you hear the clock tick?
Why keep playing, anyway?
To anticipate my moves
You need a different savvy than you have.
You knew from the beginning
I am better.

June 23, 1984

OTHER POEMS

September 1982–January 1987



To the Muse

Disheveled muse, lazy muse,
Horned horny muse,
Muse of a hundred horns,
Muse without head or tail,
Muse out of fashion,
Why do you visit me so rarely?
You see how I've been shrunk,
Drunk, sunk, cuckolded,
Yes I've thunk, but it's all bunk;
And down here,
Down where my ideas germinate,
I feel a bump that wasn't there before,
Inflamed and sore.
It's not likely it holds poetry,
But other bullshit and soft stuff.
If you don't get down to work,
Next time you'll find
Your poet crazy, dead, or fucked.

September 5, 1982

Casa Galvani[1]

My master likes frogs:
Every night he sends me down to the Reno,
But he doesn't give them to Gegia to fry.
Instead of taking care of his sick patients
He hangs frogs on the railing of his balcony,
He skins them, then torments them with a nail,
Spends the day watching them dance,
And writes letters in Latin:
Who knows what he hopes to get from it!
So every night I have to go around
With lantern, sieve, and basket.
I have to say: it's not new work.
That other one, the one from Scandiano,
Yes, him, the abbot Spallanzani[2]:
He sent me out to get frogs, too,
But instead of hanging them on the railing
He put the males and females together,
But made the males wear little pants
So they couldn't fuck anymore:
And he claims to be a Christian!
Masters are almost all insane.

May 3, 1984

1. *Luigi Galvani (1737–1798) studied bioelectricity, conducting experiments with frogs.*
2. *The biologist Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729–1799) investigated their mating habits.*

The Decathlete

Believe me, the marathon is nothing,
Or the hammer or weights: no one event
Compares with how we work.
Yes, I won: I'm better known than yesterday,
But I'm much older and worn out.
I flew the four hundred like a sparrow hawk,
With no pity for the man behind me.
Who was he? A nobody, a novice,
Someone I'd never seen before,
A third-world loser,
But whoever's running beside you is always a monster.
I broke his back, the way I wanted to.
Reveling in his agony, I didn't feel my own.
The pole vault wasn't so easy,
But luckily the judges
Didn't see me cheat
And made the five meters good for me.
And the javelin is my secret joy;
You don't have to toss it into the sky.
The sky is empty: why would you want to pierce it?
It's enough to imagine at the end of the meadow
The man or woman whom you wish were dead,
And the javelin becomes a spear,
It will smell blood, and fly farther.
I don't know what to tell you about the fifteen hundred;
I ran it feeling nausea

And cramps, stubborn and desperate,
Terrified
By the convulsive drumbeat of my heart.
I won, but the price was high:
Afterward, the discus was heavy as lead
And slipped from my hand, slimy
With my broken veteran’s sweat.
You booed me from the bleachers,
I heard you loud and clear.
But what do you want from us?
What could you still ask?
To levitate in the air?
To write a poem in Sanskrit?
To calculate pi to the final digit?
To console the afflicted?
To act out of compassion?

September 4, 1984

Dust

How much dust
Lies on the nervous tissue of a life?
Dust has no weight or sound,
No color or intention: it obscures, denies,
Obliterates, hides, paralyzes;
It doesn’t kill, it smothers.
It isn’t dead. It sleeps.
It harbors spores millennia old
Pregnant with future damage,
Tiny chrysalises waiting
To break up, decompose, degrade:
Pure mixed-up indefinite ambush
Ready for the assault to come,
Powerlessness that will be power
At the sounding of a silent signal.
But it also harbors different germs,
Dormant seeds that will become ideas,
Each one instinct with a universe
Unforeseen, new, beautiful, and strange.
Therefore respect and fear
This gray and shapeless mantle:
It holds evil, good,
Danger, and many written things.

September 29, 1984

Date Book

On a night like this
Of north wind and rainfall mixed with snow,
Someone dozes by the television
While someone else decides to rob a bank.

On a night like this, as far away
As light can travel in five days
Is a comet that falls in front of us
Out of the dark womb without high or low.
It’s the same one Giotto painted;
It won’t bring good luck or ill,
But ancient ice and perhaps an answer.

On a night like this
There’s a half-mad old man
Who in his day was a fine machinist,
But his day was not our day
And now he sleeps at Porta Nuova and drinks.

On a night like this
There’s a man who lies beside a woman
And feels that he no longer weighs a thing,
That his tomorrows no longer weigh a thing,
That it’s today that counts but not tomorrow
And that the flow of time is ending.

On a night like this the witches

Chose hemlock and hellebore
To gather by the brightness of the moon
And cook in their kitchens.

On a night like this
There’s a transvestite in Corso Matteotti
Who’d give a lung or kidney
To scoop himself out and become a woman.

On a night like this
Seven young men in white coats
Four of them smoking pipes
Are designing a long, long tunnel
Down which they’ll send a mass of protons
Almost as fast as the speed of light:
If they succeed, the world will explode.

On a night like this a poet
Stretches his bow and searches for a word
That will contain the power of the typhoon
And the secrets of blood and seed.

November 14, 1984

Still to Do

I wouldn’t disturb the universe.
I’d like, if possible,
To get free silently,
Light-footed, like a smuggler,
The way one slips away from a party.
To halt the stubborn pumping of my lungs
Without a squeal,
And tell my lovely heart,
That mediocre musician with no rhythm:
“After 2.6 billion heartbeats
You must be tired, too; thank you, it’s enough.”
If possible, as I was saying—
If it weren’t for those who stay behind,
For the work cut short
(Each life’s cut short),
For the world’s turns and wounds;
it wasn’t for the unfinished business,
The long-standing debts,
The old unavoidable commitments.

December 10, 1984

Song of Those Who Died in Vain

Sit and bargain
All you want, old silver foxes.
We'll wall you up inside a splendid palace
With food and wine, good beds, and heat
So you can argue and negotiate
About our children's lives and yours.
Let all the wisdom of creation
Converge to bless your minds
And guide you through the labyrinth.
But we'll be waiting outside in the cold,
The army of the dead in vain,
We of the Marne and Montecassino,
Of Treblinka, Dresden, and Hiroshima:
And with us will be
The lepers and the victims of trachoma,
The disappeared of Buenos Aires,
The dead of Cambodia and the dying of Ethiopia,
The negotiated of Prague,
The bled of Calcutta,
The slaughtered innocents of Bologna.
Woe unto you if you emerge with no agreement:
We'll strangle you in our bear hug.
We're invincible because we're the defeated.
We're invulnerable because we've died:
We deride your missiles.
Sit and negotiate

Till your tongues go dry:
If the harm and shame go on
We'll drown you in our putrefaction.

January 14, 1985

Samson

Son of a sterile mother
I too was announced
By a messenger with a terrifying face.
Child of the Sun, I was a sun myself;
I had the Sun’s power
Gathered in my bull’s loins.
I, sun and beast,
Killed my enemies by the thousand,
Splintered doors and shattered chains,
Took women and burned harvests,
Until a Philistine Delilah
Sheared my hair and strength
And put out the light of my eyes:
There’s no struggling against the shadows.
My hair grew back
Along with my brute force;
But not my will to live.

Delilah

Samson of Timnath, the rebel,
The Jewish mountain-splitter,
Was as malleable as potter’s clay
In my gentle hands.
It was a simple thing to take
The secret of his fabled strength:
I flattered him and babied him,
And put him to sleep in my lap
Still full of his foreign seed,
I blinded him and sheared his locks,
And took the power from his loins.
My rage and lust
Have never found such peace
As when I saw him in chains;
Not even when I felt him enter me.
Now let him meet his fate: what do I care?

April 5, 1985

Airport

It was a sampling of man in transit,
As if selected at random
For inspection by an alien buyer:
Rich and poor and fat and slim,
Indians, blacks, the sick, and children.
What does man in transit do?
Nothing of significance.
Chats and sleeps and smokes in his seat:
What will the buyer say? What will he offer
For that seventy-year-old woman in tights?
For that group of eight talking nonsense,
Grandparents, mothers, grand- and great-grandchildren?
For that family of fatties
Stuck in their chair?
For the two of us, fed up with foreign words?

We're leaving. The great cavelike bird
Sucks up everyone indiscriminately:
We cross Acheron
Via a telescopic concourse.
It taxis, accelerates, gathers power,
Lifts off, and suddenly is raised into the sky
Body and soul: our bodies and souls.
Are we worthy of Assumption?

Now it flies into the purple twilight

Over the ice of nameless seas,
Or above a mantle of dark clouds,
As if this planet of ours
Had hidden its face in shame.
Now it’s flying with dull thuds
Almost as if someone were driving piles
Into the Stygian swamp;
Now along soft,
Smoothed tracks of air.
The night is without sleep, but brief,
Brief the way no night has ever been:
Light and carefree like a first night.

At Malpensa, Lisa with her bright,
alert expression was expecting us.
I don’t think it was a useless trip.

May 29, 1985

On Trial

—State your name—Alex Zink.—Where were you born?
—In Nuremberg, illustrious ancient city,
Erstens, because certain laws were promulgated there
That don’t concern us here;
Zweitens, for a questionable trial;
Drittens, because the best toys in the world
Are manufactured there.
—Tell me how you lived.
Don’t lie. It would be pointless here.
—I worked hard, Your Honor.
Stone on stone, label after label,
I built a model industry.
The best buckram, the best felt
Were made by the Zink Company.
I was a humane, hardworking boss:
Honest prices, generous pay,
Never a dispute with customers.
And above all, as I told you,
The best felt made in Europe.
—Did you use good wool?
—Extraordinary wool, Your Honor.
Loose or braided,
Wool for which we had the monopoly.
Black and chestnut, tawny and blond wool;
But gray or white more often.
—From which sheep?

—I don’t know. I didn’t care:
I paid in cash.
—Tell me. Have your dreams been peaceful?
—Usually yes, Your Honor,
Although at times, in sleep,
I hear groans of grieving ghosts.
—Stand down, weaver.

July 19, 1985

Thieves

They come at night, like wisps of mist,
Often also by the light of day.
Unseen, they filter
Into cracks and keyholes
Noiselessly; and leave no trace,
No broken locks, no disruptions.
They are thieves of time,
Fluid and sleek, like leeches:
They drink your time and spit it out
The way you'd toss out garbage.
You've never looked them in the face. Do they have faces?
Lips and tongue for certain
and tiny, pointy teeth.
They suck and cause no pain,
Leaving just a livid scar.

October 14, 1985

Mandate

Don’t be afraid if there’s a lot of work.
They need you because you’re less exhausted.
Because your senses are fine-tuned, you hear
The hollow sound beneath your feet.
Reconsider our mistakes:
There’s been one among us
Who’s been searching blindly
The way a blindfolded man repeats an outline,
And one who has weighed anchor like a pirate
And one who’s done his level best.
Help, insecure one. Try,
Although you’re insecure,
Because you’re insecure. See
If you can repress the annoyance and the boredom
At our doubts and certainties.
We were never all that rich, and yet
We live among embalmed monsters,
Among other monsters who are obscenely alive.
Don’t be dismayed by the rubble
Or the stench of the dumps: we
Leveled them with our bare hands
In the years when we were your age.
Keep on course the best you can.
We’ve combed the comets’ manes,
Deciphered the secrets of genesis,
Tromped in the moon’s sand,

Built Auschwitz and destroyed Hiroshima.
You see that we weren’t lazy.
Take up the challenge, perplexed one;
Don’t call us teachers.

June 24, 1986

August

Who stays in town in August?
Only the poor and the insane,
Forgotten crones,
Retirees with their little dogs,
Thieves, a few gentlemen, and cats.
On the deserted streets
You hear a constant click of heels;
You see women with their plastic bags
In the line of shade along the walls.
Under the little fountain with its turret
In the pool that’s green with algae
Is a middle-aged naiad
Ten and a half centimeters tall:
Wearing nothing but a bra.
A few feet on,
Ignoring the familiar ban,
The pleading pigeons
Flock around
And steal bread from your hand.
You hear the noontime demon rustle,
Circling listless in the sky.

July 22, 1986

The Fly

I’m alone here: this
Is a sanitary hospital.
I’m the messenger.
No locked doors for me:
There’s always a window,
A crack, a keyhole.
I find lots of food
Left by the overfed
And by those who no longer eat.
    I also feed
On discarded medicine,
Because nothing harms me,
Everything nourishes me, strengthens, helps me;
Noble and ignoble matter,
Blood, pus, kitchen scraps:
I turn it all into energy for flight,
My work is that urgent.
I’m the last to kiss the lips
Of the dying and the soon to die.
I’m important. My monotonous
Buzzing, irritating, meaningless,
Repeats the one message of the world
To those who cross this threshold.
    I am mistress here:
    The only one who’s free, unhampered, healthy.

August 31, 1986

The Dromedary

Why all these quarrels and disputes and wars?
All you have to do is be like me.
No water? I go without,
Careful only not to waste my breath.
No food? I take it from my hump:
When the time is right
Grow one yourselves.
And if my hump gets flabby
All I need's a little brush and straw;
Green grass is lust and vanity.
My voice is ugly? I am mostly silent,
And when I bellow no one hears.
I'm ugly? My mate likes me.
Our females keep to the point
And produce the best milk there is;
Demand the same of yours.
Yes, I serve, but the desert's mine:
There's no servant who's without his kingdom.
Mine is desolation;
It is boundless.

November 24, 1986

Almanac

The indifferent rivers
Will keep falling to the sea
Or ruinously overflow their banks,
Ancient works of persevering men.
The glaciers will keep screaming
Polishing what lies beneath
Or abruptly avalanche
Cutting short the lives of the evergreens.
The sea will keep on struggling
Caught between the continents
Ever more jealous of its wealth.
Sun stars planets comets
Will continue on their course.
Even Earth will fear the changeless
Laws of creation.
Not we. We, rebellious offspring
Of great intelligence and little wisdom,
Will keep destroying and corrupting
Ever more frenetically;
Quick, we spread the desert
Into the forests of the Amazon,
Into our cities' very hearts,
Into our own.

January 2, 1987

Other People's Trades

Translated by Antony Shugaar

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TRANSLATOR'S AFTERWORD

Preface

If you remain in a compact group, the way bees and sheep do in winter, you have certain advantages: you're better protected from the cold and from attack. But those who stay at the edge of the group, and even those who are isolated, possess other advantages. They can leave when they like, and have a better view of the landscape. My fate, aided by my own decisions, has kept me clear of crowds: too much of a chemist, and a chemist for too long, ever to feel myself a genuine man of letters; too caught up in the landscape, parti-colored, tragic, or strange, to feel like a chemist in every fiber of my being. In other words, I went my isolated way, and followed a serpentine path, nosing around here and there, and building myself a jumbled, gap-filled, know-it-all culture. My reward has been the fun of seeing the world in an uncommon light, inverting the instrumentation, so to speak: revisiting technical matters with the writer's eye, and things literary with the eye of a technician.

The essays that are collected in this book (previously published, for the most part, in *La Stampa*) are the product of a decade and more of vagabond and dilettantish curiosity. They are "field invasions," incursions into other people's professions, poaching in private hunting reserves, raids into the boundless territories of zoology, astronomy, and linguistics: sciences that I've never studied in any systematic manner, and which therefore cast upon me the enduring spell of an unrequited, unconsummated love, exciting my impulses to be a voyeur and a busybody. Elsewhere, I have ventured to take positions on current issues, or to reread ancient and modern classics, or to explore the transverse bonds that knit together the worlds of nature and culture; I have frequently set foot on bridges that join (or ought to join) scientific culture with literary culture, crossing a crevasse that has always struck me as absurd. Some people wring their hands and describe it as an abyss, but then do nothing to bridge it; there are even those who work to widen it, as if the scientist and the literary man belonged to two different subspecies of humanity, speaking different languages, fated to ignore each

other and incapable of cross-pollinating. It is an unnatural, needless, toxic schism, the product of long-ago taboos and the Counter-Reformation, and in some cases it can even be traced back to a small-minded interpretation of the Biblical prohibition against partaking of a certain fruit. That division was unknown to Empedocles, Dante, Leonardo, Galileo, Descartes, Goethe, and Einstein, and to the nameless builders of the Gothic cathedrals, or Michelangelo; nor is it known to good craftsmen of the present day, or to physicists who hesitate on the brink of the unknowable.

At times I am asked, with curiosity or even with arrogance, why on earth I write in spite of the fact that I'm a chemist. I hope that these essays of mine, within their modest bounds of commitment and bulk, may show that there is no incompatibility between the "two cultures": instead, at times, when there is goodwill on both sides, there can be a mutual attraction. I also hope to convey to the reader an impression I often have: that though we may be living in an era rife with problems and dangers, it is never dull.

PRIMO LEVI
JANUARY 16, 1985

My House

I have always lived (with involuntary interruptions) in the house where I was born: the way I live was not, therefore, the result of a choice. I believe that I exemplify an extreme case of sedentary life, comparable to that of some mollusks, such as limpets. After a brief larval stage, in which they swim freely, limpets fasten onto wave-pounded rocks, secrete a shell, and then never move again for the rest of their lives. This is something more likely to happen to a person born in the country; for a city dweller like me, it's undoubtedly a rare fate, and it leads to unusual advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps it is this static destiny that explains the unsatisfied love that I feel for travel, as well as the frequency with which journeys appear as a *topos* in so many of my books. Of course, after sixty-six years in Corso Re Umberto, I have a hard time imagining what it might be like, I don't even say to live in another country or another city, but just to live in another part of Turin.

What distinguishes my house is how undistinguished it is. It looks exactly like many other almost luxurious houses dating from the early twentieth century, built of brick just before the irresistible advent of reinforced concrete; it's virtually devoid of decoration, with the exception of a few timid art nouveau vestiges in the friezes that run over the windows and in the wooden doors that open onto the landings. It's unadorned and functional, inexpressive and solid: it gave proof of that during the last war, when it withstood every bombing raid, getting off with nothing more than a little damage to the window frames and a few cracks that it still bears with all the pride a veteran shows for his scars. It has no ambitions; it's a

machine for living, possessing almost everything that is essential to life and almost nothing that is superfluous.

I have an unnoticed but profound relationship with this house, and with the apartment I occupy, not unlike what you feel about the people you've lived with for many years. If I were uprooted from here, even if it were to move to a nicer, more modern, and more comfortable place to live, I'd grieve like a refugee, I'd wither like a plant that has been transplanted to a soil that doesn't suit it. I read somewhere a description of one of the tricks of mnemonics, which is the art (long ago practiced by the learned and the scholarly, nowadays foolishly abandoned) of exercising and improving one's memory. Anyone who wishes to memorize a list of thirty, or forty, or even more names, and perhaps astonish an audience by reciting that list backward, can achieve his goal by mentally linking (that is to say, by inventing some relationship) between each individual name and, in order, a place in his own house: proceeding, that is, from the front door, and then moving, say, to the right and subsequently exploring every corner of the house. By retracing the same route in your imagination, you can reconstruct the original list; if you walk through your apartment in the opposite direction, you can also produce the list backward.

I've never felt the need to undertake such a performance, but I have no doubt that generally speaking it works quite well. It wouldn't work for me, because in my memory all the nooks and crannies of my home are already occupied, and the authentic memories would interfere with the contingent and fictitious memories demanded by this technique. The corner just to the right of the front door is where an umbrella stand was fifty years ago, and where my father, returning home on foot from the office on a rainy day, would deposit his dripping umbrella, or, on rainless days, his walking stick; where for twenty years a horseshoe that had been found by my uncle Corrado hung (in those days, you could still find horseshoes in Corso Re Umberto), an amulet that I couldn't say whether or not it had properly exercised its protective force; and where for another twenty years there dangled from a nail a large key whose purpose everyone had long forgotten but which no one dared to throw away. The next corner, between the wall and the walnut wardrobe, was especially desirable as a hiding place when we played hide-and-seek; one unspecified Sunday in the Oligocene era, I hid there, knelt down on a shard of broken glass, and cut myself, and to this day I bear the scar on my left knee. Thirty years after me, my daughter hid

there, but she couldn't keep from laughing and was found immediately; eight years later my son hid there with a throng of his contemporaries, one of whom lost a baby tooth in that spot and, for mysterious magical reasons, decided to press it into a hole in the plaster, where it can probably still be found.

Continuing on this dextrorotatory tour, we find the door of a room overlooking the courtyard that has served an array of functions over the decades. In my earliest memories it was the formal parlor, where my mother, two or three times a year, would entertain important guests. Then for a few years it was the bedroom of a fabulous "live-in housekeeper"; later it became my father's business office until, during the war, it served as an encampment and a dormitory for family and friends whose homes had been bombed. After the war (and after the confiscation required by Italy's racial laws), my two children slept and played there successively, and my wife spent many a night in that room, watching over them when they were sick: not me, as I had the ironclad alibi of work to be done in the factory and the Olympian selfishness of husbands. It is currently a multipurpose workshop, where pictures can be developed, sewing can be done on a sewing machine, and amusing toys are made. Stories of similar transfigurations could be told for all the other rooms; not long ago, to my intense discomfort, I realized that my favorite easy chair now stands on the exact spot where, according to family lore, I came into the world.

My house has an enviable location, not too far from downtown and yet comparatively quiet; the proliferation of automobiles, which fill up every cavity, like a compressed gas, has now extended out to here, but only in the past few months has it become difficult to find a parking place. The walls are thick, and street noises are muffled. Once everything was different: the city limits were a few hundred meters south of here, and we would walk through the fields "to see the trains," which at the time, before the excavation of the trenched tunnel system of the Quadrivio Zappata, ran on the surface. The *controviali*, or parallel access roads, were not paved with asphalt until 1935; before that they were cobblestone, and we were woken up every morning by the noise of wagons coming in from the countryside: the clatter of iron wagon-wheel rims on the cobblestones, the crack of whips, the voices of the drivers. Other familiar voices rose from the street at other times of day: the cries of the glazier, the ragman, the man who collected "hair from your combs," and to whom the above-mentioned live-

in housekeeper occasionally sold her long gray hair; and every so often the voices of beggars in the street as they sang or played the hurdy-gurdy, and to whom we would throw down coins wrapped in paper.

Through all its transformations, the apartment where I live has preserved its anonymous and impersonal appearance: or at least, that's how it looks to us who live in it. But it's well-known that people are poor judges of everything that concerns them, of their own personalities, their own virtues and defects, even their own voices and faces; others, perhaps, might see it as deeply symptomatic of my family's reclusive tendencies. Certainly, I have never consciously demanded from my home anything more than to satisfy my primary needs: space, warmth, comfort, silence, privacy. Nor have I ever consciously tried to make it mine, to make it resemble me, to embellish it, enrich it, or trick it up. It's not easy for me to talk about my relationship with my house: perhaps that relationship is catlike in nature; like cats I enjoy physical comfort, but I can also do without it, and I would be able to adapt pretty well to an uncomfortable place to live, as I have many times in the past, and as I do every time I stay in a hotel. I don't believe that the way I write is affected by the setting in which I live and write, nor do I believe that this setting can be perceived in the things that I have written. I must therefore be less sensitive than most to the influences of my surroundings, and I'm not affected in the slightest by the prestige that a setting confers, preserves, or undermines. I live in my house the way I live inside my skin: I know of many skins more beautiful, roomier, sturdier, and more picturesque, but it would strike me as unnatural to exchange them for my own.



Aldous Huxley

The shelf on which I keep books by Aldous Huxley constitutes an ever-present temptation: the temptation to close whatever book I'm reading and to pull down and open at random one of his books. To do such a thing, to abandon a book you haven't yet finished and open another, is reprehensible, and I'm well aware of the fact. It's bad manners, a minor betrayal: you'll never know what the author had in store for you on the pages you didn't read, you've refused to follow along, to listen to him; you've been an unfair judge, silencing the witness before he's concluded his testimony. Still, the temptation is strong, and encouraged by the example of Huxley himself, who confessed that "desultory reading" was his favorite vice.

I often give in to this temptation, and always in favor of his earlier works, those from the period between 1920 and 1940. The later books, written by a Huxley who was no longer a novelist but a pacifist, a mystic, a sociologist, a scholar of religions, metapsychics, and psychotropic drugs, are less appealing to me and make me uneasy; I would venture to say that this postwar Huxley, mortally wounded by the war and sincerely concerned about humanity's fate, fails to attain the essence of humanity.

In contrast, and in contrast to the views of many of his present-day readers, the books of his earliest period still strike me as rich in life-giving nourishment. Open, for instance, *Point Counter Point* and you'll find, now perhaps more distinctly than ever, the Europe that fostered us, for better or worse: the Europe that was once the world, inventor and guardian of all ideas and all experiences and at the same time cynical, weary, and weak in the face of the new appeals to the irrational and the subconscious.

We now view in a new light, practically symbolic of the years between the two wars, the weave of Huxley's novels. Nothing, or almost nothing, happens in them: they're packed with intelligent conversations and discussions, all in focus, all clear and distinct; "novels of ideas," as Philip Quarles, Huxley's own self-portrait, describes them. When we move from ideas to action, however, the *logos* dims, violence and sex prevail, and at the same time both plot and characters grow bloated, empty, less and less believable: consider, for instance, in *Point Counter Point,* Spandrell's gratuitous murder of Webley, and his own theatrical suicide.

But how true, how solid these same characters remain as long as Huxley does no more than let them speak, sketch out and compare their origins, analyze their relations and opinions of one another! Here his touch is unerring, his skill and elegance magisterial: he bestows upon us a gallery of convincing portraits, some of the most vivid in all literature. Although his acuity seems unlimited, the field of his interests and sympathies is instead narrow; we meet in his pages simpletons or fools, and they, too, live their lives but in the background. They exist to serve as "stooges," and Huxley is not indulgent toward them. His assortment is limited at the lower levels (even Quarles is "intelligent to the point of being almost human"): he couldn't serve up a Babbitt or a Leopold Bloom.

In the depiction of his peers, that is, the superendowed, Huxley is, however, a master. His characters are all invariably witty, learned, and eloquent, all are noteworthy, even in failure; you can sense at their backs the opulence and solidity of an England more evolved, less naïve, and also less poetic than in Kipling's day. They have no material worries, they suffer nothing more than the pangs of love or philosophical distress; they live only to communicate, to debate pointed ideas, and have no idea of silence and meditation.

They often keep a diary, which is a pursuit of solitary souls, but they also typically underline with care every *trouvaille* for later use in society. Huxley himself did the same thing: it is common, and slightly annoying, to catch him red-handed, to note an idea or an image in a short story, and then to see it reappear in a novel, exploited to a fault and, as it were, at second hand. This lavish, bountiful creator suddenly strikes us as miserly, careful not to squander a cent of his enormous fortune.

Levelheaded by temperament, Huxley expects and hopes to reconstruct through reason everything that is not reasonable in man, and often he

succeeds. That is why the first reading of his books had such a powerful impact, in a Fascist, idealist Italy, where the exercise of reason was openly discouraged, where philosophers furrowed their brow in distaste when confronted with physicists or anatomists.

But *Brave New World* demands a different verdict. It's a utopian novel, and one of the most coherent ever written. It contains no elegant divagations, no poetic elaboration, not even flesh-and-blood characters: the book is arid, tense, and bitter, but it abundantly rewards rereading. It describes with implacable precision a world that might then have seemed a delirious and arbitrary fantasy, but that seems to be looming larger on the horizon we are heading toward today. It is the best of all possible worlds, such as will exist if the technicians are given free rein: a world planned out to the last nook and cranny (and where even children are created according to blueprint, no longer birthed but built on an assembly line—singletons or in batches of identical twins, depending on the demands of the market), where totalitarian super-organization and capitalist productivism converge, along with Marx, Pavlov, Freud, and Ford. The latter pair, in fact, have blurred into a single deity, "Our Ford—or Our Freud, as, for some inscrutable reason, he chose to call himself whenever he spoke of psychological matters."

The globe is united into a single supernation. There are no longer human races, but mankind is divided into strictly segregated castes that are conditioned in such a way as to be suited to the specific tasks assigned them: from the "Alphas," destined from the "decanting" of the respective embryos to hold positions of the greatest responsibility, all the way down to the half-imbecilic "Epsilons" (treated with alcohol as embryos), who will be happy and contented to spend their lives as menial workers. Art and science, feelings and passions no longer exist; they would constitute threats to stability, which is the supreme, indeed the only value of this Brave New World. The education (or, rather, the "conditioning") of young people is a state monopoly: all knowledge and moral principle are irresistibly injected into the sleeping brain. Even pain has vanished: all physical pain, thanks to medical progress, all spiritual pain, thanks to "emotional engineering."

And so one and all are happy, obligated to happiness, in this new order that to us, the "non-conditioned," can only appear despicable. Unmistakably, this is a nightmare, but more realistic and more intelligent than all other positive (Plato's *Republic*) and negative (Orwell's *Nineteen*

Eighty-Four) utopias. The book is profoundly ironic and pessimistic: if you want prosperity, freedom, and peace, this is the solution, even for a rational human being, the temple of knowledge, the image of God. This: the constitution chosen millions of years ago by ants and termites, and never amended since then.

In 1958, in *Brave New World Revisited,* Huxley could write: “In 1931, when *Brave New World* was being written, I was convinced that there was still plenty of time. . . . Twenty-seven years later . . . I feel a good deal less optimistic. [My] prophecies . . . are coming true much sooner than I thought they would.” What other prophets have been granted the grim distinction of seeing the Brave New World that they foretold spring up around them?

Ex-Chemist

The bonds that tie a man to his profession are similar to those which tie him to his country. They are just as complex, frequently ambivalent, and usually understood fully only when they are broken: by exile or emigration, in the case of his homeland; by retirement, in the case of his profession. I gave up my career as a chemist several years ago, but only now do I feel I possess the necessary detachment to look back on it in its entirety, and to understand how much it influenced me and how much I owe it.

I don't mean to refer to the fact that, during my imprisonment at Auschwitz, it saved my life, or the fair salary I earned for thirty years, much less the pension to which it entitled me. Instead, I'd like to describe other benefits that I believe I got from that career, all of which can be applied to the new profession I've taken up, that of writer. A stipulation is called for immediately: writing is not strictly speaking a profession, or, at least to my mind, it ought not to be—it's a creative pursuit, and is therefore ill suited to schedules and deadlines, commitments to clients and higher-ups. Nonetheless, writing is a form of "production," or, rather, of transformation: a person who writes is transforming his experiences into a form that is accessible and enjoyable to the "customer" who will be reading it. Experiences (in the broadest sense: life experiences), therefore, are a raw material: the writer who lacks them will work in vain, and though he believes he is writing, his pages are empty. Now, the things that I saw, experienced, and did in my previous incarnation are currently, for me as a writer, an invaluable source of raw materials, of stories to tell, and not stories alone: they are also the source of those fundamental emotions that go with measuring yourself against matter (matter, an impartial judge,

impassive but unforgiving: if you make a mistake, it punishes you mercilessly), winning, facing defeat. Defeat is a painful but healthy experience, without which it is impossible to become a responsible adult. I think that any of my fellow chemists will bear me out: you learn more from mistakes than from success. For example, to formulate an explanatory hypothesis, believe in it, grow fond of it, check it (oh, the temptation to falsify data, to give them a push of the thumb!), and in the end to find it wrong is a cycle one encounters all too often in “the pure state” in the course of working as a chemist, but it’s easy to see the same thing in countless other realms of human endeavor. Anyone who experiences this with honesty emerges a more mature person.

There are other advantages, other gifts that the chemist proffers to the writer. The habit of delving into matter, the yearning to probe its composition and structure, to predict its properties and behavior, leads to insight, to a certain mental habit of being concrete and concise, the persistent desire not to stop at the surface of things. Chemistry is the art of separating, weighing, and distinguishing: these three exercises are equally useful to those setting out to describe events or give form to their imaginings. What’s more, there is an immense patrimony of metaphors that a writer can derive from the chemistry of both past and present, which to those who have never spent time in either a laboratory or a factory can be known only vaguely. Even the uninitiated know what it means to filter, crystallize, and distill, but only at a certain remove; they can’t know the “imprinted passion,” the emotions that are bound up with these actions, they haven’t glimpsed their symbolic shadows. On the plane of comparisons alone, a militant chemist finds himself the possessor of unsuspected riches: “black as . . .”; “bitter as . . .”; sticky, tenacious, heavy, fetid, fluid, volatile, inert, inflammable—these are all qualities that a chemist knows intimately, and for each of them he can select a substance that possesses the quality to a preeminent and exemplary degree. As a former chemist, though by now I might be out of practice and bumbling were I to return to the laboratory, I still feel something like shame when in my writing I make use of this repertory: it is as if I enjoyed an unfair advantage over my new writer colleagues, who do not have a militance like mine behind them.

For all these reasons, whenever a reader expresses astonishment at the fact that I, a chemist, should have chosen the path of writing, I feel

authorized to respond that I write precisely because I am a chemist: my old profession has been largely transfused into my new one.



François Rabelais

Some books are dear to us even if we can't quite identify the reason: in such cases, were we to delve deep enough, unsuspected affinities would likely turn up, abounding in insights into hidden aspects of our personalities. There are other books, however, that serve as our traveling companions for years, for a lifetime, and the reason is clear, accessible, and easy to put into words; among that latter group, I venture to cite, with reverence and love, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the immense but only work of François Rabelais, *mon maître*. This book's odd fate is well-known to us all: how it sprang from the life and learned leisure of Rabelais, a monk, physician, philologist, traveler, and humanist; how it grew and proliferated, with absolutely no plan, for nearly twenty years, and for more than a thousand pages, the most dazzling inventions piling up in total imaginative freedom, half robust folk epic of buffoonery, and half steeped in the vigorous, sharp-eyed moral consciousness of a great mind of the Renaissance. On every page, you encounter, audaciously paired, brilliant, or bawdy, or saccharine scurrilities, and, along with them, citations (authentic and otherwise, nearly all summoned from memory) from Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew texts; dignified and high-flown exercises in oratory; Aristotelian subtleties that prompt a giant's laughter, others endorsed and sanctioned with the good faith of a man who lives a pure life.

If we add to this fundamentally irregular weave, and the frequently daunting language, the violent lambasting and satirizing of the Roman Curia, it becomes clear why *Gargantua and Pantagruel* commanded only a limited readership over the centuries, and why so many have been tempted to pawn it off, suitably amputated and revised, as children's literature. Still,

I need only open it to sense in it the book of today, that is to say, the timeless, eternal book that speaks a language we will always understand.

That's not to say that it treats the fundamental themes of the human comedy: quite the opposite, for you'd seek in vain the great traditional poetic inspirations—love, death, religious experience, the whims of fate. Because in Rabelais you will never find brooding, insight, personal reflection: every word he wrote is alive with a different, witty, outgoing state of mind, essentially that of the innovator, the inventor (not the utopian); the inventor of stories grand and small, the *bosin*, or sideshow raconteur. For that matter, this revival is no coincidence; we know that the book had an obscure precursor, lost without a trace centuries ago—a country fair almanac, the *Chroniques du grand Géant Gargantua.*

But the two giants of his dynasty are not mere mountains of flesh, preposterous drinkers and eaters: at the same time, and paradoxically, they are the legitimate epigones of the giants who waged war on Zeus, and of Nimrod, and Goliath, and they are also enlightened princes and joyous philosophers. In Pantagruel's great scope and hearty laughter the dream of the ages is embedded, that of a hardworking and productive humanity, which turns its back on the shadows, striding with determination into a future of peaceful prosperity, toward the golden age described by the ancient Romans, neither in the past nor in the distant future, but within reach, provided the powerful of the Earth do not abandon the paths of reason, and hold fast against enemies both within and without.

This is not idyllic hope; it is robust certainty. You need only will it, and the world can be yours; all you need is education, justice, science, art, the law, and the example set by the ancients. God exists, but in the heavens: man is free, not predestined, he is *faber sui*, the maker of himself, who must and can rule the Earth, a divine gift. And so the world is beautiful, filled with joy, and not tomorrow but today: because to each of us the illustrious delights of virtue and knowledge are given, and also the bodily joys, likewise a divine gift, of dizzyingly sumptuous banquet tables, "theological" drinking parties, and tireless lovemaking. To love human beings means to love them as they are, body and soul, *tripes et boyaux*.

The one character in the book who is human in size, who never spills over into the realm of symbolism or allegory, is Panurge, a remarkable backward hero, a distillate of restless, inquisitive humanity, in whom, to a far greater degree than in Pantagruel, Rabelais seems to offer us a sketch of

himself, of his own complexity as a modern man, his own contradictions unresolved but cheerfully accepted. Panurge—the charlatan, buccaneer, *clerc*, variously hunter and prey, courageous and fearing "nothing but danger," starving, penniless, and dissolute, who makes his entrance begging in every language, living and extinct—is us, is Mankind. He's not exemplary, he's not "perfection,"* but he is humanity, alive in that he seeks, sins, enjoys, and learns.

How can we reconcile this intemperate, pagan, worldly doctrine with the evangelical message, never rejected or forgotten by Rabelais, the shepherd of souls? It is in fact impossible to reconcile: this, too, is typical of the human condition, to be suspended between the mud and the sky, between nothingness and infinity. Rabelais's very life, or at least what we know of it, is a tangle of contradictions, a whirlwind of activities apparently incompatible with one another, or with the image of the author that we traditionally reconstruct from his writings.

A Franciscan monk and, later (at the age of forty), a medical student and physician at the hospital of Lyon, a publisher of scientific books and popular almanacs, a scholar of law, Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew, a tireless traveler, an astrologer, a botanist, an archeologist, a friend of Erasmus, a forerunner of Vesalius in his use of human cadavers for the study of anatomy; a remarkably freewheeling writer, and at the same time the curate of Meudon, who enjoys for his whole life the reputation of a pious and god-fearing man—nonetheless, he leaves a portrait of himself (deliberately, one would gather) as a silenus, if not actually a satyr. We are a considerable distance—indeed, at the opposite extreme—from the Stoic wisdom of righteous moderation. Rabelais's lesson is one of extremism, the virtue of excess: not only are Gargantua and Pantagruel giants but the book itself is gigantic, in heft and in impulse; gigantic and fabulous are the exploits, the ribaldry, the diatribes, the travesties visited upon both mythology and history, the detailed lists.

Gigantic above all else is the capacity for joy to be found in Rabelais and his creations. This disproportionate and luxuriant epic of the gratifications of the flesh reaches heaven, unexpectedly, by another path: because a man who experiences joy is like a man who experiences love—he is good, he feels gratitude to his Creator for having created him, and therefore he will find salvation. As for that, the carnality described by the deeply learned Rabelais is so naïve and inborn that it will disarm any

intelligent censor: it is healthy and innocent and irresistible, like a force of nature.

Why do we feel that Rabelais is close to us? He certainly doesn't resemble us; in fact, he's rich in the very virtues lacking in the man of today—so beaten down, hampered, and weary. But he feels close to us as a model, in his cheerfully curious spirit, his jovial skepticism, his faith in tomorrow and in man; and again for the way he writes, so alien to categories and rules. Perhaps we can trace back to him, and to his Abbey of Thélème, via Sterne and Joyce, the now triumphant style of "writing however you like," without doctrines or precepts, pursuing the thread of imagination exactly as it unspools, by spontaneous demand, different and surprising at each turn, like a carnival parade. He is close to us, mainly because in this outsized painter of worldly joys we sense the firm and enduring awareness, ripened through a long succession of experiences, that there is more to life than this. It would be hard to find a single melancholy page in his entire body of work, and yet Rabelais was familiar with human misery; he is silent about it because, a good doctor even when he writes, he refuses to accept it, his impulse is to heal it:

Mieulx est de ris que de larmes escrire
Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme.

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* Here, and throughout *Other People's Trades*, an asterisk indicates that the word or phrase is in English in Levi's original text.

The Moon and Us[1]

More complex, precise, and costly than a modern-day army, the vast machinery of Cape Kennedy ponderously rumbles toward the critical moment. Within eight days, at an instant and a place that have been predetermined with great accuracy, two men will set foot on lunar soil, marking a singular date on mankind's calendar, and translating into reality something that in every previous century had been considered not merely impossible but the paradigm, the customary synonym for impossibility.

It will become necessary (or rather, it ought to become necessary: common parlance is conservative, we still use terms like *a quattro palmenti*, *a tutto spiano*—literally, "with four millstones," and "full ration," both meaning "all out"—even though no one any longer knows the ancient references contained in these metaphors), it will become necessary, then, to renounce the "world on the Moon" taken as a symbol of vain fantasies, as a non-place; and yet it's amusing to remember that, just twenty years ago, we spoke of "the far side of the Moon" as a typical instance of an inaccessible reality, essentially unobservable. Even to talk about it was pure futility: like debating the sex of the angels, or the Talmudic bird that Isaac Deutscher[2] mentions, which flies around the Earth and spits on it every seventy years.

So we're about to take a big step: whether or not our legs are long enough is something that for now remains to be seen. Do we know what we're doing? A number of indications suggest that we have every reason to doubt it. Of course we know, and we tell each other, the literal—I was about to say, the athletic—meaning of the undertaking: it's the most daring, and at the same time the most meticulous, operation that man has ever attempted; it's the longest journey, it's the most foreign environment. But why we're

doing it we couldn't say: the motives that are offered are too numerous, intimately intertwined and yet mutually exclusive.

Beneath them all, at the base of them all, we can glimpse an archetype. Beneath the intricacy of the calculation lies perhaps our obscure obedience to an impulse that comes into existence when we are born, and is crucial to life itself, the same impulse that drives poplar seeds to wrap themselves in cottony tufts so they can waft great distances on the breeze, that drives frogs after their final metamorphosis to migrate obstinately from pond to pond, at risk of their lives: it is the drive to disseminate and diffuse one's kind over as vast a territory as possible, since, notoriously, it is the "little plot of ground" that make us fierce, and the proximity of our neighbors that unleashes in us humans, as in all animals, the ancestral mechanisms of aggression, defense, and flight.

Even less do we know, in spite of the claims of the brave new science of "futurism," where this next step will take us. The great technological leaps of the past two centuries (the new metallurgies, the steam engine, electrical power, the internal combustion engine) have all triggered profound sociological transformations, but they did not shake the foundations of human nature; in contrast, at least four major new developments of the past thirty years (nuclear power, solid-state physics, anti-parasitics, and detergents) have brought about consequences much vaster, and of a very different character, than anyone might have dared to predict. Of them, at least three gravely threaten the equilibrium of life on the planet, and are forcing us to engage in some hasty rethinking.

In spite of these doubts, and in spite of the catastrophic problems that assail the human race, two men are going to set foot on the Moon. We the many, we the public, are by now unsurprised, like spoiled children: the rapid succession of portentous exploits in space is deadening our capacity for wonder, although that is intrinsic to human beings, fundamental to feeling alive. Not many of us will be capable of reliving, in tomorrow's flight, Astolfo's feat, or Dante's theological astonishment, as he feels his body penetrate the diaphanous lunar material, "shining, solid, firm, and polished." Sadly, this time of ours is not an age of poetry: we no longer know how to create it, we don't know how to distill it from the fabulous events that are taking place above our heads.

Perhaps it's too early: we have only to wait, and a poet of space will surely come? There is no guarantee. Aviation, the next-to-last great leap, is

now sixty years old, and it has given us no poets other than Saint-Exupéry and, one step down, Lindbergh and Hillary[3]: all three of them took their inspiration from the precarious, the adventuresome, the unpredictable. The literature of the sea died with the end of navigation under sail; there never has been, nor could we imagine, a poetry of the rails. The flight of Collins, Armstrong, and Aldrin is too safe, too well planned, not "reckless" enough to offer material to any poet. Certainly, we may be asking too much, but still we feel defrauded. More or less consciously, we'd like the new navigators to have this virtue as well, alongside the many others that distinguish them: if only they knew how to transmit, communicate, and sing what they see and experience.

It's unlikely that this will happen, in the near future or later. Out of the black cradle primeval where there is neither up nor down, neither beginning nor end, out of the realm of Tohu and Bohu, no words of poetry have come to us thus far, save perhaps for a few naïve phrases uttered by poor Yuri Gagarin: nothing but the nasal sounds, inhuman in their chilly calm, of the radio messages exchanged with Earth, in accordance with a rigid protocol. They do not seem like human voices: they are as incomprehensible as space, motion, and eternity.

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1. Published on the eve of the first human landing on the Moon, by Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong, July 21, 1969; while Aldrin and Armstrong spent almost twenty-four hours on the lunar surface, Michael Collins stayed in Apollo 11 orbiting the Moon.
2. Isaac Deutscher (1906–1967), a Polish historian.
3. Richard Hillary (1919–1943) is the author of *The Last Enemy*, an account of his experiences as a pilot during the Second World War.

Tartarin of Tarascon

I confess: this is only a partial "rereading." After laying my hands, almost by chance, on a copy of *Tartarin of Tarascon*, which to tell the truth I had remembered with considerable accuracy, I lacked the courage to reread the other two books that make up the trilogy: *Tartarin on the Alps* (even though it ought to strike us today as a singular piece of reporting on the hotel-keeping customs of the Belle Époque), and the hypochondriacal and rheumatic *Port-Tarascon. Tartarin* celebrated its first centennial in 1969: a rare commemoration among books fortified by the passing centuries, and also among those which the centuries simply bury under new and incessant stratifications of printed paper, but it seems to me that *Tartarin* does not deserve the renown it still seems to enjoy, and that it remains exactly what it always was, a thin, facile, and basically jejune piece of writing. It's time to state it clearly: this book, far too celebrated, and all too often proffered to young people as a first acquaintance with the French language, owes its reputation to little more than a crude and unreliable humorous vein. The place that Daudet assigns his hero (with not a little arrogance), midway between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, is decidedly a usurpation: Tartarin lacks the substance, the universality, not to mention the dignity of those two progeny of Cervantes, which comes from the clear consciousness each of them has (in his way) of his own worth. One need only skim the book to realize this, to sense that Tartarin is vile and small.

Just as quickly one notices that there's "something not quite right" in the core, in the heart of the book, that is to say, in the relationship that joins the writer to his character. Daudet doesn't love his Tartarin; indeed, he scorns and hates him. This, in my view, is quite a rare case in all of

literature, because that love is necessary, indispensable to any poetic creation. It is a love unique unto itself, which allows Dante to love Malacoda, Manzoni the Griso, and Pasolini Tommasino Puzzilli; a pure and disinterested love, the love of Pygmalion, which binds a creator to his creation once perfected, or in the process of being perfected; a love that must be present, because without love there can be no creation. By which I mean: without it, you cannot create characters, *pierres vives* ("living rocks"), human beings; instead, you create ghosts, marionettes held up by the force of words. That, in fact, is an apt description of this Tartarin, in my view.

Tartarin is a character out of a children's comic book: he has two contradictory shortcomings—he is schematic and at the same time inconsistent. We know nothing about—and we could not even begin to imagine—the past or the background of this nebulous little man, wealthy but already idle at forty, without friends, without wit, without women. His obsession, hunting, is too petty a pursuit to serve as his soul: and so he is vacuous, he is a substrate for clichés and depressingly predictable adventures. At the same time, his characterization lacks a firm hand, like the buffoon you cast in any role that's sure to get a cheap laugh. He's a character of convenience: by turns, he is an experienced and thoroughly prepared hunter, and yet he has no idea where lions are found; he's a bourgeois from the provinces who grew up on garlic, and he parades around Algiers dressed as a Turk; he's a cowardly visionary, but he doesn't think twice about waging battle unaided against the ship's stevedores, whom he mistakes for pirates.

There's no mistaking the fact that the book is childish in its appeal, and the nature of the readership that it has found over its century-long existence abundantly confirms this. Yet it's childish in spite of itself—not by chosen topic but through ineptitude: there could be no clearer evidence than the clumsy, ham-handed sentimental adventure of Tartarin and the Moorish chanteuse. Nor can we say that it's "also" childish: abundantly, universally childish—"also" childish—are such books as *Gulliver* and *Robinson Crusoe*, and yet they appeal to all ages; in contrast, a reader older than eighteen who takes pleasure in Tartarin must be either a bumpkin or a dimwit.

Or a racist. This doubt, this suspicion of a subtle and subconscious hatred on Alphonse Daudet's part, not only for Tartarin but for his sweet

town and his fellow townspeople, persisted throughout my reading. Moreover, it seems to me that his aversion is part of a larger attitude, a vague and muddled rebellion and intolerance that arm the Nîmes-born author against his homeland and against himself: perhaps an echo of artistic dissatisfaction? Or the infinitesimal seed of that subversive animus, that reactionary frenzy that led his son Léon so badly astray, making him a regrettable tool of the right-wing monarchists and Action Française?

Whatever the deeper motivations, the irony that Daudet employs in his portrayal of Tartarin, the Tarasconais, and the Méridionaux, while jocular on the surface, is profoundly acrimonious. “The man of the Midi does not lie, he deceives himself. . . . His untruth, for him, is not a lie, it is a sort of mirage”: this is not the sort of statement that we listen to or tolerate lightheartedly today. If we’ve learned anything in the past forty years in Europe, it is certainly this: that any generalization about the defects (or even the virtues) of this or that group of human beings is dangerous and reckless; that, when we speak of the Tarasconais, or the blacks, or the Russians, or the Italians in general terms, we are in danger of getting things wrong, and are certain to offend someone. Tartarin, however abortive and rudimentary he may be, has a fair claim to be defended from his own creator: if he was a coward, a liar, and a fool, then he was so in his own right, and not because of the blood in his veins, or the sun of Provence that “transfigures everything.”

With all this, I have yet to show that *Tartarin of Tarascon* is a bad book: but it is, no matter how you want to look at it. I don’t believe that my negative judgment is a product of that phenomenon so frequently noted, whereby books read as an assignment in school (and for the most part, unfortunately, these are the greatest works the human mind has conceived) are as a result permanently discolored, or even poisoned and unreadable. This book is bad from start to finish, practically every page of it. If I were asked to spare a few pages, for an unnecessary anthology, I would have no doubts: the description of the harbor of Marseille, which is scanned with a lively and acute eye, and sketched without lengthy digressions, with unaccustomed confidence; and the curious and quick-moving encounter with the “real” hunter, Monsieur Bombonnel, the sole dignified character in the book (though he remains onstage for only a few minutes).

Otherwise, the composition is dreary, devoid of verve and imagination: Algiers and Algeria are secondhand descriptions, all the human figures are

cardboard, the adventures of the unfortunate hunter repeat themselves in the course of two hundred pages. And those feeble, worn-out sentence openers! “For instance,” “Picture this,” “Just imagine” (the reader must never be asked to imagine something: it is the writer’s job to make the reader imagine it), “I need hardly tell you,” “Calamity!”; and the profusion of ellipses. And yet this is France, in the years of Flaubert and Zola: *Tartarin of Tarascon* is a twin of *Sentimental Education.*

Nor can the fact that the book is humorous be adduced as a mitigating circumstance. Any comic potential is restricted entirely to the first few pages and to the premise, and declines rapidly as description gives way to narrative. There is not a single scene that prompts open, liberating laughter; in fact, condensing around Tartarin (and this is perhaps the greatest surprise of this rereading), we see an increasingly grim aura of failure, of definitive shipwreck, of frustration; and we are tempted to think that if Daudet had fully understood this tragic vocation of his little man, instead of stubbornly perceiving in him a comic *miles gloriosus,* we would have had a different and better book.

Going Back to School

I overcame the stumbling blocks of shyness and laziness and, well after my sixtieth birthday, enrolled in a class at a respected language school to study a foreign language I know poorly. I wanted to learn that language better, purely out of intellectual curiosity: I had learned the basics by ear, under poor conditions, and later I'd used it for many years for professional reasons, focusing on the practical aspects, that is, understanding and making myself understood, but neglecting the specifics of the language, its grammar, and its syntax.

My entrance into the classroom for the first lesson was traumatic: I was an outsider, an alien; I didn't belong here. There were twenty or so students, only three of us males; two young women appeared to be in their thirties, all the others—female and male—were in their twenties. The teacher, who was also young, was educated, likable, intelligent, and very good at overcoming the inhibitions and shyness of the students, clearly experienced at his job, and familiar with the obstacles that interfere with the flow of learning.

He began the class with a frank and open discussion. There are many different reasons for studying a foreign language, and so there are many different methods of teaching it; strictly speaking, the teaching ought to be tailored to the aims, abilities, and previous knowledge of each individual pupil, but, since that wasn't possible, a number of compromises would be necessary. There are those who want (or need) to learn a language only so that they can read it, or in order to study the literature, or to speak it as a tourist, or to do business in it, or to write business letters, or to hold a technical conversation in it with a colleague who is also a technician; but within this multitude of purposes it is possible to draw a boundary line

between the passive command of a language (understanding without speaking) and active command (understanding and speaking). Well, have no illusions: the most talented among you may succeed in attaining an *almost* complete passive understanding of the spoken or written language; only a genius, at your age (and he was clearly referring to the age of most of the students), could succeed in speaking or writing the language without making mistakes, unless he or she could live abroad for at least six months in "total immersion," that is, without hearing or speaking a word of Italian.

From the first few classes I realized how cruelly different it is to learn at age twenty, age forty, and age sixty. I believed my hearing was normal: it is, but only for Italian. It's one thing to listen to someone talking in your own language, where, even if you miss a syllable or a word here or there, you have no difficulty filling in the blank subconsciously, or guessing at it through a quick mental process of exclusion. But if the language in question is a foreign one, then missing a syllable means missing the bus: the person goes on talking while you scramble to reconstruct the missing link. Your understanding can be thwarted by something as minor as the echo of voices off the walls, or a trolley going by in the street outside, but your young classmates don't seem to be having any difficulties. Other challenges arise from your vision. I would be unfair if I complained about mine; in daily life it gives me problems only perhaps in museums, where you are continually required to adjust your focus to see something from up close and then from far away. The same thing happens at school; agility in adjusting your focus is necessary at all times, your eyes must leap countless times from your notebook to the blackboard and to the teacher's face. If you have bifocals, things go reasonably well; but if you don't, your left hand is engaged in an exhausting workout of "on-and-off-and-on-again."

There are challenges that are more daunting because they run deeper. It is well-known that the process of learning can be broken down into three phases: impressing something in your memory, preserving it, and retrieving it when needed. The last two hold up fairly well: once a concept is impressed, it stays there indefinitely; retrieving it isn't hard, and, in fact, with the passing years you learn certain stratagems to ensure that the phenomenon of having a word or a concept "on the tip of your tongue" occurs less frequently. But it is etching it into the memory that becomes harder and harder. You have to "learn how to learn": it's no longer enough to let the concept find its own way to the warehouse and deposit itself there.

It won’t stay there, or not for long: it enters but almost immediately departs, vanishing into thin air, and leaving behind nothing more than an irritating and indistinct trace. You have to learn to intervene with brute force, to hammer it into its notch; it can be done, but it requires time and effort. You have to take methodical notes, and to reread them as many times as needed, weeks and even months afterward. There’s more: you realize that, perversely, it is just as difficult to erase, that is, unlearn mistaken concepts. It’s all as if a hypothetical wax had hardened: harder to make an impression, harder to erase one. Those mistakes in vocabulary or grammar that are so easy to pick up when studying amateurishly later demand method, patience, and a great deal of energy to chisel away.

On the other hand, age does not entail only disadvantages. You’ve managed to pick up a trick or two along the way; it’s easier to distinguish the wheat from the chaff, that is, which concepts should be accepted and recorded with care, and which can be glanced over and discarded. You have more time, greater calm, fewer distractions; you possess (possibly without being aware of it) a coherent body of knowledge into which new knowledge fits like a key in a keyhole. You have old curiosities that have been waiting ten or twenty years to be satisfied, and concepts that have been waited for and desired are remembered better.

Most of all, our objectives are different. Even in the best cases, a student, even after he’s finished with his mandatory education (where motivation is usually minimal), has no more than an indirect motivation. He studies not to learn but, rather, to obtain a certificate or degree that will allow him to continue his studies, or to earn a living; it is rare that he becomes fully aware of the correlation that links learning to professional competence, in part because, unfortunately, it is often the case that no such correlation exists. But even when he is reasonably convinced of the long-term utility of his studies, any actual interest may be weak. In contrast, an old man who chooses on his own to undertake a course of study, without restrictions in terms of schedule, without required attendance, without fear of testing, grading, or even a negative evaluation, experiences a sensation of lightness, of free will, which the handicaps described above and the hard seats do nothing to poison.

It is study, it is self-improvement and growth, but it is also play, theater, and luxury. Play—that is to say, exercise for its own sake, but orderly and governed by rules—is typical of children; but when you play at going back

to school, you rediscover a taste of childhood, delicate and forgotten. The competition with your classmates, whether victorious or not, is a form of contact with young people on an equal standing, a fair and open race that would be impossible to undertake elsewhere. The fences separating the generations come down; one is forced to set aside the dull authority of an elder, and is led to pay homage to the superior mental resources of the young, who sit beside you without derision, commiseration, or scorn, and make friends with you. Moreover, giving oneself the gift of an enjoyable endeavor that has no immediate short-term objective is a luxury that costs little and pays rich dividends: it’s as if you had been given, free of charge or almost, a rare and beautiful object.

Why Do We Write?

It often happens that a reader, usually a young one, will ask a writer, in all simplicity, why he wrote a certain book, or why he wrote it a certain way, or even, in more general terms, why he writes and why all writers write. It is no easy matter to answer this last question, which contains all the others: a writer is not always conscious of the reasons that lead him to write, he is not always driven by a single motive, and sometimes there are different motives behind, say, the beginning and the end of a single work. It seems to me that at least nine motivations can be discerned, and I will do my best to describe them here; the reader, whether he is a writer or not, will have no trouble coming up with others. Why, then, do we write?

1. Because we feel the urge or the need. This, at first glance, is the most disinterested motivation. The author who writes because something or someone inside him compels the words is not working toward a given goal; his work may bring him fame and glory, but those will be a plus, an added benefit, not something he consciously desired: a by-product, in other words. Of course, the case sketched out here is extreme, theoretical, and asymptotic; it is doubtful whether such a pure-hearted writer, or such an artist in general, ever lived. The Romantics saw themselves in this light; it is no accident that we believe we are able to descry such examples among the great men of the more distant past, about whom we know little, and who are therefore easier to idealize. For much the same reason

distant mountains all appear to us to be the same color, one that often blends with the color of the sky.

2. To entertain others or oneself. Fortunately, the two variants almost always coincide: it is rare that someone who writes to entertain an audience does not also have fun writing, and it is rare for someone who enjoys writing to fail to convey to his readers at least some share of that enjoyment. In contrast with the previous case, there do exist pure entertainers, who are often not writers by profession, strangers to ambition, literary or otherwise, free of burdensome certainties and dogmatic rigidity, as light and limpid as children, and as lucid and sage as someone who has lived for a long time and to good purpose. The first name that comes into my mind is that of Lewis Carroll, the shy Anglican deacon and mathematician who lived a blameless life, and who has fascinated six generations with the adventures of his Alice, first in Wonderland and later Through the Looking-Glass. Confirmation of his affable genius can be found in the popularity that his books still enjoy after more than a century in print, not only among children, for whom they were theoretically intended, but also among logicians and psychoanalysts, who never seem to tire of finding new meanings in their pages. It is likely that this unbroken popularity of his books is due precisely to the fact that they never sneak anything in—neither moral lessons nor educational chores.

3. To teach someone something. To do this, and to do it well, can be invaluable to the reader, but it's essential that there be a clear understanding. With only rare exceptions, such as Virgil in the *Georgics*, didactic intent tends to eat into the narrative fabric from beneath, tainting and deteriorating it: a reader in search of a story should find a story, not some unwanted lesson. As I said, however, there are exceptions, and those with a poet's blood in their veins

know how to find and express poetry even when speaking of stars, atoms, the breeding of livestock, and the keeping of bees. Let me scandalize no one by mentioning in this context *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well*, by Pellegrino Artusi, another pure-hearted man who never daintily covers his mouth with one hand: he doesn't pose as a man of letters, he passionately loves the art of cooking so scornfully dismissed by hypocrites and dyspeptics, he intends to teach it, he says so, and he does so with the clarity and simplicity of someone who knows his topic thoroughly, spontaneously attaining the level of art.

4. To improve the world. As you may see, we are moving further and further away from art for art's sake. It may be appropriate here to point out that the motivations we've been discussing have very little to do with the worth of the work they produce; a book may be fine, serious, lasting, and enjoyable for reasons that are entirely different from the ones that led the author to write it. It is possible to write despicable books for eminently noble reasons, and also, though it happens less often, noble books for despicable reasons. All the same, I personally feel a certain degree of mistrust for anyone who "knows" how to improve the world; often, though not always, such a person is so enamored of his system that he becomes impervious to criticism. We can only hope that he lacks an outsized force of will, otherwise he may be tempted to improve the world with deeds instead of just words: that's what Hitler did after writing *Mein Kampf*, and I've often thought that many other utopians, if they had had sufficient energy, could have unleashed wars and mass slaughter.

5. To spread one's ideas. Those who write for this reason constitute only a smaller-scale—and hence less dangerous—variation on the previous instance. The category in fact

corresponds to that of philosophers, whether they are brilliant, mediocre, or overweening, lovers of the human race, dilettantes, or madmen.

6. To rid themselves of some source of anguish. Often writing is an equivalent of the confessional or Freud's couch. I have no objection to those who write because they are driven by some inner tension: indeed, I wish them success in freeing themselves of it, as I was able to many years ago. I do ask, however, that they make an effort to filter that anguish, to refrain from hurling it, rough and raw, into their readers' faces: otherwise, they risk infecting others without giving any relief to themselves.

7. To become famous. I think that no one but a fool would sit down to write with the sole objective of becoming famous; but I also believe that no writer, not even the most modest, not even the least boastful, not even the angelic Lewis Carroll mentioned earlier, has been immune to this motivation. To possess fame, to read about yourself in the press, to hear others talk about you is sweet, without a doubt; but few of the joys that life can offer demand such effort, and few labors promise such an uncertain outcome.

8. To become rich. I never understand why there are people whose reaction is either indignation or astonishment when they learn that Collodi, Balzac, and Dostoyevsky wrote to earn money, or to pay off gambling debts, or to shore up struggling business ventures. It seems reasonable to me that writing, like any other useful occupation, should receive compensation. But I believe that writing for money alone is dangerous, because it almost always leads to a facile style, too compliant with the tastes of the larger public and the fashions of the moment.

9. Out of habit. I left this motivation, the dreariest of all, for last. It's not pretty, but it happens: it happens that a writer runs out of steam, losing his narrative drive, his desire to

endow the images he has conceived with life and shape; that he stops conceiving images; that he has no more desires, even for glory or cash; and that he goes on writing all the same, out of inertia, out of habit, just “to keep the name alive.” Let him pay attention to what he’s doing: along that path he won’t travel far; he’ll inevitably wind up copying himself. Silence is more dignified, whether temporary or definitive.

Congested Air

Italian, as we have become accustomed to repeating for a long time now, is a rich and noble language, and at the same time a rigid and impermeable one, reluctant to take in new words to describe new things. But for the past 150 years, and today with dizzying frequency, new things in ever-greater numbers have been appearing on the horizon, entering our everyday life, and demanding that we baptize and incorporate them. For the most part, the new things and new ideas come from the worlds of science and technology; now, our country appears to lack the simplifying imagination of English-speakers, who are so good at condensing complex concepts into a single word borrowed from ordinary language ("jet," "clutch," "gear," "kit," "bit," the recent "big bang"), or coining monosyllabic words that are full of meaning and quickly enter into universal use. To that end, the most unconventional linguistic procedures are put into operation: analogies, metaphors, onomatopoeia, and so on. One notorious example is "smog," the urban fog caused by industrial or domestic smoke; the word was created by merging the terms for its two component parts ("smoke" and "fog"). Such words, which are quite numerous in English, are called *portmanteau words*, a reference to the type of suitcase, designed to carry suits, that opens into two symmetrical halves. We can pin down the birth certificate of some of those words: "galumph," which means to *gallop* in *triumph*, was coined by Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland.*

In contrast, here in Italy (though not only here) things work differently. Carrying on the humanist tradition in a heavy-handed and indiscriminate manner, we avail ourselves of old languages, Latin and Greek, to describe new things. Now, it does not appear that the results are always accepted by

the users, that is, all those who speak the language; indeed, they find themselves faced with patently “unnatural” words, imposed from above, prefabricated, far too long and not very clear, devoid of any suggestion of analogy, and in fact frequently overburdened with false suggestions and analogies. To judge from the effects, well-known to anyone who’s spent time in a medical clinic or a chemistry laboratory or a machine shop, it is clear that the ordinary speaker recoils from words that he is compelled to use but which are unfamiliar to him. They constitute genuinely foreign bodies, forcibly making inroads into his language or dialect, and the unwilling user unconsciously tries to modify them: in short, he behaves more or less like the oyster, which, when seeded with a sharp-edged grain of sand, refuses to tolerate it and expels it, or else turns it over and over, incubating it, smoothing it, and eventually transforming it into a pearl. Typically, the speaker attempts to reconstruct the “real” meaning of the word by distorting it to a greater or lesser degree: this process, known as a false etymology or a folk etymology, is a time-honored mechanism found in all languages, and illustrated by ancient examples (*melancholia,* that is, “black bile,” altered in Italian to *malinconia* by a false association with *male*, bad), by dozens of other wonderful instances, eagerly gathered on the fly by Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli[1] (*brodomedico* for *protomedico, mormoriale* for *memoriale, formicare* for *fornicare, sgrassazione* for *grassazione*), all the way down to more recent ones, which spring up around us every day or even inside each of us.

Of these, some are of humble extraction, and entail a subconscious process that is as obvious as it is elementary; others are more daring, and attest to higher-level associations; still others contain a flash of poetry, or sarcasm, or humor. *Riflettario, mobildeno, acqua portabile* were all coined by people who work with their hands, and they are the product of simple common sense. *Riflettario* (in place of *refrattario*—“refractory,” that is, to the heat of the flame) is so appropriate, in the case of a reverberatory furnace, for instance, that it could safely be adopted, and perhaps one day will be. *Mobildeno* (for *molibdeno*, or “molybdenum”) echoes the word *mobile,* or “furniture,” given the use of this metal in special steels, and marks the Italian speaker’s dislike of the juxtaposition of *b* and *d*, an occurrence that he would like to repair. *Acqua portabile*—or “portable water”—contains an implicit accusation against the ravagers of the Italian language. Since the Latin verb *potare* (“to drink”) no longer exists in

Italian, why should the bureaucracy of the nineteenth century have dug up this abstruse term, *acqua potabile* (“potable water”), unknown to the ancient Romans and alchemistic in origin (*aurum potabile*)? Wouldn’t *acqua da bere* (“drinking water”) have been adequate, and shorter into the bargain? Hence the bafflement and the understandable amendment: portable water is the water that is brought to your home through the pipes of the water system, with no effort on your part.

Frequently, and especially in the case of words related to medicine, the rejected neologism contains a potent emotional charge, again of disgust—no longer for the word but, rather, for the thing itself, or perhaps an element of mistrust, or mockery. Many of these “wrong” words mirror a typical situation: the condition of the patient sitting openmouthed in the presence of a doctor who spouts difficult words, like Don Abbondio or Professor Azzeccagarbugli,[2] and who will eventually present a bill; and it is impossible to escape the suspicion that those difficult words are used purposely, to conceal ignorance and helplessness, so that the obligation to pay is an added and unjustified burden. After all, it is the patient who suffers, not the incomprehensible oracle; it is the patient who, as indemnification for his pain, should get the fee.

Raggi ultraviolenti, or “ultraviolent rays.” The deformation of this word refers to the well-known effects of prolonged exposure; moreover, the rays are not violet at all. *Puz*, in place of “pus,” is all too painfully self-explanatory. *Iniezioni indovinose* for “endovenous injections”: because it is necessary to guess—*indovinare*—where the vein is, and the guessing is not always immediately successful; we should also note in this connection that in current parlance “to diagnose” is expressed as “to guess (*indovinare*) the disease,” and the doctor is viewed as a sort of *indovino*, or fortune-teller. *Intercolite* (for *enterocolite*, or “enterocolitis”) seems to contain a very widespread and archaic concept of pathogenesis, according to which all diseases are confusions, mixtures, aberrant interminglings of fluids that ought to remain separate: bile in the blood, blood in the urine, and so forth. The same model, on a subconscious level, of course, may be the source of *mescolazioni*. The *verme solitario*—or “tapeworm”—is often called the *verme salutario* or *verme sanitario*—the “salutary worm” or the “sanitary worm”—because it makes more sense to connect it to the concept of health than to any idea of solitude. An analogous line of reasoning led to the term *tifo pidocchiale* (in place of *tifo petecchiale*: “epidemic typhus” or

“petechial fever,” in which the petechiae are the distinctive exanthems produced by the disease), because it is spread by lice—*pidocchi*—found in clothing.

Flautolenze, quite widespread, strikes a comic pose that is at once crass and subtle, filthy and innocent, bringing together “flautist” and “flatulence.” You’d almost call it the work of an astute, whimsical poet, rather than some anonymous and collective composition. *Dolori areonautici*—a slightly misspelled mistaken reference to “aeronautic pains”—refer to the well-known influence of atmospheric conditions on rheumatism (less clear in origin is the twin form *dolori aromatici*, or “aromatic pains”). There is no mistaking the stamp of rejection in *tintura d’odio*—“tincture of odium.”

Similar rejections can be detected in many terms from chemistry, which are used to designate noxious substances, or substances believed to be noxious: *cloruro demonio* for *cloruro d’ammonio*—roughly “demonium chloride” for “ammonium chloride”—or *stelerato* (which sounds like *scellerato*, “wicked”) for *stearate*. In much the same way, during the age of the Crusades, the name of Mohammed, in Italian Maometto, the great enemy of Christendom, was distorted to *Malcometto*, and in the late sixteenth century a pestilence was commonly referred to as a *pistolence*, as if it could be as lethal as a firearm. To go back to chemistry, there is no mistaking the connection in *bacalite* between bakelite, the most venerable of all plastic materials, stiff, yellowish, and foul-smelling, and the inexpensive codfish, *baccalà*, so rigid from the salt in which it’s preserved that it has been given the name “stick-fish” (*Stockfisch* in German, which, again through a folk etymology, with a continuing emphasis on its stiffness, has led to the Italian word *stoccafisso*). Note, in any case, the stereotypical expression “*duro come un baccalà*,” “stiff as a cod.”

Leprite—which sounds like leprosy—stands for *iprite*, or “mustard gas,” the aggressive chemical agent first used at Ypres in the First World War. The word couldn’t have originated in northern Italy, where both mustard gas and leprosy are known only by name. It was coined in the thirties, in a factory in Abruzzi, where this sinister substance was being manufactured secretly, and where the memory of the equally sinister disease, which produces vaguely similar sores, had not yet died out.

In some mines in the Canavese area, *pirite* (pyrite) is called *perite*. In Piedmontese *pera* means *pietra* (“stone”): even pyrite, with all the false splendor that makes it similar to gold, is nothing but a rock.

Adelaide, for *aldeide* (“aldehyde”), is a curious case because, unlike all the previous examples, it seems to have originated in a misreading rather than a mishearing. Still, it would seem that there exists a sort of preconceived hostility against the word *aldeide*, possibly prompted by its unusual and very un-Italian sound: in a factory where I worked for a long time, formaldehyde (“formic aldehyde”) was commonly called *Forma Dei*, a splendid Latin term that has a theological flavor. Another misreading led to the distortion of *Prosérpina* into *Prosperina*: in fact, the young woman depicted in the frescoes is pink and buxom—*prosperosa*—and in no way resembles the serpent that seems embedded in her actual name. The shift of the accent proves that the expert who thus pronounced the goddess’s name must have misread it in some treatise, and had never heard anyone else pronounce it.

The Italian word *bestemmia* is also the product of a false etymology. It was derived from the Latin and Greek roots of the Italian *blasfemia* (“blasphemy”), which is more or less equivalent to “insult,” with a transparent reference to *bestia* (“beast”), since it is an act considered more suited to a beast than to a man.

Lingua sinistrata (for *lingua salmistrata*, or “brined tongue”) is almost never heard anymore. It comes from wartime, and it expresses the mistrust of the made-in-Italy canned meats available back then. *Aria congestionata* —“congested air,” for “air-conditioning”—is more recent, and it, too, is the product of a generalized rejection of the deviltry of wholesale progress, innovative architects, buildings with too many stories and windows that don’t open. *Concedenza* stands in for *coincidenza* (“connecting trains”). The connection—or the fact that the arrival of one train and the departure of another happens to coincide—is ensured only in the most enigmatic terms by the scheduling of the railroad. Often, it does not occur: therefore, when one *is* able to make one’s connection, it is seen as a gift of fate, a benevolent concession.

There is no sense of rejection in *anellina*, *anitrina,* and *borotalcol*; rather, there is simply an attempt to interpret them by connecting them to the Italian term—“ring,” “duck,” “alcohol”—that most closely resembles them: respectively, they stand for “aniline,” “anhydride,” and “borated talc.”

Sanguis is virtually universal in Italy for “sandwich,” which purists would call a *tramezzino*. A *tramezzino* has little to do with blood (*sangue,*

except perhaps through the phrase for a rare steak: *bistecca al sangue*), and nothing to do with the harsh syllables that make up the name of its inventor, Lord Sandwich, who, as legend would have it, was so obsessed with card-playing that he never slept, and ate nothing but sandwiches while continuing to play with his free hand. For that matter, the "correction" of foreign words is a very common phenomenon in all languages. The Latin name of Milano, Mediolanum, which (probably) meant "in the middle of the plain," was not understood by invaders of Germanic descent and tongue, and they corrected it to Mailand, that is, "land of May," a lovely name that the Germans still use. In the sixteenth century, the French, confronted by the Italian word *partigiana* (a kind of dagger), did not hesitate to transform it into *pertuisane*, with clear reference to *pertuis*, a narrow opening, given the fact that a dagger is designed to perforate. Likewise in France, the German name for bitter cabbage, *Sauerkraut*, was—given the well-known tendency of the French to pronounce foreign words according to their own phonetics—pronounced more or less as *sorcròt*; but, since it was still a cabbage, this last name was distorted into *choucroute*, that is, literally, "cabbage-crust," even though it hasn't a trace of a crust.

I don't know whether Defoe knew Italian or Spanish; but he certainly attributes ignorance of both languages to his hero Robinson, and has him write *runagate* in place of *renegade* (a word that is, of course, of Italian and Spanish origin): now, to an English ear *runagate* means something like "run away from the gate." The "true" meaning of the word is thus reestablished.

Viturinari and *fastudi*, for *veterinario* ("veterinarian") and *fastidio* ("annoyance"), are ingenious attempts on the part of the Piedmontese dialect to give meaning to two relatively difficult-to-understand terms, connecting them respectively to *vettura* ("carriage" or "coach") and *studio* ("study"): words with which they have nothing in common, according to the etymologies that have been ascertained. Last of all, I'd like to point out that Mauthausen, the name of the grim concentration camp, is pronounced in Italy exclusively as *Matàusen*, probably in connection with *mattatoio* ("slaughterhouse"); and that in Piero Caleffi's memorable autobiography, *Si fa presto a dire fame (It's Easy Enough to Say Hunger)*, we read that the term *Stubendienst*, "barracks orderly (duty)," was Italianized by the Italians who didn't know German into *stupidino* or *stupendino.*

1. A nineteenth-century poet famous for his sonnets written in Romanesco, the dialect of Rome.
2. Both are characters in Alessandro Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed* (1842).

Guncotton Stockings

The salary they offered was barely enough to live on, but the accommodations, given the times, and, especially, the places I'd come from, seemed princely to me. The paint factory where I would be working was old, filthy, and full of rubble and mud; not far away, though, set between two verdant hills, was a dynamite plant that had been modernized during the war. There, in the guesthouse, I'd been assigned a bright clean room with a view of the mountains; I was authorized to eat dinner in the company cafeteria. Meat and butter were still being rationed: that authorization was no small privilege.

Until just a few months before, the dynamite plant had been anything but a peaceful place. There had been air raids, attacks by partisan bands starving for explosives, roundups by the Germans (in fact, the guesthouse had been built for the Germans, so living there struck me as a payback in some sense), black market trade, inspections, thefts, and a grim rosary of on-the-job accidents, which meant explosions. The marks of those blasts were still evident, and not only on the buildings and the equipment: many workers, both blue- and white-collar, and all the delivery people and porters, were scarred or crippled.

Now the storm had passed, and there was a graveyard atmosphere of peace and oblivion. The cafeteria was run by a middle-aged married couple, hardworking, sober, and reserved; she did the cooking, he scoured the valley in a broken-down van, returning with foodstuffs procured both legally and otherwise. He was tall, skinny, and solemn, and to me he called to mind Wodehouse's ingenious manservant Jeeves; but a length of twine ran out of one nostril and was fastened to his cheek with a bandage. "It's

holding up his trachea," the man sitting next to me said, as if it were the most natural thing. I turned to the man on my other side, who was the plant physician; but he ignored my glance and said nothing. I decided that in the past few years he'd seen worse.

One night, instead of the cook, a woman in her early thirties came to serve our table; her body was already shapeless: she was pale, a dirty blonde, and she never looked the diners in the eye. The doctor, ruddy-cheeked and jovial, a hearty eater and drinker, with a reputation as a ladies' man, greeted her in dialect, with a thunderous "Well, look who's here!"; the young woman replied in a faint voice, and hastened to disappear with the empty plates. "That's Marisa," he told me, with the air of one about to tell a good story. "The one who knit herself a pair of guncotton stockings.

"There's no issue of professional confidentiality," he went on. "You're a new arrival here, but the whole factory already knows the story, in fact, the whole town does. I should tell you that we used to make guncotton: in other words, nitrocotton. It was reckless, dangerous work, and the only ones willing to take jobs here were the hard-up, the crazy, and people who didn't understand what was involved. Safety procedures were minimal—as far as I know, just a tub of cold water over the nitration tank. If the chemical reaction started to get out of hand, you were supposed to yank the chain, as in the lavatory, and get out of there, but fast. Nobody slept all that soundly, even in the guest quarters. No, it's different now, all we do these days is dismantle surplus shells and grenades. To the eye and to the hand, nitrocotton is no different from ordinary cotton: it's just a little rougher and warmer to the touch. It will explode only if it's very dry and compressed; otherwise, it burns up in a flash, with a bright yellow flame.

"For a while Milio had been courting Marisa: he brought her gifts and made her promises. Marisa kept him on tenterhooks, never exactly telling him yes or no, because Milio was rich but he drank, and he'd been in trouble with the law on account of some stolen goods he'd bought. Then, one fine day, Marisa started to be seen with Clemente: Clemente was a handsome young man, but he was shy, and since he had a bit of a limp, he'd never been drafted. That was no time to get married, but Marisa and Clemente got married all the same: some said in a hurry, too. They got married and set up housekeeping, and after that Milio started drinking more heavily. Milio and Clemente were colleagues: they both made nitrocotton.

“There were shortages of everything; the warehouse full of cotton to be nitrated was guarded around the clock by a couple of sentries, but the sentries themselves stole cotton and sold it on the black market. The only one who didn’t steal was Clemente, and who knows why: perhaps he lacked the courage, or he had principles, or maybe just because he knew he wasn’t fast enough to get away. ‘You’re a sap,’ Milio told him. ‘Everyone’s taking cotton home to their wives to spin: your wife’s the only one who has to do without, and she’s pathetic, her stockings are full of holes.’ Clemente said he’d try, but he never seemed to make up his mind. So Milio told him he’d take care of it; but since he had vengeance in mind, he stole a wad of nitrocotton instead of regular cotton, and he gave it to Clemente, who presented it solemnly to Marisa, in good faith: ‘Get your spindle and distaff and spin it; then you can knit yourself a pair of stockings for the winter.’

“Marisa got busy spinning and knitting, and she made herself a pair of long stockings. They were a little itchy, but they kept her warm. The winter passed without incident; in late February Marisa crouched down in front of the fireplace to stir up the fire, a log dropped and sparks sprayed. In an instant, the stockings vanished in a burst of yellow flame, and Marisa fainted from the terror and the pain. Clemente found her when he got home from work, and he was even more frightened than she was. There was no trace of the stockings, not even inside her shoes, because nitrocotton burns even without oxygen.

“They brought her in to my clinic, and I’d never seen a burn anything like it. Her legs were nothing but raw flesh, from the tips of her toes to her crotch: the burn stopped there precisely, like a geographic borderline. I had to have her admitted to a hospital in Turin; luckily the head physician was a friend of mine, so I didn’t have a lot of trouble covering up the whole thing; at the time, there were German inspectors working at the factory, and they were pretty heavy-handed when they caught someone stealing explosives: Milio would probably have wound up in front of a firing squad. He certainly deserved to be punished, but not to that extent. He was no genius, and I questioned him pretty thoroughly; he had no idea of what he’d done, he meant it as a joke.”

“So what finally happened?” I asked.

“The girl was released after three months, but she’s not the same person. She’ll hardly eat, she can’t sleep, and every so often she runs away from home and they find her wandering through the woods, unable to remember

her own name. She thinks someone cast a witching spell on her, as they say around here; or that God has punished her for her sins. For that matter, people are cruel: when she walks down the street, they point at her and laugh behind her back, and she notices it. As for the two men, I convinced them that the best thing for both was to get out of here until the end of the war; so they joined the partisans, but two different groups."

Against Pain

Many, perhaps all, adolescents are suddenly shaken by an anguished doubt: “Everything I know about the world has reached me through my senses: what if my senses are deceiving me, the way they do in dreams? What if the stars, the sky, the past that I reconstruct through evidence and artifacts, the present that I perceive, the people I love and the ones I hate, the pain I feel, what if all those things were the product of my own unwished-for invention, and nothing existed but me? What if I were at the heart of endless nothingness, uselessly populated by the phantoms I rouse? Look, I close my eyes and cover my ears, and the universe is annihilated.”

As we know, this hypothesis is logically irrefutable. It is internally consistent, it contains no contradictions, it has been upheld by philosophers (but whom were they trying to convince of this, since each of them believed that he was the only worm in some vast apple?), and it has even been given the illustrious name of solipsism. Its countless inventors end up sooner or later abandoning it (or simply forgetting it) for practical reasons; in fact, it would lead to behavior that is as dangerous to the individual as to his fellow men, that is, to inertia, an abdication of influence upon the reality in which we are immersed. Moreover, we quickly come to the realization that this hypothesis, defensible though it may be, is highly unlikely: it is unlikely, for example, that by pure chance my body is unvaryingly identical to the bodies of the individuals who populate the “dream” of my daily interactions. In the same way, the hypothesis that Earth is the immobile center of the cosmos is not contradictory, but it is improbable.

These centripetal considerations came back to me while I was reading an article advocating the protection of animals by Enrico Chiavacci, a moral

theologian. I am eager to subscribe to his conclusions, but some of his arguments leave me dubious. He allows for a certain degree of suffering inflicted on animals simply because “every animal is at man’s service”; in fact, all creation is “God’s gift to man.” Even the Pleiades? Even the Orion nebula? A gift made to man fifteen billion years before he came into existence, and destined to survive at least as long after even the memory of our species is extinct?

Animals must be respected because “God finds all creatures good,” and “provides them with food, protects them”—but how can we overlook the cruel and patient ambushes laid by spiders, the refined surgery by means of which (vivisection pales in comparison!) certain wasps paralyze caterpillars, depositing a single egg inside them, and then go off to die elsewhere, leaving their larva to devour the still living host bit by bit? Can we claim that here, too, God “readies (for animals) a place to rest”? And what can we say about cats, magnificent killing machines? And the treacherous cunning of the cuckoo, which murders its newly hatched foster siblings? Certainly not that these creatures are “wicked”: but it seems clear that the moral categories of good and evil are not suited to subhumans. The gigantic bloody competition that began when the first cell came into being, and that is still raging all around us, falls outside, or beneath, our standards of behavior.

Animals must be respected, that much is true, but for other reasons. Not because they are “good” or useful to us (not all of them are) but because a rule engraved within us, and acknowledged by all religions and codes of law, requires that we avoid creating pain, either in humans or in any other creature capable of feeling it. “All is mystery except our pain.”[1] The layman has few certainties, but the first is this: it is acceptable to suffer (or to cause suffering) only if doing so prevents greater suffering.

This is a simple rule, but its ramifications are complex, and everyone knows that. How can we measure the sufferings of others against our own? Still, solipsism is a puerile fantasy: “other people” exist, and among their number we should count our traveling companions, the animals. I don’t think that the life of a crow or a cricket is worth as much as a human life; it’s even doubtful that an insect feels pain the same way that we do, but birds probably feel pain and mammals certainly do. It is the difficult task of all humans to reduce as much as possible the tremendous volume of this “substance” that poisons every life, pain in all its forms; and it is strange,

but wonderful, that we can arrive at this imperative even when we start from radically different assumptions.

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1. A quotation from Giacomo Leopardi’s poem “Ultimo canto di Saffo” (“Sappho’s Last Song”).

About Obscure Writing

We should never impose limits or rules on creative writing. Those who do are generally obeying political taboos or ancestral fears. In fact, a written text, however it may be written, is less dangerous than is commonly thought; the famous opinion concerning Silvio Pellico's *My Prisons,* to the effect that it did more harm to Austria "than the loss of a battle," is sheer hyperbole. We know from experience that a book or a short story, whether the author's intentions are good or evil, is an essentially inert and innocuous object; even in its most despicable incarnations (for instance, the hybrids of sex and Nazism or pathology and pornography), it can cause only minimal harm, certainly less than that caused by drinking or smoking or corporate stress. Compounding that intrinsic weakness is the fact that today every text is suffocated within the space of a few months by the mass of new texts pressing in from behind. Moreover, the rules and limits, historically determined as they are, tend to shift frequently; the history of all literatures abounds in episodes in which excellent and wonderful works have been opposed in the name of principles that proved to be much shorter lived than the texts themselves. We can deduce from this fact that many valuable books must have vanished without a trace, having emerged the losers in the never-ending battle between those who write and those who prescribe how one should write. From the vantage point of our permissive age, the trials (real trials, in court) of Flaubert, Baudelaire, and D. H. Lawrence appear as grotesque and ironic as that of Galileo, so great does the disparity in stature between those judged and those doing the judging appear to us nowadays—the latter prisoners of their era, the former living on into any foreseeable future. In short, passing laws for writers is useless at best.

Having made this point, and thus renouncing emphatically the idea of establishing standards, prohibitions, or punishments, I'd like to say that in my opinion writers should never write in an obscure manner, because writing is that much more valuable, and has that much greater chance of being read and remembered, the easier it is to understand and the less it lends itself to equivocal interpretations.

Of course, perfectly clear writing demands a perfectly knowledgeable and completely mindful writer, and that does not correspond to reality. We are all made up of ego and id, spirit and flesh, as well as nucleic acids, traditions, hormones, experiences, and traumas both remote and proximate; and so we are condemned to drag along with us, from cradle to grave, a doppelgänger, a mute and faceless brother, who is nonetheless partly responsible for our actions, and therefore for our pages, too. As we all know, no author fully understands what he has written, and all writers have had occasion to be astonished at the fine and horrible things that critics have found in their work, things they didn't know they had put there; many books contain instances of plagiarism, conceptual or verbal, of which the authors claim ignorance in good faith. It's a fact we're helpless to dispute: this source of the unknowable and the irrational that each of us houses within must be accepted, and even authorized to express itself in its (necessarily obscure) language, but it need not be considered the sole or outstanding source of expression. It's not true that the only authentic form of writing is that which "comes from the heart," and which in fact comes from all the various ingredients that are mentioned above as distinct from consciousness. This opinion, though time-honored, is based on the presupposition that the heart that "dictates within us" is a different and nobler organ than that of reason, and that the language of the heart is equal for one and all, which it is not. Far from being universal in time and space, the language of the heart is capricious, adulterated, and as unstable as fashion, of which indeed it forms part, nor can we claim that it is the same in just a single country or period of time. In other words, it is not a language at all, and at most we can call it a vernacular, an argot, if not an individual invention.

Thus, those who write in the language of the heart may prove to be indecipherable, and so it is reasonable to ask what purpose they had in writing; indeed (it strikes me that this is a broadly acceptable proposition), the purpose of writing is to communicate, to transmit information or

feelings from mind to mind, from place to place, and from time to time. Someone who is understood by no one transmits nothing, is only a voice crying in the wilderness. When this happens, the reader of goodwill should be heartened: if you do not understand a text, the fault is in the author, not in you. It is a writer's responsibility to be understood by whoever wishes to do so: it is his profession, writing is a public service, and a willing reader should not go away in disappointment.

I confess that I have slightly idealized this reader—and I have the odd impression that he is beside me when I write. He is similar to the perfect gasses of thermodynamics, perfect only in that their behavior is perfectly predictable according to simple laws, while real gasses are more complicated. My "perfect" reader is neither erudite nor a fool; he reads not out of obligation, or as a pastime, or to show off in society, but because he is curious about many things, wants to choose among them, and is reluctant to delegate that choice to someone else; he knows the limits of his own expertise and education, and he guides his choices accordingly. In this particular instance, he has chosen eagerly to read my books, and he would feel uncomfortable or unhappy if he were unable to understand every word that I have written, in fact, that I have written *for him*, because the truth is that I write for him, not for the critics, or for the powerful of the earth, or for myself. If he did not understand me, he would feel that he had been unfairly humiliated, and that I was guilty of breach of contract.

Here an objection could be raised: there are times when one writes (or speaks) not to communicate but to relieve an inner tension, or a joy, or a sorrow, and therefore one might also cry in the wilderness, or moan, laugh, sing, or shout.

Those who shout, provided they have good reason to do so, deserve our understanding: to weep and to mourn, whether in a constrained or a theatrical manner, are helpful inasmuch as they alleviate our suffering. Jacob howls over Joseph's bloodstained cloak; in many civilizations, cries of mourning are part of prescribed ritual. But the shout is an extreme reaction, as useful for an individual as tears, but inept and coarse if considered as language, because by definition it is something quite different from language: the unarticulated is not articulate, noise is not sound. For that reason, I have had enough of praise lavished on texts that (here I quote at random) "sound the very limits of the ineffable, the nonexistent, the animal howl." I'm sick of "a dense magmatic impasto," of "semantic

refuse," and of stale innovations. Blank pages are blank, and perhaps it's best to call them blank; if the emperor has no clothes, the honest thing is to say that he has none.

Personally, I'm also tired of the praise lavished in life and death on Ezra Pound, who may well have been a great poet, but who in order to make sure he was not understood sometimes even wrote in Chinese, and I believe that his poetic obscurity had the same roots as his supermanism, which led him first to fascism and subsequently to self-marginalization: both grew out of his contempt for the reader. Perhaps the American court that judged Pound insane and unfit to stand trial was right: a writer by instinct, he must have been a very poor thinker, and this is borne out both by his political actions and by his maniacal hatred of bankers. Now, people who don't know how to think should be given proper care, and treated respectfully to the extent possible, even if, like Ezra Pound, they might have been persuaded to manufacture Nazi propaganda against their own country while it was at war with Hitler's Germany; but they should not be praised or held up as examples, because it is better to be sane than insane.

The effable is to be preferred to the ineffable, human speech to an animal howl. It is no accident that the two least decipherable German-speaking poets, Trakl and Celan, both committed suicide, two generations apart. Their shared fate leads us to think of the obscurity of their poetics as a sort of pre-suicide, a will-not-to-exist, a flight from the world, ultimately crowned by a yearned-for death. They deserve our respect, because their "animal howl" was terribly justified: for Trakl, by the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire—something he believed in—into the maelstrom of the Great War; for Celan, a German Jew who miraculously survived the German slaughter, by uprooting and by anguish without remedy in the face of death triumphant. With Celan especially, because he was our contemporary (1920–1970), this discussion must be approached seriously and responsibly.

We can sense the tragedy and nobility of his song, but only vaguely: to penetrate it is a hopeless undertaking, not only for the average reader but for the critic as well. Celan's obscurity is neither contempt for the reader nor inadequacy of expression nor a lazy surrender to the currents of the subconscious: it is truly a reflection of the obscurity of his own and his generation's fate, and it condenses relentlessly around the reader, squeezing him in a grip of ice and iron, from the harsh clarity of *Death Fugue* (1945)

to the grim and inescapable chaos of his final compositions. This darkness, increasing from page to page, up to the last disjointed babble, is as appalling as any death rattle, and indeed that is precisely what it is. It sucks us in, in the same way that a whirlpool does, but at the same time it defrauds us of something that ought to have been said but wasn't, and therefore it frustrates us and keeps us distant. I believe that Celan as a poet ought to be the subject of reflection and mourning, rather than the object of imitation. If what he conveys is a message, it has been lost in the "background noise": it is not a communication, it is not a language, or at most it's a dark and truncated language, the language, in fact, of someone about to die, and alone, as we are all alone at the point of death. But because we are not alone when we are alive, we should not write as if we were. We have a responsibility, as long as we are alive: we must answer for what we write, word for word, and ensure that every word hits its target.

Come to that, while it may be a bad habit common to certain revolutionaries to speak to their fellow man in a language that he cannot understand, it is by no means a tool of revolution: it is in fact an age-old instrument of repression, well-known to all churches, a typical defect of our political class, and the foundation of all colonial empires. It is a subtle way to establish rank: when Fra Cristoforo says, in Latin, "*Omnia munda mundis*," to Fra Fazio, who doesn't know Latin, here is the result: "At the sound of those weighty words of a mysterious signification, and so resolutely uttered, it seemed to him that in them must be contained the solution of all his doubts. He acquiesced, saying: 'Very well; you know more about it than I do.'"[1]

Nor is it true that only through verbal obscurity can we express that other obscurity, of which we are the children, and which subsists deep within us. It is not true that disorder is needed to depict disorder; it is not true that a chaotic written page is the best symbol of the ultimate chaos to which we are vowed: to believe so is a typical error of our insecure age. As long as we live, whatever the fate that has befallen us or that we have chosen for ourselves, there is no question that we will be all the more useful (and welcome) to others and to ourselves, and that we will be remembered that much longer, the better we are able to communicate. Those who don't know how to communicate, or who communicate poorly, in some code that only they, or a chosen few, can understand, are destined to unhappiness, and to spread unhappiness around them. If they communicate poorly by

intention, they are wicked, or at the least rude, because they have forced upon their readers hard work, despair, or boredom.

Of course, if the message is to be effective, clarity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition: one can be clear and boring, clear and pointless, clear and dishonest, or clear and vulgar, but that is a separate issue. Unless one is clear, there is no message at all. An animal howl is acceptable from animals, the dying, the insane, and the desperate: a whole and healthy man who employs an animal howl is either a hypocrite or a fool, and he deserves to go without readers entirely. Conversation among human beings, in a human language, is preferable to an animal howl, and I can see no reason that it should be any less poetic than that howl.

But, I repeat, these are my personal preferences, not objective rules. Anyone who writes is free to choose the language or non-language that suits him best, and anything can happen: writing that is obscure to its own author may be luminous and open to the reader; a text misunderstood by its contemporaries may become clear and illustrious decades and centuries later.

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1. From *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni.



“Leggere la Vita”

There are languages whose grammar and vocabulary have evolved differently according to the social standing of those who speak them; languages, that is, in which there is a learned and courtly version alongside a variant that is uneducated and rooted in the vernacular, without the latter necessarily being a simplification of the former. Then, there are languages in which the decisive factor is the gender of the speaker: constructions and vocabulary that are commonly used by men are unseemly, uncommon, or even religiously forbidden to women, and vice versa. Some traces of this differentiation can be found (or could until a few years ago) in Western languages as well, where many crude words, and most curse words, are still restricted to male use.

There is, however, an odd expression that sounds distinctly feminine and whose use, limited to northern Italy though not strictly to dialect, is slowly dying out. *Leggere la vita* (“to read the life”) of someone means to speak ill of him, to talk about him behind his back, to gossip about him, and to spread stories about his misdeeds, whether real or imaginary. The term is used only in the second and third person: *I* never read anyone his life. I’ve never heard a man utter this expression, and if someone were to oblige me to do so, I confess that I would feel an inhibition, unmistakably ancestral in character. Of course, I’m not trying to say that only women “read the life”; men do it and always have, but they don’t use the term to describe it.

You might think that the phrase alludes to “reading someone’s life on his hand,” the way palm readers do, but that is quite unlikely: all they read on the palm of your hand is positive and pleasant traits and predictions. All the same, it’s possible that this interpretation had something to do with the

popularity of the locution, as if, by spreading word of someone's misdeeds, one truly were "reading," in depth and, as it were, against the light, the nature and purpose of his life, recognizing his intrinsic wickedness; it has long been noted that the soul of language is pessimistic.

The true origin of the phrase is different. While reading a fine German novel by Luise Rinser (*Der schwarze Esel*, *The Black Donkey*), I found an expression I'd never heard before, "*die Leviten zu lesen*," that is, "to read the Levites," in an episode that had nothing to do with the Levites or Leviticus, and in a context that instead suggested "to scold, to remonstrate." It stirred my curiosity, perhaps in part because it involved in some sense my own name, and I tried to clarify the matter. It promised to be a modest but enjoyable effort, like all projects that one undertakes not because one's job requires it or to acquire merit or prestige but out of the gratuitous curiosity of an inexpert dilettante—out of a sense of fun and playfulness, a wish to "play at being a philologist," the way children "play at being a doctor," or "play at being ladies." I started leafing through dictionaries and vocabularies.

To my surprise, the German dictionary contained the phrase. Under "Levit," or Levite, it added, laconically, "*jemandem die Leviten lesen*" (that is, "to read the Levites to someone"): to scold someone. Enchanting, but less than helpful, were the indications offered by the venerable *Gran Dizionario Piemontese-Italiano,* by V. di Sant'Albino, which I transcribe here verbatim:

> —*Lese la vita a un:* To reprimand someone, the same as giving someone a rebuke or reproof, that is, to chastise, deliver a resounding lecture; and also simply to tell someone off, loud and clear.

And a little further down:

> —*Apeña chità un, lesie la vita apress: Fare le scale di sant'Ambrogio*. Provincial manner of speech, meaning, to censure someone, criticize him, speak ill of him immediately after parting company.

Terse, but definitive, was the *Dizionario etimologico del dialetto piemontese,* by A. Levi, published by Paravia and recently reprinted by the Bottega di Erasmo. Under the entry *Vita (leze la)* we find:

> "To reproach." From the monastic custom of reading Leviticus at matins: A. XVI.367.

By following this last bibliographic indication, I learned that at the turn of the twentieth century several linguists had delved into this manner of reading the life, and in their opinion as well the two expressions, Italian and German, have the same origin: at matins, which is usually in the dark of night, it was customary in many monasteries and convents—after the psalms and hymns had been sung, and following the reading of the Holy Scriptures and especially of Leviticus—for the prior to address the individual monks, praising them for their achievements or, more frequently, criticizing them for their shortcomings; in other words, once "the Levites were read," the scoldings were about to begin. Now, to Italian ears, it is only a short step from "*leggere i Leviti*" to "*leggere la vita*."

We may well suppose that, in some monastic order with especially strict rules, this reading, unfailingly repeated in the chill of the night, harbinger of the bitter medicine of reproofs, roused an intense anguish among the younger brothers, and that its reverberations, however distorted and now almost indecipherable, have come down to us on the age-old stream of everyday language. In the same way, at the mouth of a river, we may see fragments of ordinary objects floating, no longer recognizable, which have been torn away and dragged downstream by the current from some remote, unknown valley.

Signs on Stone

"*Adhaesit pavimento anima mea*," "My soul hath cleaved to the pavement": thus runs Psalm 119, which Dante quotes in *Purgatory*, though it has been translated in different ways. The soul cleaved to the pavement for various reasons and for a brief time, and this contact proved to be not entirely useless; it was, in fact, an exploration. Sidewalks are a highly civilized institution: present-day Romans know this, because they lack sidewalks entirely, and when they want to walk somewhere are forced to make their way through unnerving labyrinths of cars parked too close to the walls. The Romans of long ago knew it, too, and they built the sidewalks good and high in Pompeii; and Fra Cristoforo in *The Betrothed* was well aware of the issue, since he had in fact become a friar because a certain sidewalk was lacking entirely, or it was muddy, or too narrow, and in any case he was as a result forced into an unfortunate clash that caused him to change both name and destiny.

The sidewalks of my city (and, I have no doubt, those of any other city) are filled with surprises. The most recent sidewalks are of asphalt, and this seems like sheer folly: the deeper we move into an era of austerity, the more foolish it seems to use petroleum-based compounds to build surfaces to walk on. Perhaps, not long in the future, the urban asphalt will be exhumed with all the tender care that is used in detaching a fresco; the asphalt will be collected, classified, hydrogenated, and redistilled, in order to extract the valuable components that it potentially contains. Or perhaps the asphalt sidewalks will be buried under new strata of some unknown other material, though it is to be hoped less wasteful, and so the archeologists of the future will find embedded in it, like insects from the Pliocene in amber, Coca-Cola

bottle caps and the rings of pull tabs from beer cans, deducing from these qualitative and quantitative data our nutritional preferences. They will thus become a latter-day version of the phenomenon that we now see as interesting, and therefore noble: the *Kökkenmöddingen,* or kitchen middens, small man-made hills of clam and mollusk shells, fish bones, and seagull skeletons that modern archeologists excavate along the coasts of Denmark; they were small piles of rubbish that grew up slowly around miserable fishing villages, beginning some seven thousand years ago, but now they are illustrious fossils.

The oldest and most characteristic sidewalks, on the other hand, are made of slabs of hard stone, patiently hewn and chiseled by hand. The degree to which they are worn allows us to date them roughly: the oldest stone slabs are smooth and shiny, shaped by the footsteps of generations of pedestrians, and they've taken on the appearance and warm patina of alpine boulders worn smooth by the monstrous friction of glaciers. Where the slab of schist is veined with quartz, much harder than its rocky matrix, the vein sticks up, sometimes forming an annoyance to tender-footed pedestrians. On the other hand, if the wear has been less or nonexistent, it is still possible to make out the original rough stone surface, and often even individual chisel marks. You can see this clearly along walls, and it is particularly evident on the sidewalk in front of Palazzo Carignano; the straight pedestrian path running perpendicular to the front entrance has eroded normally, while the recesses in the baroque façade contain rough stone slabs, because for more than three centuries practically no one has set foot there.

Far more intense has been the wear and tear on marble, which is a much less durable material: the thresholds of many old shops are made of marble, and in the space of just a few decades a hollow has been worn in them. This erosion of the threshold is particularly noticeable in certain mountain churches and chapels, where generations of the faithful have entered wearing hobnailed boots. Frequently the wear is not limited to the threshold alone, and a second worn place can also be seen, half a meter inside the church: this marks the almost obligatory site of the second footfall.

One may note that the large stone slab in front of many porte cocheres bears a distinctive incision. From the two jambs run two grooves, straight or curved, and diverging; running between these two grooves, and parallel to the façade of the building, is a series of other grooves, every dozen

centimeters, the entire width of the sidewalk. These grooves were designed to give traction to the horseshoes of the draft horses, those prehistoric animals: when the carriage was hauled up the ramp leading from the street level to the sidewalk, the horses' rear hooves were subjected to the greatest possible strain, and they would slip if the pavement was smooth. The oldest of these grooved stone thresholds also bear the marks of the iron wheel rims and the iron-shod hooves.

At various points around the city, the paving stones bear the marks of air raids from the Second World War. The stone slabs that were shattered by fragmentation bombs have been replaced, but slabs that were pierced by incendiary bombs were left in place. These bombs were steel bars dropped blindly from the aircraft overhead, designed so that they would plummet vertically, and with enough momentum to penetrate roofs, attics, and ceilings; when some of these incendiary bombs hit sidewalks, they drilled neatly through the ten-centimeter-thick stone, like an industrial blanking punch. It is very likely that anyone who bothered to lift the perforated stone slabs would find the incendiary bomb underneath; two of these holes, just a few meters apart, can be found for instance outside of No. 9 *bis* on Corso Re Umberto. The sight of them is enough to bring back memories of macabre rumors that circulated in wartime, about pedestrians who hadn't made it to shelter in time and were run through from head to foot.

Other marks are less sinister and more recent. Everywhere, but especially numerous in more popular stretches of street, you can spot round patches on the stone sidewalks, just a few centimeters in diameter, off-white, gray, or black. These are pieces of chewing gum, oafishly spat out on the ground, and they offer testimony to the outstanding mechanical properties of the material they are made of; indeed, unless they are scraped off (but that's no easy task; it takes time and effort, and a strong stomach, as the few shopkeepers who take the trouble to clean the sidewalks in front of their shops are well aware), they're practically indestructible. Their color turns increasingly dark as their surface absorbs grime and dust, but they never disappear.

They constitute an excellent example of a phenomenon that engineers encounter frequently: the effort to optimize the properties of durability and strength of a given material can result in serious problems when the time comes to eliminate that material after it has outlived its usefulness. For example, it was a considerable challenge to demolish the reinforced

fortifications erected during the Second World War; it is practically impossible to destroy glass and ceramic, materials meant to last for centuries; the increasingly durable protective paints and coatings created for industrial use have brought in their wake a generation of terrifyingly aggressive solvents and paint removers. Likewise, the demand for a gum that will withstand the torment of extended mastication—deforming without being destroyed, suffering the combined forces of grinding pressure, humidity, heat, and enzymes—has resulted in the creation of a material that can all too well withstand being walked upon, rained on, frozen, and subjected to summer sunlight.

These wads of chewing gum, with their needlessly excellent mechanical properties, have found various ancillary uses, all of them more or less harmful; and this, too, is a recurring phenomenon. It is safe to say that none of the tools of peacetime invented by man have escaped the fate of being used in the most murderous of fashions, that is, as weapons: scissors, hammers, sickles, pitchforks, ice axes; even the short-handled trenching shovel, as Erich Maria Remarque tells us terrifyingly in *All Quiet on the Western Front.* Chewing gum has not been used as a weapon, but it was used to sabotage the ticket-punching machines used on public transportation in the fieriest months of the student protests.[1]

As I said, wads of used chewing gum can be found anywhere, but a closer examination shows that they reach maximum density in the vicinity of the most popular bars and cafés: in fact, the gum chewer about to enter one is obliged to spit it out in order to free his or her mouth. Therefore, a visitor unfamiliar with a city could guide himself to these places of public entertainment by following the chewing-gum gradient, in much the same way that sharks find their wounded prey by swimming toward higher concentrations of blood in the water.

Alongside other more obvious and trivial elements, these are the signs that can be seen on the pavement when the soul cleaveth unto it like a wad of chewing gum, out of sloth, lassitude, or weariness.

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1. Levi is referring specifically to demonstrations by university students and others in 1968.

Novels Dictated by Crickets

In an elegant essay of perhaps forty years ago, Aldous Huxley, responding to a young man who aspired to become a writer and had turned to him for advice, recommended that he purchase a pair of cats, observe them, and describe them. He told him, if I'm not mistaken, that animals, and especially mammals, and domestic animals in particular, are like us, but "with the lid off." Their behavior is similar to what ours would be if we were free of inhibitions. Therefore, observing them can be invaluable for a novelist who is preparing to probe the deepest motivations of his characters.

Perhaps matters are not quite so simple. Since then, the science of ethology has come into being and rapidly attained maturity, showing us that animals are different one from another and from us, that every animal species follows laws of its own, and that these laws, to the extent that we are able to understand them, are in close accord with evolutionary theories —which is to say, they favor the preservation of the species, though not always that of the individual. Ethologists and Pavlovians have sternly warned us not to attribute human mental mechanisms to animals, not to describe them in anthropomorphic language. For the most part, their demands have been accepted and, if anything, the opposite tendency has taken root—that is, the tendency to describe humans in zoological terms, to seek and find at all costs the animal inside the man (just as Desmond Morris has done, somewhat summarily, in *The Naked Ape*). I think that not all human actions can be interpreted in these terms, and that the method doesn't take us very far. Socrates, Newton, Bach, and Leopardi were not naked apes.

That said, I should add that Huxley might have had his explanation wrong, but he was triumphantly correct in offering this advice to his pupil. There's more: if you look closely at his best known works, you can hardly fail to see that he himself must have been a careful and brilliant observer of animals, in whose behavior he had trained himself to discern hypostases and symbols of the virtues, vices, and passions of man. No doubt his closeness to his brother Julian, a famous biologist and a scientific popularizer with real flair, must have helped him in this direction.

If I could, I would eagerly obey Huxley's recommendation and fill my house with all the animals available. I'd make every effort not only to observe them but also to communicate with them. I would have no scientific objective in mind for so doing (I have neither the culture nor the training); my reason would be an instinctive affinity, and because I'm sure it would bring me an extraordinary spiritual enrichment and a more complete view of the world. For lack of something better, I read with constantly renewed enjoyment and astonishment any number of books both old and new about animals, and they seem to give me vital nourishment, entirely apart from their literary or scientific worth. They can even be riddled with lies, like Pliny the Elder: it makes no difference; their value lies in the inspiration they provide.

It is an age-old observation, ancient even in the time of Aesop (who must have been quite familiar with these matters), that it is possible to find all extremes in animals. There are animals both enormous and minuscule, extremely powerful and extremely weak, audacious and elusive, fast and slow, clever and dull, magnificent and horrible. A writer need only choose, he can overlook the truths set forth by scientists—it is enough for him to draw liberally on this universe of metaphors. It is precisely by leaving the human island that he will find every human trait multiplied a hundredfold, a forest of prefabricated hyperboles.

Of those, many are tired, worn out by use in all languages: the too well known qualities of the lion, the fox, and the bull can no longer be employed. But the discoveries of modern naturalists, so abundant and wonderful in recent years, have opened to writers a treasury of ideas whose exploitation is merely at its timid beginnings. In the archives of *Nature* and *Scientific American*, in books by Konrad Lorenz and his followers, lurk the seeds of a new style of writing, which is still to be discovered, and awaits its demiurge.

We've all listened to crickets singing duets on summer evenings. There are various species of crickets, and each one sings at its own rhythm and on its own note; the male calls and the female, who may be as far as two hundred meters away, and completely invisible, responds "in tune." The duet, patient and chaste, goes on for hours and hours, as the two partners come slowly closer until, finally, they meet and mate. But it is essential that the female respond accurately: a response that is out of tune, even by as little as a quarter tone, will break off the dialogue, and the male will go in search of another companion more in keeping with his innate model. Apparently this requirement of an exact acoustic match is a way of preventing couplings between different species, which would be sterile and therefore would not serve the aims of "increase and multiply." The same purpose is thought to be served by the complicated, graceful, or grotesque rituals of courtship that are observed among a diverse array of animals, such as spiders, fish, and birds (we might point out here that the ethologists were forced to incorporate the term "courtship" into their language, though it's a human metaphor).

Now, one clever experimenter has observed that there is a way of altering to a predictable and reproducible degree the tonality of the cricket's song: its frequency (which is to say, the tone of the note emitted) depends to a very great extent on the environmental temperature.

Obviously, in a natural setting, the male and the female are at the same temperature; but if we heat the female (or the male), even by as little as two or three degrees Celsius, the song rises in pitch by a semitone, and the other cricket stops responding: he no longer recognizes in her (or she in him) a potential sexual partner. One tiny shift in an environmental factor results in an incompatibility. Isn't that the seed of a novel?

Spiders, in particular, are an inexhaustible source of wonder, meditations, ideas, and chills. They (though not all of them) are methodical and fanatically conservative engineers: the common garden spider, the diadem spider, has been building its radial, symmetrical web for tens of millions of years in accordance with a rigid model. It will not tolerate imperfections. If the web is damaged, it won't fix it; it destroys it and spins a new one. During a research project on the effects of drugs, a biologist administered a tiny dose of LSD to a spider. The drugged spider did not remain idle and, following the customs of its species, immediately set about making a web, but it wove a monstrous, distorted, deformed web, much like

the visions of human beings on drugs: dense and tangled in some areas, broken by gaps in others. When the work was completed, the tripping spider took up its position in a corner of the web, waiting for an unlikely prey.

It is well-known that many female spiders devour the male, immediately following or, in some cases, even during the sex act; for that matter, so do female praying mantises, and bees massacre with meticulous ferocity all the drones in the hive after one of them sets out for the nuptial flight with the future queen bee. These are all ideas filled with a shadowy significance of their own, and they stir muffled echoes deep in our civilized conscience.

The murder of one's mate is practically normal among spiders. The female is generally bigger and stronger than the male, and as soon as fertilization is complete, she tends to treat him as she would any other prey. The male does not always try to defend himself or get away: in various species, it almost seems that he accedes to nature's cynical evolutionary plan, according to which, once the task of reproduction has been performed, his reason for existence ceases and the instinct for self-preservation is therefore extinguished. But when the male spider instead tries to defend himself, we enter a dramatic and contorted world, which finds its human counterpart only in the criminal or psychopathic fringes of society; or perhaps there is no counterpart, but one is tempted to invent one, to describe situations never imagined even by our tragedians.

There are spiders that begin their courtship by offering the female a gift: a living prey, paralyzed by their venom, and bound and gagged by a wrapping of threads. It's not a selfless gift. The female accepts it, eating her fill while the male waits patiently, and, once her hunger is sated, their coupling will not end in murder. Other males, dancing around the female in a ritual courtship, gradually trap her in a net of strong threads, and fertilize her only when this violent partner, ambivalently desired and feared, has been immobilized. There are still others (and here who could resist the temptation of a no doubt unfair and baroque human interpretation?) that behave with uncanny farsightedness and despicable duplicity.

During the season when the eggs hatch, they set out on raids to capture immature, and therefore still weak, females; each male abducts and imprisons one. He binds her with his prodigious thread, good for a thousand uses, and holds her captive, feeding her only grudgingly (to keep her from becoming too strong) and defending her against all possible aggressors,

until she attains sexual maturity; then he fertilizes her and abandons her. Once she has attained the fullness of strength, the female has no difficulty escaping her bonds. Here we are on the vague boundary between crime reporting and opera buffa. It is hard not to be reminded of the ambiguous and stereotypical relationship between guardian and ward, tutor and student, between the scheming jailer Don Bartolo, swollen with late-life lusts, and the tender young Rosina, enclosed between four walls but a future "viper": "*tutti e due son da legar*" ("both of them need restraining").[1]

Many animals, structurally quite diverse, are bright colored, and yet their flesh is disgusting to the taste, or they are poisonous; for example, goldfish and ladybugs, or, respectively, wasps and certain snakes. The bright colors serve as a signal and a warning, to ensure that predators recognize them from a distance and, trained by previous experience, refrain from attacking them. Are there parallels in human behavior? In general, dangerous men tend to blend in with the crowd, in order to elude identification, but they behave otherwise when they are or believe themselves to be above the law.

We should think a little more carefully about the appearance of the bravos, as Manzoni describes them; the use of aggressively colored military uniforms (widespread until 1900); and certain distinctive manners of dress and speech that make it easy to distinguish members of particular levels of organized crime (the "apache," the mafioso). Aside from these examples, I'd like to invent and describe a ladybug character, identifiable perhaps in certain passages of Gogol: a hypochondriac, dissatisfied with himself, his neighbor, and the world around him, unpleasant and a whiner, who dons a livery that can be recognized from afar (or a catchphrase, or a speech defect), so that his fellow man, whom he reviles, becomes quickly aware of his presence and makes sure not to get underfoot.

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1. In Rossini's opera *The Barber of Seville*.



Domum Servavit

The “channel” is one of the most felicitous images yet taken from everyday language to satisfy the constantly renewed demands of specialized language. Everyone knows what a channel is: it obliges water to run from its source to an outlet, between two banks that are basically impossible to overflow, but the term also lends itself to other instances of flow, in which “some thing” (a fluid, a swarm of particles, the traffic of a highway, a crowd of human beings, but also a sum of money, a packet of energy, a piece of information) moves in a single dimension and direction, forced to do so by material or symbolic embankments. In this sense, there can be no doubt that a highway is a channel, as is a telephone communication; less properly, we speak of television channels, because in that case the point of origin is single, while the outlets (the television screens) number in the millions. A television channel, then, is a finely branched channel, and a channel only in the sense that the program being broadcast flows exclusively toward the intended users without spilling over to others.

A separate discussion should be devoted to the postal “channel.” From its origins (in China, perhaps six thousand years ago), it was considered essential that a message should run between good strong banks, meaning that the information should reach the recipient without being intercepted by outsiders. In order to ensure the impermeability of the postal channel, a number of notorious contrivances were dreamed up, such as invisible inks and cryptographic codes, and other, even more imaginative ones, such as inscribing the message on the courier’s shaved head, waiting for the hair to grow back, and then sending him on his journey; the recipient then shaved the courier’s head and read the message. Still, the most practical way of

ensuring secrecy was and remains the seal and its modern equivalents. The problem of formulating a material suitable for use as a seal is simple: it must be capable of receiving a clear impression, solidifying rapidly, preserving the impression over a significant temperature range, and not be excessively fragile. As you can see, this is a good description of plastic materials, and in fact the classic material used for seals throughout history has been the senior member of the family of plastic materials, sealing wax. Wax has almost nothing to do with its makeup: the fundamental component is lac, a strange and illustrious material that bears discussion here.

Lac is the product of the encounter between two inventive imaginations, the ponderously slow imagination of evolution, which is to say, of nature, which created it, and the quick and flexible imagination of man, who found it to be suited to various uses. The true inventor of lac is an insect with lowly habits: its career, straightforward and unadorned, is a parody of the welfare-state utopia that is so much the subject of discussion nowadays. The male and the female of the creature in question begin their lives in the form of reddish larvae, barely visible to the naked eye; in countless swarms, they lazily explore the twigs of certain exotic trees until they find a break in the bark sufficient to allow them to insert their proboscises deep into the succulent wood beneath: at this point, they’re taken care of, set for life, without a care, but, by the same token, without an experience, an emotion, or a sensation. Their number is vast, millions of individuals on a single tree, and in fact the term “lac,” used in all languages to describe the substance that they secrete, comes from an ancient Sanskrit word that means “a hundred thousand.”

The hundred thousand tiny parasites pump the life-giving sap and grow in silence, but even the most safely entitled creatures must have or learn an art that allows them to guard their backs. The art these have developed is a very estimable chemical art: they transform the plant sap into a resin possessing properties that are neither banal nor vile—specifically, lac. They exude it from their pores, covering not only their backs but their whole bodies; they are so densely packed that the shell covering one individual winds up merging and fusing with that of its neighbors, in such a way that the infested branches are ultimately sheathed in a compact and shiny crust that must have attracted the interest of human beings from earliest times. Beneath that shell lies, protected and imprisoned, the army of suckers. The males communicate with the outside world only through a tiny aperture that

allows them to breathe; the females also keep open a second aperture, an extension of their genital orifice, and it is through this that fertilization will take place.

After a few weeks, sexual maturity is attained, and here male and female fates diverge. The female continues to remain in one place, and in fact she loses her legs, since she will have no more use for them. Like the exemplary Roman matron of antiquity, *domum servavit, lanam fecit*: she lived at home, spinning wool, or, in our case, exuding resin. The male resolves to undertake a single fleeting enterprise: once he has attained maturity, he leaves his prison and fertilizes a number of females, without direct contact, by utilizing the aperture designed for the purpose; then he dies. The fertilized females, practically without exception, remain in their cells and continue to secrete resin; they lay their eggs inside the cell, and survive until they hatch, whereupon they, too, die, and the larvae that emerge from the eggs begin a new cycle. To try to draw a human moral from the behavior of the animals around us is an age-old and senseless bad habit; to indulge in it is dangerous but fun. One is tempted to say, with Aesop, “The fable teaches us” that the price of guaranteed prosperity can be high, and that early retirement can be fatal.

Lac is a noble resin; it is transparent, it withstands impacts and sunlight, it has a pleasant odor, it’s shiny, and it presents, besides, a unique and curious virtue certainly useful to its insect inventor: when it’s exposed to moisture, its permeability to water diminishes, instead of increasing, as does that of nearly all other organic materials; in short, on a molecular scale, it behaves like an umbrella that spontaneously pops open at the start of a downpour.

The human discoverer of lac remains unknown. He must have been one of the thousands of forgotten Darwins and Newtons who punctuated all the ages of the past and continue to punctuate our own, and who waste their talents in a society that doesn’t appreciate them, yoked to dull and repetitive jobs. Someone must have noticed that the protective properties of lac lent themselves to the protection of things other than the lazy and gluttonous parasite that secretes it. In particular, they could lend themselves to protecting the secrecy of the mails, that is, to plugging the holes in the channel traveled by written messages, which since time immemorial is exactly the purpose that sealing wax has served, but the resin has other uses as well. Since time equally immemorial the lac was heated, mixed with

pigments of various hues, and then allowed to harden into blocks. These blocks were pressed hard against wooden parts as they were turned on a lathe: the heat of the resulting friction once again melted the colored lac or lacquer, which then flowed uniformly over the wood “to the thickness of a human fingernail,” embellishing its appearance and protecting it from humidity. This singular method of varnishing was still in use in India at the turn of the century, and is described by Kipling.

Today lac is used primarily as a binding agent in spirit varnishes. It is evident that, with the system described above, only objects with a symmetrically cylindrical shape and a size suitable for turning on a lathe can be coated. If the resin were to be used as a paint or varnish, a solvent to dissolve it would have to be found, and technology to reduce it to an easily soluble form. The solvent was identified in the early nineteenth century, and is common rectified spirit; the technology, today obsolete, is surprising.

The resin was melted and filtered through a cloth in order to eliminate the insects and fragments of wood. Then it was allowed to harden into flat blocks weighing five or six kilograms; these blocks were heated once again, until the resin became gooey. At this point, the “stretchers” began work, for the most part very young women or girls. From dawn to dusk they squatted on the ground, grabbing the flat block at five points, with both hands, their teeth, and both feet, and then stood up quickly, extending their arms; the block was thus stretched out into a sheet with a pentagonal silhouette, the height of the stretcher, as transparent and fragile as glass. This sheet was broken up into thin flakes that could be easily dissolved. In this action, repeated countless times, the little girl-machines rose from the tight, closed pose of the bud to the open pose of the flower. It must have been a comic, cruel, and graceful ballet, and in it we can detect a genius as cynical as that which stripped the female insects of their legs: a genius that would not hesitate to reduce man to a tool, making him regress to an animal act in which the mouth, once the workshop of the word, became again an instrument for biting.

Renzo’s Fist

I confess, and not in boast but, in fact, with shame: I have only a dwindling appetite for new books, and I tend to reread books I already know. In much the same way, over the years the desire (or is it the ability?) for new friendships wanes, and one prefers to delve deeper into old ones: perhaps noticing an extra wrinkle or two, or even a few previously overlooked virtues.

The successive readings of a book that is already familiar can take place, as it were, with enhanced powers of enlargement, like certain wonderful sequences of photographs in which you see a fly, then its head, with the delicate antennae and the compound eyes, then a single eye, resembling a crystal dome, and finally the complicated yet necessary inner structure of that eye; or the same readings can be undertaken, if we may once again draw upon the language of photography, with different lighting, or from a different angle. To tell the truth, not all books lend themselves to reading with a magnifying glass: in other words, they don’t all feature a “fine structure”; but, for those which do, the effort is rewarding, and they are the books I love best.

I have just finished rereading, in *The Betrothed*, the famous scene in which Renzo, recovered from the plague, goes back to Milan in search of Lucia. They are magnificent pages, confident, rich in a strong, sad human wisdom that enriches you, and that you sense is true in all eras: not only in the time in which the story is set but also in Manzoni’s time and in our own. After much fruitless inquiry, Renzo finally learns the address of the house where Lucia is said to be staying, but he feels no relief; indeed, he’s deeply disturbed. At that final moment, confronted with the crude and immediate

alternative, Lucia dead or Lucia alive, “he would have preferred to be still in the dark about everything, and to be at the beginning of the journey whose end instead was near.” Who has not felt such anxiety, perhaps at the door of a doctor’s office? But only a perceptive student of the human soul can condense it into a few words, re-create the truth at the heart of it.

Immediately afterward, in the famous and concise episode (just over a page) of the mother who refuses to hand over to the *monatti*[1] her daughter who is dead “but lovingly dressed . . . as if . . . out for a long-promised party,” and instead places the body on the cart herself, we see the looming shadow of the greatest doubt that can afflict a religious soul, the problem of all problems, the source of all evil. It is the puzzle that tormented both Job and Ivan Karamazov, and the darkest stain on Hitler’s Germany: why the innocent? why the children? why does Providence stop when confronted with the wickedness of human beings and the pain of the world? This meditation, hinted at but left unspoken, this moment of profound compassion stands out against the grim backdrop of the streets of Milan emptied by the slaughter; here the only sign of life is the insolent and sinister presence of the *monatti*, “some wore the red uniform, others . . . multicolored plumes and bows, which the brutes wore in a show of good cheer in the midst of so much public grief.”

Like the devils of Malebolge, the *monatti* are a group. They have developed a group philosophy and a group ethics. After Renzo escapes on their wagon, where they mistook him for a plague-sower, they have a memorable conversation with him: “You’ve come to place yourself under the protection of the *monatti*: consider yourself in church”; “You’re right to infect these dogs . . . who as a reward for the life we lead . . . go around saying that, once death has taken its toll, they want to hang the lot of us”; shortly before, to a plague-infected Don Rodrigo, who had rebelled against arrest, a *monatto* had shouted angrily and scornfully, “You rascal! You would defy the *monatti*! The officers of the court! The very ones who are performing acts of mercy!” They seek justification in their own eyes and the eyes of others: they are “officers of the board,” their work indispensable, their decisions unappealable.

It is remarkable to note how Manzoni, so adept at creating images and metaphors, so spare and effective in the depiction of landscapes and states of mind (indeed, states of mind set within landscapes), is instead hesitant and clumsy when he comes to the human gesture. I can’t say whether this

observation is new, much less whether it's fair, but within the context of the same episode mentioned above, and on the same page, I find two "gestures" at the limit of the credible, or even of the possible. Renzo, surrounded by a mob of menacing passersby, shoves his way out and takes to his heels "at a gallop, with his hand in the air, squeezed into a tight fist, ready for anyone who might get in his way." Now, it's completely unnatural to run with a fist held high in the air. It's uneconomical, even for a short distance: you waste much more time than would be needed to clench and raise your fist a second time. I'm reminded of a lovely Tuscan joke. A mother, leaning over her balcony, says to her neighbor: "Signora, as long as your mouth is open, would you mind calling my Gianni, who's down in the courtyard, too?"

Immediately afterward, the fleeing Renzo decides to take refuge on one of the wagons belonging to the *monatti*: "He took aim, leaped and up he went, his right foot down on the ground, his left in the air, and his arms raised high." This is truly a badly executed snapshot, or really, a completely invented one. In none of the phases of a leap could there exist a statue-like position such as the one described; but perhaps this is much more evident to us, accustomed since childhood to seeing sports photography, than it would have been to Manzoni's contemporaries.

There are in the novel other unreal, mannered images like this one; they suggest an indirect mental process, as if the author, in the presence of a posture of the human body, had made an effort to construct an illustration of it in the style of the period, and thereafter, in the written text, had attempted to illustrate the illustration itself instead of an immediate visual fact. Renzo, in the throes of a rage that is unusual for him, but fully justified by Don Abbondio's reserved behavior, has kidnapped the cleric and confined him in his room, where he tries to learn the name of the powerful bully who is blocking his wedding, "while he was leaning over him, with his ear close to his mouth, his arms taut, and his fists squeezed tightly behind his back."

The rendering of the gesture is precise, but it is the gesture itself that is implausible, emphatic, excessive. It's reminiscent of the code of expression of silent film, which is so bizarre and comical to us today, and yet was universally accepted in its time; it was, in fact, a code, the result of a convention, according to which a gesture was appointed to replace a word that the screen was still incapable of conveying to the spectator, and it could therefore be quite different from our everyday gestures.

Renzo, on bad advice given him by Agnese, is going to see Professor Azzeccagarbugli, and, as a precautionary gift, he is taking him four capons, because you should never go empty-handed "to gentlemen like that." In the economy of the page, those capons loom large and are treated with a discreet and masterly hand. They had been fattened up for the wedding banquet: "Take these four capons—poor things—whose necks I was supposed to wring for the Sunday banquet, and bring them to him." That "poor things" bears the seal of literary and psychological genius: it is a compendium of that tangle of piety, tolerance, and cynicism that is so typically Italian. The words of commiseration are not expressed because the capons are about to have their necks wrung: this is their unquestioned fate as household victims. No: Agnese has performed a transference and has glimpsed in them a symbolic value, so that the capons are innocents who suffer for the sins of others. It is not them, but Lucia and Renzo, and Agnese herself, who are the "poor things."

It is no accident that just a few phrases further on they are explicitly humanized, in a comparison that has become justly famous and even passed into the realm of proverb: while Renzo carries them, he shakes them rudely, so that their dangling heads "in the meanwhile found a way to keep pecking at each other, as happens all too often with partners in misfortune." But here, too, in this book that is so exemplary for its clear-eyed pessimism, the human gesture is contrived: even in a time of famine, four capons weigh at least eleven kilos, and only a Hercules could have shaken them, lifted them, and tossed them from side to side with just one hand, as described here; and it would have taken a Herculean mime and actor, instead of a mild-mannered spinner of silk.

In the introduction to the Einaudi edition of *The Betrothed*, Alberto Moravia proposes seeing in it a "Catholic realism" that runs parallel to the "socialist realism" of the Soviets, and that is to say, a distinguished literary profession conscripted for purposes of propaganda, even if that profession, by dint of its very excellence, transcends and obliterates those purposes. The thesis baffles me, but there are certainly some descriptions of gestures that could confirm it.

In chapter 6, Fra Cristoforo grows indignant at Don Rodrigo's insolence: when urged to desist from his schemes against Lucia, Rodrigo asks the friar to persuade her to place herself under his protection. "'Your protection!' he exclaimed, taking two steps back and positioning himself

proudly on his right foot. With his right hand on his hip, he pointed his left index finger at Don Rodrigo and glared at him with two fiery eyes. ‘Your protection!’” Here we see not the friar but a baroque monument to the friar. Once again, we might venture to say that the author came up with this image via some transverse path: not passing directly from the depiction to the word but inserting between them a scene played by an actor—and, let’s admit it, a mediocre actor.

Interestingly enough, a few pages on, a very similar gesticulation is attributed to Renzo with quite a different purpose. In the presence of Lucia and Agnese, Renzo, swept away by fury, has threatened to take justice into his own hands, even at the risk of losing Lucia’s love; the two women try to calm him down. “For a while he stood there without moving, lost in thought, contemplating the pleading expression on Lucia’s face. All of a sudden he gave her an angry look, took a step back, pointed his arm and index finger at her, and cried, ‘That’s it! He’s asking for it. He has to die!’” This is probably the weakest line in the novel: one has the impression that the theatrical gesture has somehow infected the “soundtrack” and dragged it down.

But here Manzoni justifies himself: it might have seemed useful to Renzo, at that point, to strike a little fear into Lucia’s heart, because she had firmly rejected until that point the more direct solution of a forcible wedding; Renzo might perhaps have “used a little trickery to increase it [Lucia’s fear], so he could take advantage of it.” Manzoni seems willing to allow certain recitative solutions only “when two strong passions clash in a man’s heart”; but in that “clash” we can clearly see the author’s stoic Catholic aversion for the emotions that enslave his character, however beloved.

Clearly, reading under a magnifying glass is a pitiless exercise. Woe to the author who practices it on his own writing. If he does, he will feel that he is condemned to endlessly rewrite every page, and each of his books will become an open-ended work.

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1. During the plague of 1630, the *monatti* collected the corpses from houses, streets, and hospitals and buried them.

Thirty Hours Aboard the *Castoro 6*

The thirty hours that I spent aboard the *Castoro 6* in April 1980 were a rare gift for a landlubber like me, a man to whom the sea is just something you experience during summer vacations in Liguria, or the transfigured entity that emerges from the pages of Coleridge, Conrad, Verne, and Melville. In particular, the latter two writers came to mind frequently during my all too short stay aboard: to be specific, I thought of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and especially of the "guided tour" that Captain Nemo gives Professor Aronnax through the mechanical bowels of the *Nautilus*, and a phrase (first impressed on my memory more than thirty years ago) by Cesare Pavese, in his translator's foreword to *Moby-Dick*: "Melville . . . is a man whose acquaintance with life goes well beyond the 'long Vaticans and street-stalls,' and who knows that the greatest poems are those told by unlettered sailors on the forecastle."

The two quotes, or perhaps I should say the two literary hooks, should be taken at face value, like any quote. The sailors manning the *Castoro* are anything but illiterate: in fact, they're marine engineers, a species of human that didn't exist in Melville's day, but which Verne foresaw and predicted with that mysterious sixth sense of a technological visionary, allowing him to anticipate, fifty or a hundred years ahead of his time, the use of helicopters in wartime, television, rockets hurtling to the Moon (and specifically from Cape Canaveral!) with their human crew, and a submarine that was, all things considered, quite plausible.

I hope that Captain Pietro Costanzo will forgive me for likening him to the misanthropic, vindictive, Luciferian Captain Nemo; nor, for that matter, is the *Castoro* a submarine, though, like the *Nautilus*, it has a belly teeming

with wonders. Like submarines (and in fact it is technically designated a "semi-submersible"), and, like the whalers of both yesterday and today, it is a non-ship ship, a ship for which sailing is an ancillary task, taken for granted, because it is basically designed for other, clearly defined purposes. The devices it contains, in fact, stir wonder because of the extreme refinement with which they have been adapted to a specific and unusual objective: to lay along the sea floor, from Tunisia to Sicily, at depths never previously attained, a rigid steel pipe sheathed in cement, manipulating it as if it were as light and flexible as a rubber tube.

The history of technology shows us that, when it comes to dealing with new challenges, both scientific training and great precision are necessary but hardly enough. Two other traits are required, experience and inventive imagination, but in the profession of exploiting natural gas, quite a recent one, experience stretches back not over centuries or millennia; rather, it is compressed into decades, or even shorter spans. It is far shorter than a human lifetime, and fathers have nothing to teach their sons; it is impossible to rely upon the slow quasi-Darwinian evolution that has transformed firearms in the course of five centuries, or the automobile in the course of one. Experience demands trial and error, but here there is no time to make mistakes and correct them. What must prevail is imagination, which works by leaps, in short periods, through radical and rapid mutations. But no aspect of worthwhile experience should ever be wasted, even experience dating back to the earliest times; just as our body has inherited the genetic mechanism and the proteinaceous structure of single-cell organisms, and just as the automobile incorporated the design of the horse-drawn carriage, likewise on the *Castoro 6* it is possible to discern the presence of curious and illustrious innovative ideas that date back to the dawn of our civilization: stilt houses, the double hull of the catamaran. This, too, is something to think about: like the great ideas and the deep problems of philosophy (whether matter is infinitely divisible; whether the universe is finite or infinite, eternal or perishable; whether we possess free will or are slaves), so, too, the great inventions of technology are transformed but never die. The lever, the wheel, and the roof have survived over the millennia; no metal has yet fallen into disuse and, if anything, countless new uses have been found for the most ancient metals. It would be difficult to think of a single obsolete plastic material, while the oldest among them—the phenolic resins and polystyrene—remain just as important as ever.

Much the same thing can be said about the men aboard the *Castoro.* Just as the vessel is singular, unlike anything else on Earth, so is its crew entirely sui generis; or perhaps I should say its crews, because there are three squads of 150 men each, which rotate shifts, with two squads on board (for twenty-eight days, Sundays and holidays included, twelve hours on duty and twelve hours off every day) and one squad on dry land, with fourteen days off. It's a composite crew, including welders, mechanics, electricians, electrical engineers, crane operators, mechanical engineers, fitters, and roustabouts, as well as stewards and seamen. Nonetheless, the separation (the "interface") between sailors and industrial workers and, higher up the hierarchy, between ship's officers and engineers is anything but distinct, because the *Castoro*'s method of navigation is a strange one.

From a ship proper, what we expect is that it sail quickly, along a straight line, and only rarely reverse engines. The *Castoro,* on the other hand, sails forward only when it is on its way to a worksite; to tell the truth, it really makes little sense even to use the terms "fore" and "aft," "forward" and "reverse," when speaking of the *Castoro*: it has no real bow, though the end from which the pipe is lowered into the water is conventionally referred to as the bow, and therefore the vessel travels backward when laying pipe. It can move in all directions, because it has four orientable propellers, one at each corner of the lower hulls. It does not normally travel faster than six or seven knots; for this ship, stability and position are far more important than speed, because it is in fact an exceedingly sophisticated floating workshop. In other words: it must be capable of remaining stationary with respect to the sea floor and, more specifically, with respect to the pipe, with tolerances of no more than a few tenths of a meter; it mustn't oscillate with the swell; it must remain oblivious of wind and current; and when it moves in order to lay pipe it must do so at a precisely controlled speed. So that this will occur with the necessary reliability, a refined system of automation has been put in place, and it ensures that, every time a length of pipe is "launched," the twelve winches of the twelve anchors (formidable anchors, weighing between twenty and twenty-five metric tons each) and the four propeller-engine groups work in concert to make certain that the pipe slides into the water without being exposed to shocks greater than those allowed by the specifications and strength of the materials. The moment of the "launch"—that is, the advancing of the pipe, which takes place (if everything is working properly) about every ten minutes—is an unforgettable spectacle:

at a command given by the electronic brain that supervises the operation, the colossal winches all grind into motion simultaneously, winching in the stern cables and winching out the bow cables, and the forty-thousand-metric-ton bulk of the *Castoro 6* begins to move ponderously toward the coast of Sicily, by exactly twelve meters, that is, the length of a section of pipe. But the motion is so smooth and gentle that those on board don't even sense it. They only see the pipe slide forward, and believe that the pipe is moving while the ship stands still. This is a concrete illustration of Galilean relativity, and one is reminded of Dante's description of the Garisenda Tower, which seems to lean toward the ground when wind-driven clouds move behind it.

Automation is a young art, and naturally its practitioners are young men. But the older men, too, have often proved invaluable, and not only in the more traditional professions, working as mariners and stewards: their experience, attained in the course of the years in a wide variety of jobs, has shown itself to be extremely useful in dealing with unforeseen circumstances; indeed, it would be naïve to expect that in such a complex system, necessarily working in such unusual conditions, everything should function according to plan and without accidents. I was told about two episodes, two unforeseen circumstances, in fact, that prove the importance even now of experience and inventive imagination when it becomes necessary to solve a new problem quickly, and "with the resources on board."

The foundation of the *Castoro*'s work is welding. It is basically a welding shop some hundred and fifty meters (five hundred feet) long; distributed along the length of the pipe, as it gradually advances, are eight welding stations, and the joints of the sections of pipe are welded, in part automatically and in part by hand, according to extremely sophisticated welding techniques. Prior to the "launch," and once the welding is complete, a radiographic quality check must be performed: if the weld is flawless the pipe continues to advance; if any defects are found, they are quickly repaired. The X-ray generator is housed in a device that runs on a wheeled undercarriage inside the pipe, or perhaps it is more accurate to say: that remains stationary with respect to the ship, while the pipe moves around it; this device is held in place by a cable, and because of its elongated shape it has been dubbed "the piglet." At one point during pipe laying, for reasons that remain mysterious, the piglet suddenly disappeared:

the cable must have broken, the wheeled undercarriage rolled down the slope of the pipe, and the very costly piece of equipment was now three hundred meters away. This was very bad news: aside from the necessary cessation of pipe laying (I was informed that *one minute* of work on the *Castoro 6* costs 280,000 lire!), the piglet was almost entirely blocking the pipe, and it had to be removed as quickly as possible, at all costs.

The top technicians gathered, and various suggestions were put forth, the most beguiling of which was this: make a phone call to Tunisia, have the Tunisians insert a sphere made of rubber or some other pliable material into the pipe, and then pump compressed air into the pipe behind it, the way that a pneumatic postal system works. The ball would reach the piglet on the floor of the Mediterranean Sea and shoot it out. They were still talking this over when a crew member stepped forward; he was a former fisherman, and it struck him as obvious that the piglet ought to be fished out. His suggestion didn't seem all that straightforward to implement, but it was simple, quick, and wouldn't cost more than a few thousand lire; the man was accompanied to the welding shop, where he had a large hook made and ballasted it with a weight. He inserted hook and weight into the mouth of the pipe, and after a few minutes of patient and expert attempts, he hooked the piglet and hauled it out of the pipe.

The second episode was on a cyclopean scale. As mentioned above, the positioning and the forward motion of the *Castoro 6* rely upon a complex system of anchorage. The twelve gigantic anchors are deployed in a radial arrangement around the ship, and normally the ship "walks" on its twelve anchors: as it moves, dragging itself along the cables, it eventually reaches a point that is too close to the cables nearest Sicily, and, when it does, those anchors are raised and then dropped again farther forward, while the anchors on the Tunisian side are moved closer to the ship. The timing, angles, and distances of the repositioning of the anchors are all dictated by the on-board computer, and the operation is performed by tugboats that follow and circle the *Castoro* like dutiful butlers. The mooring cables (steel, three-inch diameter) are 2700 meters long. Ultimately, the *Castoro*, along with its anchors marked by the corresponding buoys, the tugboats, and the supply boats* that run back and forth from dry land, bringing the vessel pipes, fuel, and other provisions, covers many square kilometers of water.

On a night of intense bad weather, one of the buoys just mentioned disappeared: it thus became impossible to locate with any precision the

anchor that was beneath it, and hence to move it when its turn came. Apparently, the buoy had been damaged in some way: it was an unsinkable type of buoy, but its buoyancy had clearly been compromised, and the weight of the cable connecting it to the anchor held it somewhere in the middle of the water column, at a point unknown in terms of both location and depth. This, too, was a fishing problem, but a problem of blind fishing; also, the anchor down on the seabed weighed twenty-five metric tons, plus at least another ten metric tons of chain. The problem was solved the way a blind man would have solved it—that is, by groping. One of the tugboats rigged a large hook and fastened it under the heavy steel cable, still visible for a few meters, running from the *Castoro* all the way down to the anchor; then the tugboat started moving through terrifying seas, letting the hook slide along the cable, keeping the hook cable under pressure. The hook descended on a slant, following the catenary of the cable for almost two kilometers, until it reached the massive links of the chain connecting the cable to the anchor: it hooked into the first link, and the powerful gantry winch of the tugboat hoisted anchor and chain just high enough to bring the damaged buoy back to the surface.

Now, these are the “poems” to which Pavese alluded when speaking of Melville. They were told to me not on the forecastle (I don’t believe the *Castoro 6* even has one) but, rather, at a cafeteria table, over glasses of good wine; and not by unlettered sailors but by Captain Costanzo and the other men of the crew, some young, some less so, cybernetic engineers just entering the working world, machinists proud of every single bolt on their equipment, blue-collar seamen who have rediscovered the age-old virtues of competence put to the test and work well done in this colossal and uncommon undertaking. I hope none of them will be astonished or dismayed at the idea that their stories struck me as poetic. In fact, in their words, restrained, courteous, precise, and unemphatic, I heard an echo of the voice of another navigator and storyteller whose long-ago adventures have since become deathless poetry: a sailor who plied strange seas for ten years, and whose prime virtues, far greater than courage, which he certainly never lacked, were patience and resourceful ingenuity.

To Invent an Animal

To invent out of nothing an animal *that could exist* (by which I mean that it could exist physiologically, grow, feed itself, survive in the environment and withstand predators, reproduce) is virtually an impossible task. It is a design challenge that far outstrips our mental capacities, and even the capacities of our most powerful computers: we still know too little about existing living mechanisms to dare create ones of our own, even if only on paper. In other words, evolution has always shown itself to be much more intelligent than the brightest evolutionists. Every passing year confirms that the mechanisms of life are no exception to the laws of chemistry and physics, but the gap that separates us from ultimate comprehension of these vital phenomena also keeps widening. It's not that problems are never solved, questions never answered; it's that each problem solved only spawns dozens of new ones, and the process gives no sign of coming to an end.

Nonetheless, our experience of three thousand years of literature, painting, and sculpture shows us that even to invent an animal out of nothing on a whim, an animal whose possible existence is of no interest to us whatsoever, but whose image can in some way tickle our sensibility, is no easy task. All the animals invented by mythology, in every land and in every age, are potpourris, rhapsodies of traits and limbs of well-known animals. The most famous and most composite creation was the chimera, a hybrid of a goat, a serpent, and a lion, so fanciful that its name is equivalent today to a "vain dream"; but it has also been adopted by biologists to describe the monsters that they create, or dream of creating, in their laboratories by means of transplants among different animals.

Centaurs are fascinating creatures, bearers of manifold and archaic symbols, but Lucretius had already realized that they were physical impossibilities, and had attempted to prove it with a peculiar argument: at the age of three, a horse is in the prime of its strength and vigor, while man is a child, and "oft even then he gropes in sleep / After the milky nipples of the breasts, An infant still," only just weaned from mother's milk; how could two natures coexist that "*non florescunt pariter*" ("ne'er / At one same time they reach their flower of age"), and for that matter "never burn with one same lust of love"?

In more recent times, Philip José Farmer, in a fine science fiction novel, pointed out the respiratory problems of classical centaurs, and solved the difficulty by providing them with "in place of the human lungs a bellowslike organ which drove the air through a throatlike opening." Others have insisted on the problem of their nourishment, pointing out that a small human mouth would be inadequate to allow the passage of the quantity of forage needed to feed the equine part.

In other words, we might think that the human imagination, even when not confronted with issues of verisimilitude and biological feasibility, still hesitates to strike out in new directions, and prefers to reassemble familiar constituent elements. If we reread the wonderful *Book of Imaginary Beings*, by Borges, we fail to find a single animal that is truly original in terms of design; there isn't one that comes even close to the incredibly innovative solutions that can be found in certain parasites, such as the tick, the flea, and the tapeworm.

In a middle school not far from Turin, an experiment was attempted: the children were asked to describe an invented animal, and the results confirmed this limit to our imagination. They basically described mythological animals, that is, composites: conglomerations of different limbs, such as Pegasus and the Minotaur, or excursions into the colossal and the supernumerary reminiscent of the Leviathan from the book of Job, Rabelais's giants, both human and beastly, hundred-eyed Argus, eight-armed Shiva, three-headed Cerberus, and the ENI oil company symbol, the six-legged dog. But within those limitations audacious, cheerful, and alarming inspirations bloomed.

The *Executioner* lives underground because it is afraid of the horrible animals described by the other children, and it sleeps twenty-two hours out of every twenty-four. It lives on nothing but human flesh and fruit trees, and when it runs it can reach a speed of 200 kilometers per hour. The female is extremely fertile: “She has babies eight or nine times a month, and she always gives birth to fifty or sixty little executioners,” but she gives birth in her underground den for the safety reasons mentioned above.

The *Lymphodinosaur* also lives in the cellar, in a box filled with paper and straw. The author doesn’t state its dimensions, which must not be particularly large, but her description of an encounter with the animal stirs a subtle shiver of horror: the little girl went down into the cellar a number of times to fetch wine, and she heard strange noises, but upstairs she said nothing, “as usual.” And so she’s alone, in the darkness and filth of the cellar, a place of ancestral fears, an urban and modern version of the Underworld; and, behold, the beast emerges into the open, and the little girl screams, “because of how ugly it was.” The conclusion hints at a genuine sense of horror: “I don’t ever want to see that animal again.”

The *Gigantic-Neck* is a composite creature, as were, for that matter, the two preceding creatures (“It has the head of a swordfish . . . and it’s as heavy as a bulldozer dog”), but it differs from them in one surprising feature: “Woodcutters use it to saw firewood.” Even though this is not clearly stated, it must be the product of a technological contamination, because in fact “it has six parts of the neck” (visible in the cursory but precise sketch provided by the author: these are basically six vertebrae) “which break every now and then and so when it goes to the mechanic it spends a lot of money and now it’s poor.”

Then, there’s an animal with an unpronounceable eighteen-syllable name that “has the distinctive characteristic of using its tail to eat, so that the head can ward off danger.” An even more rigorous quest for rationality is shown by the author of the *Leptorontibus,* which is described with uncommon concern for verisimilitude. It has three eyes, stands 1.80 meters, and “is afraid of everyone.” It has no bones, “and stands erect, with a complicated nervous system.” In this eccentric zoo, it is perhaps the only “economical” species, whose author has done more than merely arouse wonder or horror. “It has just one lung and breathes with a hole that it has in line with its stomach,” but this is no ordinary stomach; as soon as the

animal “has finished chewing, it swallows its food, which doesn’t slide down a tube but falls directly into a sort of sack, and that would be its stomach.” The author is also concerned with the embarrassing issue of excretion: “To expel everything it doesn’t need, it uses a hole on the bottom of each foot (it has ten feet in all).” Who, at least once in his life, has not envied the modesty and discretion of the *Leptorontibus*?

The *Mostrumgaricos,* on the other hand, is completely overblown. It devours buffalos and elephants: it swoops down to attack them, hurtling headfirst from the trees and “sinking its sharp teeth into the brain of its prey”; it can also breathe underwater; it weighs four thousand tons; the female gives birth to sixty pups every month; its bones are tougher than steel, and “when it falls off a mountain even five thousand meters high, it doesn’t get hurt at all”; it has twelve hearts and sixty ribs, and we might fear it as an invincible and immortal being, except that “it’s afraid of just one sickness, glomatitis, which kills it.” In this final detail, we see the survival of an archetype: there is no ill without a remedy, there is no invulnerability without an Achilles’ heel.

Another animal is described, rather summarily, to tell the truth; it’s not named, but it is quite intelligent and strong. “When it looks and looks again and finds nothing it is capable of rending even a small and innocent animal limb from limb. . . . It has a lovely pelt and ladies buy its fur.” Its death is pervaded by a tragic and solemn dignity: “It can live for a certain number of years and when it knows that it will die that day it starts eating as much as it can, lest it forget the meals it once enjoyed.”

Cocò is surreal, mild, and modest (it has only three eyes and is only twenty centimeters tall). I envy the fun its author must have had describing it. “It eats stones, branches, blossoms, and cats”; it comes from China, but “lives at No. 2 Via Archimede,” and plays with the neighborhood children; on the other hand, “it often lives everywhere in the country, because it changes address every day. . . . Now it’s forty years old and smokes a pipe every five minutes,” but a tragic death lies in wait for it, too: in fact, *Cocò* “lives to the age of a hundred and then dies running, which is a tradition among these odd animals,” and at this point I cannot resist the temptation to requote Tennyson, translated and cited by Borges, that great painter of strange deaths. The subject is the Kraken, another invented animal, a gigantic squid a mile and a half in length: “Below the thunders of the upper deep; . . . His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep the Kraken sleepeth. . . .

There hath he lain for ages and will lie / Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep, / Until the latter fire shall heat the deep; / Then once by man and angels to be seen, / In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die" (Borges, *Book of Imaginary Beings*).

This array of creatures would be incomplete if we overlooked the *Cybercus*. Its description starts out in dull tones. It has the usual six legs, though they are as "slender as blades of grass," the usual square ears, one eye triangular and red, the other eye square and black, but then comes a shock: "It has a two-meter-long tail made of vanilla-cream filling." From this point, the text takes off, following the inspiration to its extreme logical consequences. The *Cybercus* "lives in a chilly forest, otherwise, if it stayed out in the sun, it would melt"; "it's feeble and if it's hit by an arrow, it springs leaks like anything, plus there's a legend . . . a herd of these animals ventured out into broad daylight to attack men once, but as soon as they came out they melted." With a fine conscious comic touch, the author tells us that the *Cybercus* lives on mice and chocolate, and closes with a sword thrust: "This animal runs very slowly."

The Squirrel

Some years back, I happened to introduce a gentleman by the name of Perrone to two rather elderly aunts of mine, who lived in a small provincial town. My aunts instantly translated his surname into Prùn, and for the duration of the conversation they continued to address him, in dialect, as Munssü Prùn; the gentleman in question, as it happens, seemed to accept the thing as natural.

Surnames that originate in dialect are common everywhere, and the key to the meaning of many of them has been lost. Still, in Piedmont, such surnames as Bergesio, Cravetto, Masoero, Schina, Sùita, and Pentenero are promptly recognized as local, and when dialect is spoken they are restored to their native form (*Bergé* = shepherd, *Cravèt* = kid goat, *Masué* = tenant farmer, *Schin-a* = spine, *Süita* = drought, *Pentné* = comb maker), indicative of an unconscious, or perhaps perfectly conscious, distaste for the clumsily Italianized forms of the names. To offer one extreme case, the name Sùita, according to someone who bears that name, even now rings false and precious if pronounced with a round, Italian *u* sound.

The case I just described made an impression on me, because the phonetic distance between Perrone and Prùn is considerable, and as a city dweller I had no idea that *prùn* was the word for squirrel. To tell the truth, in various places around Piedmont the same word is used also for guinea pigs and even rabbits, which may explain why surnames derived from this word are so widespread and numerous: Prone, Prono, Pron, Prunotto, Pronello, and Prunetti, aside from the previously mentioned Perrone. According to Emidio De Felice's *Dizionario dei cognomi italiani*, Perrone

is just one of many names derived from Pietro (Peter), but I prefer to rely on the “local” ear of my two aunts.

In some linguists’ opinion—rejected, however, by certain others (both parties of linguists are German: it is incredible to see how diligently nineteenth-century German philologists delved into the roots of Italian, its various dialects, and even its most recondite spoken forms)—*prùn* can be traced back directly to the Latin *pronus*, which has all the meanings of the corresponding Italian word (*prono*, or English “prone”), as well as a few more. The allusion is unmistakable: a squirrel’s back is never level. When the creature is standing on all fours, it is “prone” (inclined) toward the ground, because its forepaws are shorter than its hind paws, and when it rises upright on its haunches, in an almost human pose, clutching in its paws the nut that it is gnawing, it necessarily leans forward, because its body has to serve as a counterweight to its justly celebrated tail. This tail appears, in a more or less recognizable form, in the names the squirrel bears in nearly all European languages, beginning with ancient Greek. Its Greek name is *skìouros*, a compound of two words that mean “shadow” and “tail”: in fact, it was a common belief that on hot days a squirrel would take shelter from the sun in the shade of its tail, and I’d be grateful if Mario Rigoni Stern,[1] who has long enjoyed a relationship of neighborliness and trust with squirrels (feelings that are justly mutual), would tell me whether that is a charming legend or a fact.

From *skìouros*, the scientific name *Sciurus* was derived, but speakers of vulgar Latin, who abhorred the combination *iu* (even if, abominable to say, they relished the flesh of the little beast, which weighs no more than three or four hundred grams), transformed the name into *scurius*. From here to the Italian *scoiattolo* is a short step: we get there by means of a double diminutive, and there are really few animals more deserving of a diminutive: the squirrel is a living diminutive. Again, *scurius* plus a diminutive gives us both the English “squirrel” and the French *écureuil*, and it is also apparently the source of the German word, *Eichhorn*, more commonly found as *Eichhörnchen*—once again a diminutive. *Eiche* is German for “oak,” and *Horn* means “horn”; now, oaks have very little to do with squirrels (squirrels may nest in oak trees, but it’s just one variety among many, and they may eat acorns, but they also eat countless other seeds and fruits), while the horn has absolutely nothing to do with it. This is

a false etymology, the product of a folk effort to make sense of a word of foreign origin that (at first glance) seems inexplicable.

I've encountered few squirrels in my life, nor can I hope to meet many more. I've seen them occasionally in the forest, leaping from branch to branch, using their tails as rudders or stabilizers; or others, less timid and more frankly mercenary, in the parks of Geneva and Zurich, who venture close enough to take food from your hand and even seem to express thanks. And I've seen others still in captivity, but they seemed no less lively and cheerful than their fellow squirrels of the forest. There were a dozen of them, enclosed in a large cage: inside the cage was a smaller squirrel cage, or treadmill, cylindrical, open on one side, and revolving freely on a horizontal axis.

One of the little creatures had devised a game: he'd venture into the treadmill and, by running rapidly, start it revolving rapidly; then he'd come to a sudden halt, but the treadmill, which weighed more than he did, would keep turning, spinning him around through several revolutions. At that point, he'd release his grip and allow himself to be shot upward and at an angle out the open side of the wheel, like a stone hurled from a slingshot. His trajectory was never random; he'd surveyed his terrain, and he landed where he chose, for instance, on a small swing about a meter and a half away, and there he'd sit swaying back and forth, visibly contented.

I ran into another prisoner squirrel many years ago, in a biochemistry lab. This one, too, was in a "squirrel cage" treadmill, but this time it was closed on both sides, and was kept slowly turning by a small electric motor: the squirrel was forced to walk endlessly on the treadmill to keep from being dragged. In that laboratory, scientists were performing experiments on sleep; I would imagine that they periodically took blood samples from the little creature, to identify the toxins produced by extended insomnia.

The squirrel was exhausted: it trudged along that endless trail, and it reminded me of galley slaves, and those other forced laborers in China who were obliged to walk for days and days in similar treadwheels to pump water into irrigation canals. There was no one else in the laboratory; I switched off the motor, the treadmill came to a stop, and the squirrel fell asleep on the spot. Perhaps it is my fault that we still know so little about sleep and insomnia.

1. The Italian writer Mario Rigoni Stern (1921–2008) was a friend of Levi.

The Book of Odd Data

Much as Francesco Berni dared to write verse in praise of chamber pots and the plague, I would similarly venture to say that inflation has brought at least one benefit, that of clarifying for us all the exact value of a million: a sum that is now within reach of nearly everyone's budget, something that was hardly the case in Signor Bonaventura's day.[1] In fact, our ability to envision things is limited, and those who wish or need to convey to us how big very big things really are, or how small very small things are, invariably stumble over our age-old deafness to these things, as well as the inadequacy of everyday language. Scientific popularizers in such fields as astronomy and nuclear physics have long known about this challenge, and they have tried their best to compensate for the inadequacy by availing themselves of paradox and proportion: if the sun were to shrink to the size of an apple . . . if a billion years were compressed to the length of a single day. . . .

The educational value of these contrivances can vary within quite wide margins, and depends above all on their elegance: if that fails, the reader is left with the same sense of frustration he felt when reading the bare facts. Defying these dangers, an elderly Dutch scientist has set off with youthful audacity down the path of paradox and astonishing equivalencies—beyond the bounds of the absurd—driven by the urge to show us just how odd the universe around us is, even in the aspects whose oddness is disguised by routine.

In a book published many years ago, but still useful, R. Houwink (one of the world's leading experts in the field of polymers and rubber) indulged in the sheer fun of gathering a few hundred curiosities from the realms of astronomy, particle physics, biology, and economics; it is called *The Odd*

Book of Data (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1965), and it admonishes us from the introduction onward to focus on orders of magnitude: nanoseconds, which these days we toss off without a second thought when talking about computers, are extremely short spans of time; there are as many nanoseconds in a second as there are seconds in thirty years.

Astronomy is the domain of "astronomical numbers," and we all know, at least in qualitative terms, that there are lots of stars, but the image that Houwink provides is far more eloquent, as well as being easier to remember: in our galaxy alone, any human being who wishes to "get away from it all" would have the choice of thirty solar systems. To see a falling star strikes us as a fairly unusual spectacle, and we are astonished to learn that most of these "stars" are actually metallic or rocky particles smaller than a grain of millet; nonetheless, some 15,000 tons reach the Earth's surface every day. If this invisible "dry rain," which has probably been going on for as long as our planet has existed, were not constantly washed away by rain showers, it would have by now produced a layer of cosmic dust twenty meters deep.

We are as incapable of conceiving of the enormous size of stars as we are the infinitesimal smallness of particles; it is therefore helpful to learn that a teaspoonful of water contains as many molecules as the Atlantic Ocean contains teaspoonsful of water. Electrons orbit the atomic nucleus at speeds a hundred times as great as that of any missile launched by man, but when a one-ampere current flows through a conductor with a cross-sectional area of a square millimeter, the speed of the electrons' forward motion is pathetic: twenty-five centimeters an hour, much slower than a line at a post office window. What is the diameter of these electrons? It is virtually pointless to reel off figures to a layman: far more picturesque to say that if Noah, in 3000 BC, had started stringing electrons on a thread at a rate of one a second for eight hours a day, today the chain would be two-tenths of a millimeter long.

It is well-known that plants grow by extracting the carbon they need not from the earth but from the air, and specifically by using the trace amounts of carbon dioxide found in the atmosphere. But it is stunning to learn that the carbon thus fixed every year, which is then the only carbon available in nutritional form for human beings and animals, is forty times as plentiful as the amount that over the same period of time is extracted from the world's coal mines.

That the future of mankind ultimately depends on the way (rational, irrational, or plain crazy) that we cultivate our fields and manage our livestock can be seen from several illuminating data. For every human being there exist five hectares of dry land, but of those five hectares one hectare is too cold for cultivation, one too mountainous, one too barren, and one too arid; all that's left is a single hectare per person, but at present only half this area is being exploited. A single American grain farmer produces an average of 100 kilograms of wheat per hour (though we are not told with what investments). To obtain this same result takes seventeen Chilean farmers, twenty-four Pakistani farmers, and fifty Japanese farmers; we are given no comparable data for Italy and the other European nations. Every year, a Danish cow will produce ten times the animal's live weight in milk; an Indian cow will produce only twice its body weight but, because it is very lean, in absolute terms it gives only a tenth of the yield produced by the Danish cow.

It seems likely that certain numeric correlations are more than mere coincidence: it is calculated that the weight of bacteria in a hectare of topsoil of a fertile meadow is equivalent to the weight of the cattle that can be adequately supported on it. One cubic centimeter of this topsoil contains a population of microorganisms comparable to the human population of the planet: that same human population, if sufficiently compacted, could be fit into Lake Windermere, in England (roughly equivalent to Italy's Lake Orta).

To the vexation of macrobiotics everywhere, and to the encouragement of the starving, we learn that seventeen volunteers, in the United States, lived for many months only on synthetically produced foods, which is to say, food produced by chemical processes, excluding animal or plant products entirely; at the conclusion of the experiment, all the subjects were found to be in excellent health. Therefore, one synthetic-food factory of moderate size could adequately feed the population of a large city; still, we'd like to know the results of a longer experiment, because the diseases caused by malnutrition manifest themselves only slowly.

Seen through Houwink's eyes, our bodies take on surreal traits, either ethereal or earthly. A woman who supports her weight on one stiletto-heeled shoe exerts a pressure on the ground similar to that acting on the walls of an ordinary high-pressure steam boiler; the flow of air passing through our nose in the course of normal inhalation approximates wind

force 2 of the Beaufort scale; but the levels of energy at play in the "auxiliary services" (that is, in our sensory and communication organs) are incredibly low. The power output of the sound produced by a man who talks for three hours a day throughout an average life span is roughly sufficient to heat a cup of tea, while the energy that could be extracted from a pea falling from a height of three centimeters, if converted entirely into light, would be enough to actuate the optic nerve of every human being who has ever lived.

Our brain is the most complex object that exists in the universe, but it requires no more energy to operate than is needed for a 100-watt lightbulb. We can add to this statement the observation that, just as in the case of the lightbulb, most of that energy dissipates in the form of heat; the share that is actually used for mental operations is minimal, and as far as I know it has not been measured as of this writing.

Each of the data taken from the field of economics is a tiny electroshock. A dollar invested at 4 percent compound interest in the year of Christ's nativity would now have the value of a hundred thousand globes of solid gold, each the size of the Earth. As for that, it's no longer correct to refer to gold as the most precious substance par excellence: plutonium is worth thirty times as much as gold, and the neutron is worth a million times as much. Nonetheless, if I may put in my own personal advice, I'd venture to discourage the reader from stockpiling either of these two materials; plutonium is radioactive and exceedingly toxic, while neutrons would be a terrible investment, because they have a half-life of about sixteen minutes. That is to say, if you purchased a kilogram of neutrons, there would be only 500 grams a quarter of an hour later, 250 grams after half an hour, 125 grams after forty-five minutes, and so on.

Our consumer civilization is actually a civilization of waste. An office clerk currently "produces" an average of two kilos of wastepaper a day, which contain more calories than are required to nourish him and his wife. In the industrialized nations, trucks that are sent to the junkyard may have lost no more than 0.1 percent of their original weight. It costs roughly the same, in terms respectively of ink and fuel, to write for a kilometer with a ballpoint pen and to drive for a kilometer in a car, not including the salaries of author and driver.

The book provides us with about two hundred such pieces of information. They range from the elegant to the frivolous and the grotesque,

but not one of them is useless: they're all meant to show us something about the world we live in, that is, to give us a clearer idea of it; but in many cases "showing" actually means making it evident to us that we are unable to envision certain objects and phenomena at all (the same is true of God, according to certain religions). Our imagination is the same size as we are, and we have no way of stretching it any further. Classical physics, too, is made to our measure; in order to descend into the heart of an atom, or climb into intergalactic space, we need another kind of physics, where intuition is no longer any help, and is indeed a hindrance. For laymen like us, the only instrument that will allow us to catch a glimpse of what lies outside our own boundaries are these "odd data." They aren't science, but they're an encouragement to learn it.

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1. Signor Bonaventura is the title character of a famous Italian comic strip that began in 1917; every misadventure leads to his winning a million lire.

The Leap of the Flea

On display in the Kremlin Museum is the majestic wire cage of a crinoline that belonged to some lady-in-waiting—I've forgotten which—of the tsar's court. Fastened to the belt, or, perhaps I should say, to the blood-chilling metal hoop that served as a belt, are two small porcelain tubes, the same shape and size as a chemist's test tube; the museum label tells us that these were flea traps. A teaspoonful of honey was poured into the bottom; the fleas, in their wanderings from one piece of cloth to another, would be attracted by the aroma of honey, enter the tube, slide down the smooth walls, and fall to the bottom, where they would be stuck.

This is just a chapter in the novel that describes the endless struggle between two forms of cunning: the conscious, short-term cunning of man, who must defend himself against parasites and invents his stratagems in the course of a generation or two, and the evolutionary cunning of parasites, which requires millions of years but attains results that leave us astounded.

Among animals, it is the parasites that we should especially admire for the originality of the inventions inscribed in their anatomy, their physiology, and their habits. We do not admire them, however, because they are distasteful or harmful; still, once we get over that preconception a realm opens out before our eyes in which, truly, reality surpasses imagination. Just think of intestinal worms: they feed, at our expense, on a food so perfect that, unique in all creation, along with the angels perhaps, they possess no anus. Or think of rabbit fleas, whose ovaries, by dint of a complicated interplay of hormonal messages, work in synchrony with the ovaries of their host: thus both the female rabbit and her guest give birth simultaneously, so that each little bunny is issued at birth its own ration of

tiny larvae, and will emerge from the nest already provided with fleas its age.

These are necessary forms of cunning. We must keep in mind that the profession of a parasite (“he who eats beside you”) is not an easy one, in either the animal world or the human world. A good parasite must exploit a host that is bigger, stronger, and faster (or, in the human version, richer and more powerful), but it is indispensable that it make its host suffer as little as possible, at the risk of being expelled; and it must take care not to make the host die (in human terms: go bankrupt), because it would be ruined along with the host. Let us consider mosquitoes and vampire bats, which, though different from each other, both invented anesthesia, and utilize it to keep from troubling the sleep of their host during their modest withdrawals of blood. A human analogue to this anesthesia could be found in the adulation of the powerful dispenser of favors, but the parallel between human and animal parasites cannot be pushed much further; in our complex society, the freeloading dining companion has broadly made way for parasitic social classes and incomes, against which it is much harder to defend ourselves.

One essential difference remains in place between human and animal parasites. The old-school human parasite had to be intelligent, because he lacked the appropriate instincts: for him, parasitism was a choice, and he was obliged to invent his own artifices. The animal parasite, as far as we know, is all instinct, totally programmed, and its brain is minimal or entirely lacking. There is an economic consideration in this; the hunt for an enormous, rapid host has such an unpredictable outcome that the species has preferred to invest its creativity not in brains, not in the digestive apparatus, not in the sensory organs but, instead, in a prodigious reproductive apparatus: the tapeworm, devoid of brain, digestive tract, and locomotor apparatus, produces in the course of its adult life many millions of eggs. This enormous compensatory fecundity serves to inform us that a tapeworm’s “infant mortality” is extremely high, and that a larva’s likelihood of enjoying a career is on the order of magnitude of one in a million.

Human fleas, which is where we began, have fallen out of fashion, and no one misses them, but in fact in the past few years we have witnessed a mysterious revival of lice, and so we should be on the alert. It is important to remember that the flea, aside from being a vehicle of epidemics, was, just a few decades ago, part of European civilization and folklore, mixed with

all social classes (as is shown by the crinoline described above), and was often mentioned by men of letters. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who had a boundless faith in providence, wrote that fleas are dark, and are attracted by light cloth, in order to ensure that humans can catch them: “If these little black, light, nocturnal animals didn’t have an instinct for white, it would be impossible for us to descry them and catch them.” Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli, in an 1835 sonnet, paints an oddly sensual miniature of the *purciaròla* (flea-infested girl), who finds no delight greater than that of getting rid of her fleas:

> Everyone has his preferred tastes.
> Mine is for fleas, you see—I like
> to crush them and hear the crackling sound.

In Balzac’s *Droll Stories*, the nuns of the merry Abbey of Poissy explain to an innocent novice what she must do to tell whether a flea she has caught is male, female, or virgin, but they add that it is an exceedingly rare thing to find a virgin flea, “since these beasts have no morals, are all wild hussies, and yield to the first seducer who comes.”

In the popular mind, the flea, much like the fly, for that matter, has family ties to the devil. In *Faust*, in Auerbach’s Cellar, Mephistopheles is roundly applauded when he sings a song about a king who had a large-sized flea, cherished it like a son (not like a daughter: *pulce*, feminine in Italian, is *Floh,* and masculine, in German), and had a fine suit made for it out of silk and velvet.

Truth be told, the appearance that a flea presents under a microscope is so peculiar as to verge on the diabolical, and equally diabolical is its ability to avoid capture with a leap so rapid that it swiftly eludes sight and seems to vanish. It was precisely this leap that formed the subject of many decades of study by an amateur scientist rich in patience and talent, Dame Miriam Rothschild. It should come as no surprise that a naturalist would ignore our repugnance and our taboos; in fact, these studies have produced such surprising findings that even laymen deserve to know about them.

The leap of a flea is commensurate with need: the leap of a mole flea, or of any flea that lives on a permanently den-dwelling animal, is feeble or even nonexistent, because getting onto its slow or sedentary host presents no problems. On the other hand, when the host is fast-moving and lively,

like a cat, a deer, or a human being, it is crucial that the insect, as soon as it has completed its metamorphosis, be successful in the fundamental undertaking of its life, that is, the leap that will take it from the ground to its destination. The human flea has made measured leaps of thirty centimeters in height, which is to say, at least a hundred times the length of the flea itself.

Now, the power required for such a leap cannot be supplied by any muscle, much less an insect's muscle: insects are practically inert at low temperatures, and the flea must in fact make a "cold" leap, because it often completes its metamorphosis in unheated quarters, such as the floors of certain human dwellings, and as soon as it emerges from its larval stage it has a need for blood.

Given the problem, evolution has through millions of years of trial and error come up with an elegant solution. The powerful musculature that enabled the flight of the flea's winged ancestors has been converted, and linked to a system of elastic storage of mechanical energy: basically, a tension, trigger, and release mechanism similar to that of the crossbows of olden days, or the spring-loaded spearguns used now by scuba divers.

The flea's elastically deformable organ, analogous to the speargun's spring and the crossbow's bow, is made of a protein that is virtually unique in the animal kingdom, similar to rubber but with greatly superior performance. Thus, the energy needed for the prodigious and instantaneous leap is accumulated during a slower preparatory phase: between one leap and the next, the flea must "gather its strength," store up energy in its springs, but even for this pause it requires only a few tenths of a second. This is the secret that allows the insect to leap even in chilly surroundings, and to leap so high and so far.

Dame Rothschild and her colleagues plumbed and reconstructed these subtle phenomena by fabricating ingenious tools, for example high-speed cameras operated by the flea's own leap. There may be readers who wonder what the purpose of such research might be: a religious soul might reply that the harmony of creation is mirrored even in a flea; a secular spirit would prefer to point out that the question is beside the point, and that a world in which we studied only useful things would be grimmer, poorer, and perhaps even more violent than the world in which it is our lot to live. In essence, the second answer is not very different from the first.

To Translate and Be Translated

According to Genesis, the first humans had only one language: this made them so ambitious and so dexterous that they set about building a tower that reached as high as the sky. God was offended at their audacity, and He punished them in a subtle manner: not with a thunderbolt but by confounding their speech, which made it impossible for them to continue their blasphemous work. This episode has parallels, surely no accident, with the story of original sin, a story that comes shortly before this one in the Bible and which was punished with expulsion from Paradise; we can conclude that linguistic differences were perceived from the earliest times as a curse.

And a curse they have remained, as anyone knows who has been forced to live, or, even worse, forced to work, in a country where he doesn't speak the language, or anyone who has been obliged to hammer a foreign language into his head as an adult, when the mysterious material in which memories are engraved becomes more refractory. Further, for many people, at a more or less conscious level, anyone who speaks another language is a foreigner by definition, an outsider, a "stranger," and different from me; and someone different is a potential enemy or, at least, a barbarian—that is to say, etymologically speaking, a stutterer, someone who cannot speak, a quasi-non-human. Thus, linguistic friction tends to become racial and political friction, yet another curse that afflicts us.

It ought to follow that those who practice the trade of translator or interpreter should be honored, inasmuch as they strive to limit the damage done by the curse of Babel; such, however, is generally not the case, because it's hard to translate, and so the product of the translator's efforts is

often poor in quality. This gives rise to a vicious cycle: the translator is paid poorly, and someone who could be or become a good translator looks for some more remunerative line of work.

To translate is a difficult undertaking, because the barriers between languages are higher than is commonly thought. Dictionaries, especially pocket dictionaries intended for use by tourists, can be useful for one's basic needs, but they constitute a treacherous source of illusions; the same can be said of those multilingual electronic translators that have come on the market in recent years. The correspondence that both the former and the latter certify between a word in the source language and the corresponding word in the target language is almost never truthful. The respective areas of meaning may partly overlap, but it is a rare thing for them to coincide entirely, even between languages that are structurally close and historically related.

Italian's *invidia* has a more specialized meaning than the French *envie*, which can also mean desire, and than the Latin *invidia*, which also incorporates hatred and aversion, as is attested by the Italian adjective *inviso* (abhorrent). It is likely that this family of words originally referred solely to the idea of "looking poorly upon," both in the sense of causing harm by looking, that is, casting an evil eye, and in the sense of feeling uneasy when looking at a person who is hateful to us, and of whom we say (but only in Italian) that *non possiamo vederla* (literally, "we can't see him," meaning "we can't stand him"); but thereafter, in every language, the word drifted in different directions.

It does not appear that there are some languages with broad areas of meaning and other languages with narrow ones: the phenomenon is capricious. The area of the Italian verb *fregare* includes at least seven meanings, while that of the English verb "to get" is practically endless. *Stuhl* means "chair" in German, but, through a chain of metaphors that can be pretty easily reconstructed, it has also come to mean "excrement." It seems that Italian alone has bothered to distinguish between birds' *piume* (small downy feathers) and *penne* (feathers proper); French, English, and German overlook the distinction entirely, and the German word *Feder* actually describes four distinct objects, the *piuma*, a bird's feather, a pen for writing, and a spring of any kind.

Another trap for the translator is the so-called false friend. For remote historical reasons (which, case by case, would certainly be intriguing to

track down), or sometimes owing to a single misunderstanding, terms in one language may appear in another language where they acquire a meaning that is no longer similar or contiguous—as in the instance mentioned above—but completely different. In German, *Stipendium* is a scholarship (*stipendio* is "salary" in Italian), *Statist* is an extra in a play (*statista* is "statesman" in Italian), *Kantine* is a store or shop (*cantina* is "cellar" in Italian), *Kapelle* is an orchestra (*cappella* is "chapel" in Italian), *Konkurs* is bankruptcy (*concorso* is a contest or competition in Italian), *Konzept* is a rough draft (*concetto* in Italian is "concept"), and *Konfetti* is confetti (but *confetti* in Italian are sugarcoated almonds).

French *macarons* are not, as they sound to the Italian ear, "*maccheroni*" (macaroni) but correspond, rather, to the Italian *amaretti* (in English, "macaroons"). In English, "sensible," "delusion," "ejaculation," "apology," "compass" by no means signify what an Italian might assume at first sight; that is, sensitive (*sensibile*), disappointment (*delusione*), discharge of sperm (the only meaning of *eiaculazione*), apologia (*apologia*), drawing compass (*compasso*). "Second mate" is *terzo ufficiale* (literally, "third officer") in Italian. An "engineer" is not an engineer in the Italian sense but anyone who works with motors or engines: it is said that this "false friend" proved costly, not only to a number of translators but also to a young noblewoman of southern Italy, who in the years just after the last war found herself married to an American railroad engineer, on the strength of an avowal made in perfectly good faith but sorely misunderstood.

It is not my good fortune to speak Romanian, a language passionately beloved of scholars of linguistics, but it must be crawling with false friends, constituting a veritable minefield for translators, if it's true that *friptură* is a roast (in Italian "*frittura*" is fried fish), that *suflet* is the soul or spirit (in Italian, it looks very much like *soufflé*), that *dezmierdà* means to caress (to an Italian, the word looks scatological), and that *indispensabili* means underwear ("indispensable" in Italian). Each of the terms listed is a trap laid for an unwary or inexpert Italian translator, and it is amusing to consider that the trap is set in both directions: a German is in danger of taking an Italian statesman for an extra.

Another trap set for the translator consists of idiomatic phrases, which are present in all languages but specific to each. Some of these are easy to decipher, or are so bizarre that they would put even a novice translator on the alert: I don't believe that anyone would blithely write in Italian that in

Great Britain “cats and dogs are raining down,” but there are other cases in which the figure of speech sounds far more innocent as it mingles with the general narrative, at the risk of being translated word for word; one such case occurred in the translation of a novel into Italian, where we read that a well-known benefactor has a literal skeleton in his closet, which may seem possible but certainly not usual.

A writer who does not wish to put his translators into an awkward situation should abstain from the use of idiomatic phrases, but that’s easier said than done, because all of us, both in speech and in writing, employ such phrases without even realizing it. Nothing could seem more natural to an Italian than to say “*siamo a posto*,” “*fare fiasco*,” “*farsi vivo*,” “*prendere un granchio*,” the aforementioned “*non posso vederlo*,” and hundreds of other similar expressions (respectively, “we are in place,” meaning “all is well”; “do a wine bottle,” meaning “fail”; “make oneself alive,” meaning “not to be a stranger” or “get in touch”; “catch a crab,” meaning “to make a blunder”; “I can’t see him,” meaning, as noted above, “I can’t stand him”). Nonetheless, these are all meaningless for a foreign reader,[1] and not all of them are explained in a bilingual dictionary. Even the Italian question “*Quanti anni hai?*” is an idiomatic phrase, literally, “How many years do you have?” An English speaker or a German speaker would say something equivalent to the Italian “*Quanto vecchio sei?*”—literally, “How elderly are you?”—which sounds ridiculous to us, especially if the question is directed to a child.

Other difficulties arise from the use of local terms, common in all languages. Any Italian knows what Juventus is (a championship soccer team), and any Italian who reads newspapers understands what is being alluded to when someone writes “Quirinale,” “Farnesina,” “Piazza del Gesù,” and “Via delle Botteghe Oscure” (respectively, the Quirinal Palace, residence of the president of the Italian Republic; the Farnesina Palace, the official seat of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Piazza del Gesù, the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party; and Via delle Botteghe Oscure, the headquarters of the Italian Communist Party), but if a translator working from an Italian text has not immersed himself at great length in Italian affairs he will surely be baffled, and no dictionary will come to his assistance. What will help him, if he possesses it, is a linguistic sensibility, which is a translator’s most powerful weapon, though it isn’t taught in school, just as it is impossible to teach prowess in writing in verse or

composing music; it will allow him to sink into the personality of the author of the text he's translating, to identify with him, and it will let him know when something in the text sounds wrong, doesn't work, is off-key, lacks meaning, or seems unnecessary or jarring. When that happens, it may be the author's fault, but more often it's a signal: one of the traps described here is waiting, unseen, with its jaws yawning.

But to be a good translator it's not enough to avoid traps. The task is more challenging: it requires that you transfer from one language to another the expressive power of a text, which is a superhuman undertaking, to such a degree that certain celebrated translations (for instance, the translation of the *Odyssey* into Latin or of the Bible into German) have marked turning points in the history of our civilization.

Nonetheless, because a text is the product of a profound interaction between an author's creative talent and the language in which he expresses himself, every translation entails some inevitable degree of loss, comparable to that of someone who goes to a money changer. This loss varies in scale, from large to small depending on the translator's skill and the nature of the original text; as a rule it is minimal for technical or scientific texts (but in that case the translator must not only possess mastery of two languages but also understand what he is translating, which means a third area of expertise), and quite vast for poetry (what remains of "*e vegno in parte ove non è che luca*," "I have reached a part where no thing gleams," if it is reduced and translated as "*giungo in un luogo buio*," "I come to a dark place"?[2]).

All of these cons might frighten and discourage any aspiring translator, but we can add some weight to the balance pan of the pros. Besides being an enterprise of civilization and peacemaking, translating can also offer unique gratifications: a translator is the only one who truly reads a text, reads it in depth, in all its wrinkles, hefting and evaluating every word and every image, or perhaps even uncovering gaps and false sections. When he manages to find, or even invent, the solution to a problem, he feels "like a god," without, however, having to bear the burden of responsibility that weighs on the author's back: in that sense, the joys and labors of translating are to those of creative writing as those of grandparents are to those of parents.

Many writers, both ancient and modern (Catullus, Foscolo, Baudelaire, and Pavese), have translated texts that suited them in particular, giving

pleasure both to themselves and to their readers, and often finding in this work the blithe and lighthearted state of mind of someone devoting himself, on a day off, to a type of work that is different from his everyday work.

It is worth saying something about the condition of the writer who finds himself being translated. Being translated is not work for either the weekday or the weekend; it is not work at all but a state of semi-passivity similar to that of a patient on a surgeon's gurney or a psychoanalyst's couch, and it abounds in violent and conflicting emotions. The author who finds before him a page of his own work translated into a language that he understands will, variously, or all at once, feel that he has been flattered, betrayed, ennobled, X-rayed, castrated, planed smooth, raped, embellished, or murdered. Rarely does he remain indifferent toward the translator, whether he is an acquaintance or a stranger, who has jammed his nose and his fingers into his viscera: he would gladly send him, variously, or all at once, his own heart carefully packaged, a check, a laurel wreath, or his seconds for a duel.

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1. To an English reader, of course, there is no mystery to the meaning of the Italian word *fiasco* in the second example.
2. *Inferno* Canto IV:151.

The Children’s International

A long time ago I happened to see a small group of children playing hopscotch in a Ukrainian village. I couldn’t understand what they were saying to one another, or what name they gave their game (which in Italy is usually called *campana*, or “bell,” and also *settimana* and *mondo*), but to all appearances the rules they followed were the same as ours. The game consisted of scratching a pattern of rectangles in the ground and then jumping through them in a varied succession of styles: with eyes closed and without stepping on the lines; with eyes open but hopping on just one foot and picking up a pebble from the rectangles; balancing another pebble on one’s head, on the back of one’s hand, on a foot, and so on; those who commit a foul lose their turn to another player, and the one who is able to complete the entire program in the shortest period of time is the winner.

Back then, the pattern of rectangles was the same in Ukraine and in Italy; it has since been slightly modified here. It would be interesting to find out whether it has likewise changed in Ukraine, and I’d guess that it has, because the universe of children’s games is connected by mysterious channels.

An English married couple devoted themselves with philological diligence to the study of these channels, and they lavished on the work the invaluable combination of rigor and imagination that distinguishes British culture. Iona and Peter Opie spent the decade from 1959 to 1969 interviewing more than ten thousand children. They asked the children only to describe the rules of their spontaneous games, the ones in which grown-ups had never interfered, and which required no equipment, not even a stick or a ball: “all you needed was players.”

Aside from these interviews, they also consulted a vast amount of documentary material, drawing on research undertaken in distant countries, as well as ancient and recent literary testimony. What emerged was a book full of surprises, *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford University Press, 1969), which is supposed to be followed by another volume about games that require a ball, or marbles, or any other such items.

Like any good book, this one answers certain questions, but it poses more questions than it answers, and these are by far more intriguing. The games described here, although they have been observed throughout Europe and outside of it as well, are familiar to any Italian who has or had children, or has contact with children, or even just has memories of his or her own childhood. With different names of course, but with strangely similar rituals, we find in their many variants both the "chasing games" and the "hiding games," the "olly olly oxen free" calls, the "cops and robbers games," and, up to this point, there's nothing that strange about it. These games are rational: they reproduce the situations and excitement of hunting and ambush, and it's likely that their roots lie deep in our heritage as hunting, social, quarrelsome mammals. Even puppies and kittens, though they belong to species that have been domesticated for millennia, reproduce in their games the rituals of hunting and fighting.

What is instead difficult to understand is why games or abstract ceremonies, apparently devoid of utilitarian meaning, should be found in roughly identical forms in countries distant from one another. One example is the well-known game of "four corners," which is not rational. There is no reason that the four players who occupy the corners should not remain indefinitely where they are, so that the child who has the disagreeable role of being "it" remains "it" equally indefinitely. And yet, for centuries now (the game is documented as early as 1600), and in many places around the world, the ritual is unvaried, as if, rather than a game, it were a religious ceremony.

The same can be said of the charming but (to an adult) irritating game that in Italy is called *regina reginella* (queen little queen). For those who may not remember it, the *reginella* (little queen) stands at one end of the field, and facing her (or him), lined up and at a distance of ten or twenty meters, are all the other players. Each of them, in turn, asks the queen how many steps he must take to reach "her castle," and the queen replies in the most capricious manner imaginable, but in accordance with a traditional

vocabulary, that he must take four giant steps, for instance, or six lion steps, or five ant steps, or even ten crayfish steps; in the latter case, the player-victim must walk backward.

As you can see, the game couldn't be more unfair; it is basically an abstemious children's version of the *passatella*, a drinking game dating back to ancient Rome. The one who wins, by reaching the castle, is invariably and exclusively the child whom the queen has chosen to favor; having in his or her turn become queen, that child will repay the favor to the first queen, in keeping with an unpleasant piece of Mafia etiquette. There is no space left for the personal initiative, intelligence, strength, or skill of the players; in spite of this, the game is common in many countries and with only a few variants (few, but singular: in the British Isles the Opies have recorded, among others, caterpillar step, banana-peel step, and watering-can step; the last consists of spitting as far as possible and stopping where the spit lands).

In virtually all "capturing" games a sanctuary is established (designated by a variety of names: where I grew up it was called *il tocco*) where the one being chased is safe from capture; particularly popular is the variant that is known in Italy as *rialzo* but forty years ago was known as *portinària*, and which in France is *le chat perché* and in England off-ground-he: parenthetically, "he" or "it" is the player who in Italy we say is "*sotto*," literally "under." In this version, immunity from capture is acquired by climbing onto any surface that extends higher than ground level. *Rialzo*—or "rise"—is well-known around the world.

Equally international are the rituals that come before the start of any game. They generally consist of drawing lots, to designate the player or players who are "it"—that is, who are assigned the least sought-after role in any game—but only rarely is a fair choosing system employed, such as drawing lots with the short straw. Commonly used and fair, but complicated because it allows a playoff between only two players, no more, is the so-called (in Europe) Chinese morra, which I assume my readers all know; in virtually every country the three hand signs indicate rock, scissors, and paper, and the justification for the circular manner in which each sign beats the next one remains the same.

Again, parenthetically: I find no mention by the remarkably diligent Opies of a type of deciding game that I have seen played in Piedmont. The two contenders opt respectively for even and odd, but then, instead of

availing themselves of the classic morra, one of them pinches the flesh on the back of his left hand; the one who calls the number of folds, even or odd, that appear in the flesh wins the round.

The Opies devoted relatively little attention to the cry of truce, or time out, used universally to ask or impose an armistice in competitive games: they limit themselves to the observation that in the British Isles the cry of "Barley!" is used, without going into the origins of this curious term. In Italy, nowadays, to the best of my knowledge, the cry is *Alimorta!* obvious in its meaning, and *Aliviva!*[1] to resume play. Fifty or sixty years ago, in Piedmont (I don't know if this was true elsewhere) the cry was "Marsa!" I would propose a query to the reader who might find this sort of small-scale anthropology alluring: *marsa*, in Arabic, means "port," hence Marsala, Marsa Matruh, and other place-names; it is likely that it also means "refuge, asylum." Might that be the origin of the cry, indicating that it therefore comes from the south of Italy? To verify this hypothesis, I would need older readers who might have played hide-and-seek in Sicily in their childhood to make an effort to remember how they called truce in those days and in their hometown. I hope they will.

Despite the array of quicker and fairer systems that we could easily imagine, and that have in fact been imagined, the most popular way on earth of picking someone to be "it" is a counting-out game, and that is where things become interesting. I would guess that everyone remembers at least one or two of the *contine*, or counting-out games, they used or heard others use when they were children. These are rhyming singsongs, generally with four sharp accents on each line; the Opies, taking advantage of other existing collections, have counted more than two hundred, throughout Europe and in the English-speaking nations. Some of them, the more recent ones, have been "rationalized" and have a more or less clear meaning, but it is evident that the favorites are the older ones, and these are pure abracadabra. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a number of international categories, no more than four or five: the rhythm and, often, the rhyme remain unvaried, while the words are distorted in keeping with the spirit of the local language.

Clearly, the ritual nature of casting lots prevails over the utilitarian purpose; indeed, the meaning of the words is unimportant (how many protests the Roman Catholic Church prompted when it decided to eliminate Latin from the Mass!), but what is very important is the repetition of

gestures and words that, being magical, must be perceived as “sibylline.” These then are words reduced to pure sound, which explains the challenge involved in tracing their origins.

For one of the categories mentioned above, however, the source has been identified: although the counting-out games of this category are widespread throughout the former British Empire, their origin is not English but Welsh, and it reproduces not the ancient form of spoken Welsh that is now virtually extinct but, rather, the series of ordinal numerals, probably pre-Celtic, that the herdsmen of Wales used long ago for the sole purpose of counting heads of livestock. Apparently, they used those numbers, and not the ordinary ones, to ward off evil—that is, to keep evil spirits from understanding and from stripping the herd of one or more animals, either by stealing it or causing it to fall sick. It is evident that these counting-out games owe their popularity precisely to their age-old incomprehensibility.

A similar but more modern story has been reconstructed by an Italian scholar, Matizia Maroni Lumbroso. As a little girl in Viareggio she had learned this counting-out game: “*Inimíni mani mo / chissanía baistò / effiala retingò / inimíni mani mo*”; many years later she learned that this was an English counting-out game (“Eeny meeny miny mo / catch a nigger by his toe / if he hollers let him go / eeny meeny miny mo”), and that it had been taught to a small group of Italian children by an elderly Englishwoman. The *contina* had quickly caught on, and I cannot exclude the possibility that it is still circulating today, precisely because it had no meaning to Italian ears and was therefore particularly fascinating. For that matter, even in English only the second and third lines have even an appearance of meaning. The rest is pure enchantment.

To sum up, not only are strange counting-out games used everywhere but more or less the same counting-out games are used everywhere. It would be simplistic to conclude that counting-out games and, more generally, spontaneous games are international because “children are the same the world over.” Why are they the same? Is their play the same everywhere because it springs from a biological inheritance, because it reproduces some innate need that they (and we) feel for a set of rules? Or are their games only apparently spontaneous, and do they in fact reproduce (symbolically, in caricatural form) the “games” of grown-ups? The fact remains that political frontiers are impervious to our verbal cultures, while

the civilization of games and play, which is basically nonverbal, crosses them with the carefree liberty of the wind and the clouds.

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1. The references are to the dead and to the living.

The Language of Chemists I

Although their profession is more recent than that of theologians, vintners, or fishermen, chemists felt obliged, from the start, to equip themselves with their own specialized language. Nonetheless, in contrast with other professional languages, the one used by chemists needed to adapt to a function that I believe is unparalleled in the panorama of countless specialized jargons: it must be able to indicate with precision, and if possible describe, more than a million individual objects, for that is the number (and it rises every year) of chemical compounds found in nature or constructed through chemical synthesis.

Now, chemistry, unlike Minerva, did not leap fully formed into existence but evolved painstakingly, through the patient yet blind efforts of three generations of chemists, who spoke different languages and frequently communicated only by letter; therefore, nineteenth-century chemistry developed through a terrible tangle of languages, the relics of which persist into modern-day chemistry. Let's leave aside the issue of inorganic chemistry, which faces a relatively straightforward array of issues, and deserves separate treatment. In organic chemistry, that is, in the chemistry of carbon compounds, at least three different forms of expression come together.

The oldest of them is also the quaintest and most agile; it involves assigning a made-up name to each new compound as it is discovered, which makes reference to the natural product from which it was first isolated: names such as geraniol, carotene, lignin, asparagine, and abietic acid (in Italian, *abies*, or *abiete*, silver fir) all express quite clearly (at least for us neo-Latins!) the origin of the substance, but they tell us nothing about its

makeup. Already slightly more obscure, at least for us, is adrenaline, so named because it was isolated from the adrenal glands (*ad renes*, “close to the kidneys,” in Latin). The Italian word for gasoline—*benzina*—takes its name (Italian and German: other languages have different words for it) from a natural product, but through a strange and tangled chemical and linguistic history. At the root of it all is benzoin, a scented resin that has been imported from Thailand and Sumatra for at least the past two thousand years, and which was once used not only in the making of perfumes but also in medical therapy: I’m not sure on what basis, perhaps merely on the dangerous reasoning that substances that emit a pleasant odor must “be good for you.” Trade in this resin, and many other spices, was controlled by Arab merchants and navigators. Because the spirit of advertising, along with the instinct to protect trade secrets, is as ancient as commerce itself, the Arabs sold the product under a beautiful but deliberately misleading Arabic name: they called it *luban jawi*, which means “incense of Java,” even though benzoin was not strictly speaking an incense at all, and it certainly didn’t come from Java.

In Italy and France the first syllable was mistaken for a definite article and dropped; what remained of the name, that is, banjawi, was pronounced and written in a variety of ways, until it settled into benzoé, beaujoin, benjoin, and, finally, benzoin. Centuries passed, until, in 1833, a German chemist came up with the idea of subjecting benzoin to dry distillation—that is, heating it intensely without adding water—in one of those retorts that still appear here and there as heraldic symbols of chemistry, even though chemists no longer actually use them. It was believed in those days, more or less consciously, that this treatment was useful in separating the volatile, noble, “essential” part of a substance (and it is no accident that gasoline is still called *essence* in French) from the inert residue that remained at the bottom of the retort: in other words, that it was a way of separating a soul from a body. In many languages, in fact, the word “spirit” is used to describe both the soul and alcohol and other liquids that evaporate easily.

The German chemist thus obtained the “soul,” the “essence” of benzoin, and he called it *Benzin*. In fact it was the product that we nowadays call benzene, but, with the analytic resources available at the time, it was not easy to distinguish it from the petroleum fraction that has roughly the same degree of distillation and is now called *benzina* (gasoline) in Italian. In the

first few decades of the nineteenth century, the two names and the two products were basically interchangeable, and, come to think of it, even now benzene might be a good substitute for gasoline if it weren't so toxic. Many automobiles used by the partisans ran on benzene, or other, even more exotic and dangerous fuels, with no evident damage. It is only an odd coincidence that the man who built the first efficient gasoline-powered engine, in 1885, was named Benz; that is, unless his surname (which still forms part of the official corporate name of the Mercedes company) actually contributed to the engineer Karl Benz's calling as an inventor.

The story of the name of methane likewise has its origin in a process of dry distillation, and the intent to isolate the essence or spirit of wood. By dry-distilling wood, one obtains complex liquids, varying greatly according to the kind of wood you start with, and in any case consisting largely of water. Frequently, however, they contain a small percentage of what is now called methyl alcohol.

Another nineteenth-century chemist, this one French, purified this "spirit of wood," described its properties, and noticed that it closely resembled the old and well-known "spirits of wine": its aroma and taste were even more agreeable than "spirits of wine," but, when consumed even in small quantities, it resulted in permanent blindness, a confirmation that a pleasant odor can be a terrible guide. It was probably with the assistance of some colleague who was a classicist that he clumsily translated "spirit of wood" into "*methy hyle*," because in ancient Greek *hyle* means wood, and *methy* generically indicates intoxicating liquids (wine, hydromel, and so on). This "methy" also appears in the ancient name of amethyst: not because of its purplish color but because it was believed that this gem had the property of combating drunkenness.

From "*methy hyle*" was derived "methyl alcohol," and from that methane, which is a close chemical neighbor, gets its name, in accordance with a first rudimentary agreement among the chemists of various nations that called for the *-ane* ending to be assigned to saturated hydrocarbons. Methane was followed by ethane, from the root of "ether"; propane, through a slight distortion of the Greek *protos*, that is, "first"; and butane, from the root of *butyros*, which in turn comes from a Greek word that means cow's-milk ricotta. The other saturated hydrocarbons, pentane, hexane, heptane, and so on, were baptized somewhat less fancifully, relying

on the Greek numerals that corresponded to the respective number of carbon atoms.

A second chemical language, less imaginative but more expressive, is that of the so-called rough formulas. To say that common table sugar is $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$, or that the old compound Pyramidon, a favorite of family doctors, is $C_{13}H_{17}ON_3$, tells us nothing about the origin or use of the two substances, but it does give us an inventory of their contents. It is, in fact, a rough, incomplete language: it tells you that in order to construct a molecule of Pyramidon, you need thirteen carbon atoms, seventeen hydrogen atoms, one oxygen atom, and three nitrogen atoms, but it says nothing about the order and the structure in which those atoms are bound together. In other words, it's more or less as if a typesetter pulled the letters *c*, *e*, *s*, *t*, *l*, and *a* out of his type case and claimed to express the word "castle": an uninitiated reader, or one who has no assistance from the context, could just as easily read "cleats" or who knows what other anagram. It's a summary form of writing, and it has only one benefit (typographical in nature): it fits nicely on a line of printed text.

The third language has all the advantages, and its only disadvantage is due to the fact that its "words" don't fit into the lines of conventional printing. It tends (or attempts) to give us a portrait, an image of the minuscule molecular edifice: it renounces most of the symbolism that is an intrinsic element of any language, regressing to the level of illustration or pictography. It's as if, instead of the word "castle," we were to print or sketch a picture of a castle. This system brings to mind the professor from the land of Balnibarbi whom Swift describes in *Gulliver's Travels*: according to him, it was possible to abolish all words whatsoever and reason without them, and in place of words he suggested that men should carry with them "such things as were necessary to express a particular business they are to discourse on," that is, what is nowadays known as the "referent": a ring if the subject is rings, a cow if the subject is cows, and so forth. In this way, the professor argued, "it would serve as a universal language, to be understood in all civilised nations." There is no doubt that the objective, or rather, object-based language of Balnibarbi and the structural formulas of chemists come close to perfection in terms of comprehensibility and internationalism, but they both also have the shortcoming of bulkiness and inconvenience, as the unhappy typesetters of organic chemistry textbooks know all too well.

Of course, the language of structural formulas, despite its ambitions to portraiture, and in contrast with Balnibarbish, has remained partially symbolic by the very fact of being a genuine language. In the first place, because its depictions are not life-size but drawn on the “scale” (that is, the enormous enlargement) of roughly one to a hundred million. Second, because instead of the shapes of atoms they contain a graphic symbol for them, that is, an abbreviation of their name, and because it has proved useful to insert between the atoms themselves the forces that hold them together, represented with symbolic lines.

And, last of all, for the fundamental reason, which applies to all portraits, that the object depicted, generally speaking, possesses depth, a three-dimensional structure, while a portrait remains flat because the page on which it must be printed is flat. And yet, in spite of all these limitations, if we compare these conventional diagrams with the “real,” quasi-photographic portraits that subtle techniques have made possible over the past few decades, we find the resemblance striking: the molecules-as-words, the little sketches derived from reasoning and experimentation, are truly quite similar to the ultimate particles of matter that the atomists of antiquity guessed at when they glimpsed specks of dust dancing in a shaft of sunlight.

The Language of Chemists II

When I was a working chemist, I suffered from heat, cold, and fear, and never would I have expected, after leaving my longtime profession, to feel any nostalgia. And yet it happens in my free moments, when the mechanism slips into neutral, like an engine idling: it happens, thanks to the singular power of filtration peculiar to memory, which lets happy recollections survive and slowly suffocates the others. Recently I happened to see an old fellow prisoner, and we talked about the kinds of things veterans talk about; our wives noticed, and pointed out to us, that in two hours of conversation we hadn't brought up a single painful memory, but only the rare moments of remission, or the odd episodes.

I have before me a chart of the chemical elements, the "periodic table," and I feel nostalgia, as if I were looking at a class picture, with the boys wearing bow ties and the girls the modest black tunic: "each by each, I know you all."[1] The stories of the struggles, defeats, and victories that bind me to certain elements I have already recounted in another setting; likewise, the stories of their character, virtues, vices, and eccentricities. But now my trade is a different one, it is a trade of words, selected, weighed, carefully, patiently fitted together; and so, to my mind, the elements now tend to become words, and, instead of the thing, what interests me deeply is the name of the thing and the reason for its name. The landscape is another, but as varied as the landscape of the things themselves.

Everyone knows that the "self-respecting" elements, the ones that exist in nature both on Earth and among the stars, are ninety-two in number, ranging from hydrogen to uranium (actually, this last has lost a little of its reputation in recent decades). Now, their names, passed in review, constitute

a picturesque mosaic that extends over time from the distant prehistoric era to the present day, and in that mosaic it is perhaps possible to glimpse all the languages and civilizations of the Western world: our mysterious Indo-European forefathers, ancient Egypt, the Greek of the ancient Greeks, the Greek of the Hellenists, the Arabic of the alchemists, the nationalistic pride of the nineteenth century, all the way up to the deeply suspect internationalism of the postwar years.

Let us begin the review with two of the best known and least exotic elements, nitrogen and sodium. Their international symbols, that is, the single letter or pair of letters used to abbreviate the conventional and original name, are respectively N and Na, the initials of nitrogenium and natrium, and here we can glimpse traces of an ancient misunderstanding. Nitrogenium means “born of niter,” and natrium means “the substance of natron”; now, originally, in the language of ancient Egypt, niter and natron were the same thing.

In the complicated written form of that language, it was considered superfluous to indicate vowels (perhaps because chiseling words into rock is harder work than using a ballpoint pen, and skipping vowels spared the stonecutters work), and the three consonants *NTR* generically indicated saline efflorescences: both the kind found on old walls, which in Italian is still called *salnitro*, and in other languages, more expressively, “salt of rock,” or saltpeter (from Greek *petra*), and the one that the Egyptians excavated from certain deposits and used in mummification. The latter is made up mostly of soda, that is, sodium carbonate, while saltpeter is made up of nitrogen, oxygen, and potassium.

In other words, they were both “non-salt salts,” substances with a saline appearance, water-soluble, colorless, but differing in taste from table salt; and glassmakers quickly understood that in the production of glass one could be substituted for the other without any major differences in the final product (which is easy enough for us to understand: at the temperatures attained in a glassmaker’s crucible, both salts break down, the acid portion goes away, and all that remains in the fused mass is the metal oxide). The Greeks and, later, the ancient Romans, in the transliteration of Egyptian writings, inserted vowels on a completely arbitrary basis, and only thereafter was the “nitro” variant specialized to indicate niter, the father of nitrogen, while “natro” was used to indicate soda, the mother of sodium.

For that matter, nitrogen, a substance that is chemically fairly inert, lies at the center of age-old disputes over nomenclature. Dubbed “azote” almost two centuries ago by a French chemist with a dubious Grecism (“without life”), it is instead, as I have said, “born of niter” (nitrogen) to the English and “the suffocant” (*Stickstoff*) to the Germans. There is no agreement even about the symbol: the French, who claim credit for its discovery, until recently rejected the symbol N and instead used Az (some still use it, just to make a point).

If you run down a list of the names of minerals, you are confronted with a veritable orgy of proper names. One has the impression that no mineralogist has ever been satisfied to conclude his career without lending his name to a mineral, with the addition of the *-ite* ending as the laurel wreath: garnierite, senarmontite, and thousands more.

Chemists have always been more discreet; in my review, I have come upon only two names of elements that the discoverers chose to dedicate to themselves, and they are gadolinium (discovered by the Finnish chemist Gadolin) and gallium. The latter has a curious story behind it. It was isolated in 1875 by the French chemist Lecocq de Boisbaudran; “cocq” (nowadays it is written “coq”) is French for “rooster,” or “gallus” in Latin, and Lecocq named his element gallium. A few years later, in the same mineral that the French chemist had examined, the German chemist Winkler discovered a new element; those were years of serious tension between Germany and France, and the German believed that the name gallium was a nationalistic tribute to Gaul, and so he named his element germanium in order to even the score.

Aside from these two, only a few of the brand-new and highly unstable elements that are heavier than uranium, obtained by man in tiny amounts from nuclear reactors and enormous particle accelerators, have been given personal names; specifically, they have been dedicated to Mendeleyev, Einstein, Madame Curie, Alfred Nobel, and Enrico Fermi.

More than a third of all elements have been given names that refer to their most evident properties, via linguistic paths that are more or less intricate. Thus chlorine, iodine, and chromium, from Greek words that mean, respectively, “green,” “violet,” and “color,” and refer to the colors of the salts or vapors (or, in other cases, the stripes of their emission spectrum). Thus barium is the “heavy one,” phosphorus is the “light-bearer,” and bromine and osmium are both, with varying nuances, the

“stinkers” (but what chemist deserving of the name could ever confuse the two extremely unpleasant odors?).

Also in this spirit, which I might call descriptive, and which bespeaks modesty and common sense, hydrogen and oxygen were given names that mean, respectively, “water-begotten” and “acid-begotten”; but because their baptism was the work of the French chemist Lavoisier (or at least confirmed by him), the chemists of Germany rejected it, and overlaid those names with two crude translations: *Wasserstoff* and *Sauerstoff*, or, respectively, “water substance” and “acid substance,” and the Russians followed suit, coining the pair *vodorod* and *kislorod*.

Only three of the elements that have been given “descriptive” names show signs of a leap of imagination: dysprosium (“hard to get at”), lanthanum (“hidden”), and tantalum. With the third name in that list, the discoverer (Ekeberg, in 1802: he was Swedish, a neutral, and so the name he chose wasn’t tampered with) meant to make reference to Tantalus, the mythical sinner described in the *Odyssey*: he is immersed in water up to his neck, but is eternally racked with thirst, because every time he bends over to drink the water retreats, leaving only arid ground. He, the pioneering chemist, suffered the same pangs during the alternating hopes and disappointments along the path that finally led to the recognition of his element.

Apart from the aforesaid germanium, twenty or so elements were given names that more or less clearly refer to the country or city in which they were discovered: lutetium after the old name for Paris, scandium from Scandinavia, holmium from Stockholm, rhenium from the Rhine. Alongside these geographic celebrities we should mention the obscure village of Ytterby, Sweden, because near there a mineral was found that proved to contain a number of previously unknown elements. The mineral was called Ytterbite, and from various segments of that name, by a procedure reminiscent of that used in the word puzzles called “logogriphs,” ytterbium, yttrium, terbium, and erbium were successively coined.

I have deliberately left aside the history of the names of the veteran elements, well-known to one and all, characterized and exploited by the earliest and most ancient civilizations thousands of years before the birth of the first chemist: iron, gold, silver, copper, sulfur, and many others. It is a complicated and fascinating story, which perhaps deserves to be told separately.

1. From the poem “L’Aquilone” (“The Kite”) by Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912).

Butterflies

The building, now (1981) undergoing renovation, that once housed Turin's great hospital, the Ospedale Maggiore di San Giovanni Battista, is not a cheerful place. Its ancient walls and soaring vaults seem to be steeped in generations of suffering; busts of its benefactors, which line the stairways, look down on the visitor with the unseeing gaze of mummies. But when you reach the *crociera,* or cross vault, where the two central halls meet, and the exhibition of butterflies assembled there by the Museo Regionale di Storia Naturale (Turin Museum of Natural History), your heart swells, and you feel that you have regressed to the fleeting but giddy condition of a student on a field trip. As from any well-designed exhibition, or, indeed, from the consumption of any spiritual nourishment, you emerge well fed and, at the same time, hungrier than before.

If we were to imagine a zoologist who knew all about birds and mammals but nothing about insects, and we were to tell him that there are hundreds of thousands of animal species, of great diversity, that have devised a method of building themselves a shell using a unique derivative of glucose and ammonia; that when these little animals have grown to the point that they "no longer fit in their skin," or rather, in their unexpandable shell, they discard it and grow another, larger one; that, in the course of their brief lifetimes, they transform themselves, taking on shapes that differ as radically as does a hare from a pike; that they run, fly, leap, and swim, and have managed to adapt themselves to practically every environment on Earth; that with brains weighing no more than a fraction of a milligram they have succeeded in amassing the skills of the weaver, the potter, the miner, the murderer with his poisons, the trapper, and the wet nurse; that they are

able to live on any organic substance, living or dead, including those synthesized by humans; and that some of them live in exceedingly complex societies, and engage in such practices as the preservation of foods, birth control, slavery, alliances, wars, agriculture, and breeding livestock—well, this unlikely zoologist would refuse to believe it. He would tell us that this insect-model of animal is something straight out of science fiction, but that if such a thing really existed it would be a terrible rival to man, and in the long run would certainly vanquish him.

In the insect world, butterflies enjoy a privileged status: anyone who goes to an exhibition of butterflies will understand that a comparable show devoted to such orders as the Diptera or the Hymenoptera, even one of equal scientific importance, would be less popular. Why? Because butterflies are beautiful, but that's not the only reason.

Why are butterflies beautiful? Certainly not, as Darwin's adversaries insisted, to give pleasure to humans: butterflies existed at least a hundred million years before the first human being. I believe that our very concept of beauty, which is necessarily relative and cultural, has been modeled over the centuries on butterflies, as well as on stars, mountains, and the sea. Proof of this can be had by examining a butterfly's head under the microscope: for most observers, admiration gives way to horror and disgust. In the absence of cultural habit, we are disconcerted by this new object; the enormous eyes without pupils, the hornlike antennae, the monstrous buccal apparatus all appear to us as a diabolical mask, a twisted parody of the human face.

In our civilization (but not in all civilizations) bright colors and symmetry are considered "beautiful," and so butterflies are pretty. Now, a butterfly is a veritable factory of colors: it transforms both the food it consumes and the wastes it excretes into dazzling pigments. What's more, it is able to obtain its magnificent metallic and iridescent effects by purely physical means, exploiting nothing more than the interference effects we see in soap bubbles and in the oily films that float on the surface of water.

But the fascination of butterflies is not merely a product of color and symmetry: deeper factors contribute as well. We wouldn't find them so beautiful if they weren't able to fly, or if they flew as straight and alertly as bees, or if they could sting, or, especially, if they didn't pass through the unsettling mystery of metamorphosis. This latter phenomenon takes on, to our eyes, the value of a poorly deciphered message, a symbol, and a sign.

It’s no surprise that a poet like Guido Gozzano (“friend to the chrysalises”) should have studied and loved butterflies so passionately: if anything, it’s surprising that so few poets have loved them, since the transformation from caterpillar to chrysalis, and from chrysalis to butterfly, casts a long and admonitory shadow.

Just as butterflies are beautiful by definition, and serve as our standard of beauty, similarly caterpillars (“*entòmata in difetto*,” Dante called them, “like . . . unto insects undeveloped”) are ugly by definition: awkward, slow, stinging, voracious, hairy, dim-witted, they are in their turn symbolic, the symbol of the crude and the unfinished, of perfection unattained.

The two documentaries that accompany the show reveal to us, with the powerful eye of the motion picture camera, something that very few human eyes have ever had a chance to see: the caterpillar suspended in its lofty, temporary grave, the cocoon, transforming itself into an inert chrysalis, and then emerging into the light in the perfect form of the butterfly; the wings are still unusable, weak, like crumpled tissue paper, but in a few moments they strengthen and extend, and the newborn insect takes flight. It’s a second birth, but at the same time it is a death: the creature that flew away is a psyche, a soul, and the torn cocoon that remains on the ground is the mortal remains. In the deeper layers of our consciousness, the butterfly with its agitated flight is a simple soul, a fairy, sometimes even a witch.

The strange name that the butterfly has in English harks back to an ancient northern belief that a butterfly is a sprite that steals butter and milk, or turns them sour; and *Acherontia atropos*, the large Mediterranean moth with the death’s-head pattern on the thorax, which Gozzano encountered in the villa of Signorina Felicita,[1] is a damned soul, “which brings sorrow.” The wings that popular iconography attributes to fairies are not feathered bird wings but the translucent, ribbed wings of a butterfly.

The furtive visit of a butterfly, which Hermann Hesse describes on the last page of his diary, is an ambivalent annunciation, with the flavor of a serene foreshadowing of death. The aged thinker and author, in his Ticinese retreat, sees “something dark, silent, and ghostly” take flight: it is a rare butterfly, a brown-and-violet-winged *Nymphalis antiopa*, and it lands on his hand. “Slowly, like someone breathing easy, the beauty opened and shut its velvet wings, clinging to the back of my hand with its six fine legs; after a brief instant it vanished, before I even noticed its departure, in the great hot light.”

1. A reference to the poem “La signorina Felicita ovvero la felicità,” by Guido Gozzano (1883–1916).

Fear of Spiders

A very young friend of mine was assigned in third grade to write a paper on insects, and his triumphant opening line ran as follows: “Insects take their name from the fact that they have six legs.” His teacher pointed out to him that their name would have been just as suitable if insects had seven legs, and he replied that there is only a small difference between six legs and seven.

The difference between six legs and eight must be a vastly greater one. Many people, children and adults, women and men, courageous and timid, feel an intense repulsion for spiders, and if you ask them why spiders in particular, they usually answer: “Because they have eight legs.”

I’m not proud to admit that I count myself among their number, and I can never forget one of my most horrifying nights: I must have been nine, and I was in the country, sleeping in a bedroom where the wallpaper had peeled off the wall and therefore amplified sounds like a drum. I was on the verge of sleep when I heard a ticking sound. I turned on the light, and there was the monster: black, all legs, descending toward the night stand with the hesitant yet inexorable gait of Death. I called for help, and the maid crushed the apparition (an innocuous *Tegenaria*) with unmistakable satisfaction.

This ancient terror of spiders, now dormant, thanks to the disappearance of those adversaries from the urban environment in which I live, came to mind while I was reading an article that appeared in *La Stampa* a few weeks ago. In it, Isabella Lattes Coifmann describes a number of new discoveries concerning the sex life of spiders. All spiders, from the minuscule scarlet spiders that live in porous rocks to the obese cross spiders that lie in wait, head down, at the center of their geometric webs, fill me with a completely

unjustified horror and disgust that is highly specific. I would touch a toad, an earthworm, a rat, a cockroach, or a slug, and, if I were guaranteed to suffer no harm, I'd even touch a scorpion or a cobra; but never a spider. Why?

The answer I quoted above is classic but it is also a non-answer. Obviously, there is no reason that eight legs should be any more repugnant than six or four, even if we conceded the likelihood that we enemies of spiders, before launching into our ritual shiver, were to take the time to count legs; which, come to that, are often seven in number or even fewer, because spiders are subject to accidents (on the road or on the job) at four times the rate of us bipeds, and because, if grabbed by the leg, spiders will happily let it go: they "know" that a new one will grow the next time they molt. Equally unsatisfactory, however, are the other usual responses.

Some say that they hate spiders because they are cruel. So they are, but no more than many other animals. Anyone who has seen a cat toy with a mutilated mouse at death's door for hours at a time will at most feel pity for the mouse; toward the cat he will experience a sense of understanding, and perhaps a wicked mammalian solidarity, even though the cat's cruelty is (at least in appearance) more gratuitous and guilty than that of the spider. We cannot subject animals to moral judgments ("for every wish of yours"—that is, theirs—"is nature's doing");[1] how much less right do we have to export our human moral judgments to animals as distant from us as the arthropods. To judge from the behavior of wounded or amputee spiders and insects, it seems unlikely that they feel anything comparable to what we call pain, and likely on the other hand that our pity for the spider's victims is wasted: it would be better to channel it toward, say, chickens raised in battery cages, or man's human victims.

Some hate spiders because they're "ugly and hairy." Various spiders are, in fact, hairy, but then, if hair is repellent, why are we happy to touch many other animals covered with hair or fur? In fact, what we love is precisely their hair, with a strange love that drives us to shear them, or even to skin them so that we can adorn ourselves with their pelts. Nor do other fuzzy little creatures, such as honeybees or bumblebees, inspire repulsion in us. As for ugliness, no term could be more ambiguous or questionable: prudence suggests that we restrict its use to the works of man. There is nothing ugly in nature, neither animals nor plants nor stones nor bodies of water, much less are there ugly stars in the sky. We have been taught to

describe as ugly (“ugly beast”) certain animals that are considered harmful, but the ugliness of nature ends here.

Do we hate spiders because they lay traps? I believe that this, too, is mere moralizing. If anything, the spider’s web is deserving of admiration; and in fact it is admired by all those who are immune to our phobia or who have overcome it. To witness the hatching of a nest of spiders, which as soon as they emerge from their eggs scatter over a bush and busily set to work, each weaving a web of its own, is to see a wonderful spectacle, not a horrible one. Each of them is no bigger than the head of a pin, but is born a master: without hesitation, without error, it weaves a web the size of a commemorative stamp, and takes up a position to await its tiny prey. It is born adult, and wisdom has been handed down to it along with its shape. It does not need to go to school: is this what strikes horror into us?

There are more daring explanations. Who can stop a psychologist of the subconscious in the performance of his duties? Every weapon in the arsenal has been unleashed upon spiders. Spiders’ fuzziness supposedly has a sexual meaning, and the disgust that we experience therefore points to an unrecognized rejection of sex on our part: that is how we express it, and, by the same token, this is how we will seek to free ourselves of it.

The spider’s method of capturing its prey, by wrapping it in filaments as it lies caught in the web, would seem to make it a mother symbol: the spider is the enemy-mother who envelops and absorbs us, who wants to return us to the womb from which we emerged, swaddle us tightly to lead us back to the helpless state of infancy, to take us back into her power; and there are those who point out that in nearly all languages the names of spiders are feminine, that the biggest and most beautiful webs are made by female spiders, and that some females devour the male after or while they mate. This last fact is strange and horrendous, when seen from our human point of view, but it doesn’t explain how a strong aversion could derive from an observation that almost no one has made with his own eyes and that very few have learned from books.

I believe that simpler explanations are in order. In Mediterranean countries, spiders are thought to be poisonous, and in Spain and southern Italy the memory of tarantism is still vivid. It was believed that a tarantula bite infected a person with a fatal disease, from which it was possible to recover only by dancing frantically. Today we know that the tarantula is harmless, as are nearly all the spiders in our country, but there isn’t a child,

especially in the countryside, who hasn't been told by his mother, "Don't touch that, it's a spider, it's poisonous"—and childhood memories are lasting.

Perhaps there's more. The old cobwebs that we find in basements and attics are loaded with symbolic weight: they are the banners of neglect, absence, decay, and oblivion. They veil the works of man, wrapping them as it were in a shroud, as dead as the hands that built them over the years and centuries. And it is impossible to overlook the furtive manner—this, it is true, is extremely specific—in which spiders appear on the scene: not with the warlike buzz of wasps, not with the lightning determination of rats, but through invisible fissures, with the slow and silent step of ghosts; sometimes they drop straight down from a dark ceiling into a cone of lamplight, unexpected, suspended from their metaphysical thread. Spectral also are their nocturnal webs, unseen but sticky on our faces when in the early morning we pass between hedges on a path that no one has yet taken.

As for my own personal and negligible phobia, it has a birth certificate. It is the engraving by Gustave Doré illustrating Arachne in Canto XII of *Purgatory*, with which I collided as a child. The young woman who dared to challenge Minerva to a competition in the art of weaving is punished by an unholy transfiguration. In the illustration, she is "already half spider," and she is brilliantly depicted backward, with her buxom breasts where you would expect to see her back, while from her back six gnarled, hairy, painful legs have issued: six, which with the desperately flailing arms make eight. Kneeling before the newborn monster, Dante seems to be contemplating its pudenda, half disgusted, half voyeur.

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1. From Leopardi's "Il passero solitario" ("The Solitary Thrush").

The Force of Amber

If you rub amber with a cloth, a few odd and minor things happen: you will hear a crackling, in the dark you will see sparks, bits of straw and scraps of paper that are placed near it will dance crazily. In Greek, amber was called *elektron*; until about 1600 those effects had not been observed on any other substances, and they were therefore called electrical effects. To name a thing is as gratifying as naming an island, but it can be dangerous, too: the danger lies in the way you persuade yourself that the hard part is done, and that whatever you have just named has also been explained.

Now, until well into the nineteenth century, no one suspected that the little game you could play with amber was a signal to be deciphered: that it was an annunciation—in the form of a riddle—of a force that would change the face of the world, and that the lovely sparks shared the nature of lightning. Nonetheless, all Western languages have preserved the term "electricity," that is, "the force of amber"; only the Hungarians have coined a neologism that, more logically, amounts to "the force of lightning."

Today it is generally known that electrical effects can be obtained by rubbing certain solid objects together, but it is usually overlooked that comparable phenomena can also be generated by the friction of a liquid against a solid. I found this out many years ago in a dramatic fashion.

It was summertime. In the factory courtyard there was an aboveground storage tank that held ten tons of solvent. A factory worker approached, with a container in his hand: he intended to fill it, just as he and other workers had done countless times over the years. He opened the petcock on the storage tank, and the solvent came out in flames, as if from a flamethrower. The factory worker hurled the container away from him and

ran off to give the alarm. Meanwhile the liquid continued to pour out: a burning puddle had formed on the ground, spreading rapidly and threatening to invade the production areas.

An experienced, courageous man who happened to be on the spot came to the rescue (to everyone's immense good fortune): he managed to make his way between the flames and the storage tank and close the petcock, after which the fire died down without causing any serious damage. This spontaneous ignition of a fairly ordinary substance seemed mysterious and magical, but then I found the explanation in a specialized handbook: certain liquids, extremely pure hydrocarbons among them, become electrified if they flow through conduits at velocities higher than given limits.

Between the storage tank and the petcock, in fact, there was a fairly narrow stretch of pipe; the factory worker must have opened the petcock in a single move, and the liquid had become electrified over the short distance. That was the first withdrawal of the day, but already it was late morning and the sun was shining; therefore, the liquid had sat in the pipe for a long time, long enough to be heated to a temperature above its ignition point. There must have been a small spark, perhaps between the petcock and the liquid itself, and the ignition followed.

A subtle danger, then: neither obvious nor banal. How to defend against it? According to the handbook mentioned, there are substances that, if added in very small quantities to the hydrocarbons, make them sufficiently conductive to eliminate the risks due to the "force of amber." It struck us as strange and absurd that these concepts were so little known, even among people who handle solvents; in any case, we adopted the additive prescribed, and from then on, whether because of it or not, nothing of the sort ever happened again.

On another occasion, however, I myself came close to unleashing that force, through an excess of zeal and sheer ignorance. It was the morning of December 31 and the factory was closed. The security guard called me on the phone and told me to hurry down; on the road, outside the front gate, a tanker trailer full of gasoline had just overturned, and he didn't know what to do. I told him to call the fire department, and, just in case, I set out myself, preparing for an unusual New Year's Eve.

I found a sinister scene. The truck driver, out of either caution or fear, had unhooked the truck cab, which was also filled with gasoline, and had disappeared with it into the fog. The tanker trailer was lying on one side,

across the road from the factory, and gasoline was gushing out of the cover (which hadn't been closed properly, or had come unbolted at impact). It was very cold and the gasoline, instead of evaporating, was pooling in the adjoining field.

A short while later, the fire department showed up; we went into a huddle and decided that the first thing to do was right the tanker trailer, but that would require a crane; they phoned the garage to have a crane sent out, but I said that it seemed dangerous to attach a hook to the trailer in that atmosphere saturated with gasoline fumes: the impact of steel against steel could produce sparks. So the firemen proposed covering everything with foam, the trailer, the road, and the field, and it was done in a flash, after which the field became snowy white, and was lovely to behold.

While we waited for the crane, and as the gasoline continued to pour out and flow away under the blanket of foam, another danger occurred to me. As the fuel tank gradually emptied, air entered to replace the gasoline, but that air was saturated with flammable vapors: this could result in the formation of an explosive mixture, and you couldn't rule out the possibility of a spark being struck for some reason—during the lifting operations, from the impact of a monkey wrench banging against metal, or even from the friction of the gasoline pouring out. Who could say whether this gasoline contained the notorious additive?

I told the lieutenant fireman that it might be wise to fill the emptying tank with inert gas. In the factory we had plenty of CO_2 fire extinguishers: we could cautiously lift the lid, spray in the carbon dioxide, and close it again. The lieutenant approved; night had fallen, and we began the operation in the glare of spotlights. One after the other, we emptied five or six fire extinguishers into the half-full tank (the other half was still full of gasoline, because of the angle of the overturned vehicle), then we shut the lid again.

In the meantime, the cold had intensified and the fog had grown thicker; everyone else in the world, in the warmth of home, was getting ready to celebrate, and we felt abandoned. The firemen ran up and down like tightrope walkers on the rubber hoses of the foam pump, because the mixture in the hoses was beginning to freeze. The overturned tanker, covered with foam, had taken on the appearance of a centuries-old wreck.

At last the crane arrived, just before midnight, and along with it arrived champagne, through whose generosity I can no longer remember, whether it

was the local police or the fuel company or the factory. The tanker trailer was righted, we slapped one another on the back in good cheer and to warm ourselves up, and we drank a toast to the new year, the success of the operation, and the danger we had avoided.

Two days later I learned that the danger we had avoided was even more serious than we had imagined. In another book, just as obscure as the first, I read that CO_2 fire extinguishers are excellent for putting out fires after they've started, but they should absolutely never be sprayed at flammable solvents to prevent a blaze. As the carbon dioxide rushes violently out the nozzle, it cools and condenses into needles of dry ice; as they brush past the nozzle itself, they are electrified and generate sparks that can ignite the solvent before the atmosphere has become inert, or when the extinguisher is empty. The book described a terrible fire with an explosion that took place in the Netherlands: dozens of people were killed, and it had been started by the improper use of a CO_2 fire extinguisher.

It seems to me that there is a moral to be drawn from these two stories. Our world is becoming increasingly complicated, and each of us needs an increasingly refined and up-to-date expertise. There are many dangerous professions, and the analysis of dangers (both evident and hidden) ought to be the ABCs of any professional education. We will never be able to eliminate all risks or solve all problems, but every problem solved is a victory, in terms of saving human lives, health, and property.

There is no substitute for expertise: we saw evidence of this recently in the terrible story of the child who fell down an abandoned well, only to die after two days of good-hearted but misguided efforts.[1] Goodwill, courage, the spirit of self-sacrifice, and improvisational brilliance are of little use, and in fact in the absence of expertise they can even be harmful. Peace on Earth is promised to men of goodwill, but in an emergency woe to those relying on rescuers who bring only goodwill.

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1. In June 1981, a child fell down a well in Vermicino, a village near Frascati, and the rescue attempts were broadcast live on television; all of them failed.

The Irritable Chess Players

Even Horace, himself a poet, admitted that he preferred to let many issues slide rather than risk the enmity of the irritable tribe of poets; and poets, or, more generally, writers, remain irritable today. We need only turn our thoughts to the dramas surrounding literary prizes, or the visceral hatred that poets nurture toward critics if a review contains even the slightest hint of doubt. Now we read, as Karpov and Korchnoi silently rip one another limb from limb in Merano, about the irritability of chess players.[1] Why is this quality shared by chess players and poets? Do chess and poetry have something in common?

Lovers of the noble game insist that they do: a chess match, even if it is played by amateurs, is an austere metaphor for life and the struggle for life, and the virtues of a chess player, reason, memory, and inventiveness, are the virtues of any thinking man. The stern rules of chess—which demand that a piece, once touched, must move, and that one is forbidden to take back a move one has thought better of—reproduce the inexorable nature of the choices one makes in life. When your king, owing to your lack of skill or attention or your recklessness or your opponent's superiority, is ever more closely pursued, threatened (though the threat must be clearly announced: it's never a pitfall), cornered, and finally run through, you never fail to glimpse, hovering over the chessboard, a symbolic shade. What you are experiencing is a death; it is your death, and at the same time it is a death for which you bear the guilt. By experiencing it, you exorcise it and strengthen yourself.

This fierce and chivalrous game, then, is also poetic: and so it is perceived by everyone who has ever played it, at whatever level, but I doubt

that the source of the irritability of poets and chess players lies here. Poets, and anyone who plies a creative and individual trade, have this in common with chess players: total responsibility for their actions. This is rarely, or never, the case in other human endeavors, whether well paid and serious or unpaid and playful. Perhaps it's no accident that tennis players, for example, who play alone or at most in pairs, are more irascible and neurotic than soccer players or bicyclists, who compete in teams.

Those who do for themselves, without allies or middlemen between themselves and their work, are stripped of excuses in the face of failure, and excuses are an invaluable analgesic. An actor can put the blame for his failure on the director, or vice versa; someone who works for a manufacturer can feel that his own responsibility is diluted by that of his many colleagues, superiors, and underlings, and further contaminated by "circumstances," by the competition, by the whims of the market, and by unpredictable events. A teacher can blame the curriculum, the principal, and of course the students.

The politician, at least in a pluralistic regime, makes his way through a jungle of tensions, collusions, open or hidden hostilities, traps, and favors, and when he fails he has a thousand opportunities to justify himself to others and to himself. But even the despot, the possessor of absolute power, sole arbiter of his open and avowed decisions, when faced with collapse will look for someone to blame in his place—he, too, reaches for an analgesic. Hitler himself, under siege in the Reich Chancellery, an hour before committing suicide, angrily unloaded all blame on the German people, who had been unworthy of him. But someone who moves his bishop to attack what he believes to be the weak point in his opponent's line stands alone, has no fellow culprits even in theory, and must answer fully and individually for his decision, like a poet at his writing table before his "petty, paltry rhymes." Even if it is only in the context of a game, he is a grown man, an adult.

We should add that poets and chess players work only with their brains, and that we are all quick to take offense concerning the quality of our brains. To accuse one's fellow man of having defective kidneys, or lungs, or heart is no crime; saying that he has a defective brain, on the other hand, certainly is. To be considered stupid, and to have someone tell you so, is more unpleasant than being called a glutton, a liar, wrathful, lustful,

slothful, or a coward: every weakness, every vice has found its defenders, its own rhetoric, those who ennoble and exalt it, except for stupidity.

"Stupid" is a strong word and a stinging insult: perhaps that is why the term possesses, in every language and especially in dialects, a myriad of synonyms, all of them euphemistic to a greater or lesser degree, as is the case for words relating to sex or death. If Christ, according to St. Matthew the Evangelist (5:22), felt it necessary to warn that whosoever shall say to his brother "Raca" shall be in danger of the council, but whosoever shall say "Thou fool" shall be in danger of hellfire, that is a sign that he had recognized the wounding nature of such judgments.

In the face of them, both chess player and poet stand defenseless: they have been stripped naked. Every verse they write, every move they make, bears their signature. They have no coworkers, no accomplices: they have learned from masters, in flesh and blood or at a distance of centuries and continents, but they know that it is cowardly to place the blame for their shortcomings on their teachers, or in any case on others. Now, someone who is naked, his flesh open to the world and densely covered with nerve endings, with no armor to protect him, no clothing to screen and mask him, is both vulnerable and irritable. This is a condition to which, in our complicated society, we rarely find ourselves exposed, and yet few are the lives into which the moment of being denuded never comes. And so we suffer for the nudity to which we are ill suited: even our actual, nonmetaphorical skin becomes irritated if exposed to sunlight.

For that reason, terrible chess player though I am, I believe that it would be a good thing if the game of chess were more widely played, and perhaps taught and practiced in our schools, the way it has been for many years in the Soviet Union. It would be good, in other words, for everyone, especially those who aspire to positions of authority or a political career, to learn from an early age to live like chess players, that is to say, thinking before making a move, even in the awareness that the time allowed for each move is limited; remembering that every move we make prompts another from our opponent, difficult but not impossible to predict; and paying for wrong moves.

The exercise of these virtues is surely advantageous over the long term, both for the individual and for the community. Over the short term, it has its price, which is to make us slightly irritable.

1. Anatoly Karpov played Viktor Korchnoi for the world chess championship in Merano, Italy, in the autumn of 1981.

Queneau's *Cosmogony*

I've always believed that one should write in a clear and orderly manner; that to write is to convey a message, and that if the message is not understood the author is at fault; that therefore a courteous writer has the obligation to ensure that his writings are understood by the greatest number of readers, as effortlessly as possible. After reading Raymond Queneau's *A Pocket Cosmogony* (*Petite cosmogonie portative*; in Italian, *Piccola cosmogonia portatile* [Turin: Einaudi, 1982]), I find that I am forced to reconsider these principles: I believe that I will continue writing the way I set out for myself, but I also believe that Queneau was eminently correct to write the way he did, which is diametrically opposed to my way, and that I would like to write the way he did, if only I were capable of it.

Queneau is popular in Italy chiefly for his novels, the best known of which is the delightful *Zazie dans le métro*. Queneau, who died in 1976, at the age of seventy-three, was not only a novelist but also a poet and a publisher, and frequented surrealists, mathematicians, biologists, and linguists. For twenty years, beginning in 1956, he was the director of the respected *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*, but at the same time he founded a journal of "potential literature" that described and offered dazzling instances of wordplay: there was no field of knowledge that escaped his curiosity, which was always lively and never amateurish. This *Cosmogony* is a poem in Alexandrine verse divided into six cantos, first published in 1950, and it tells nothing less than the story of the universe. I emerged from my reading of it dazed, giddy, with my head spinning, as if I'd just descended from a roller coaster.

There’s no doubt, it’s an extraordinary book, in both senses of the word. It’s not a book for everyone: it’s not for distracted readers, uneducated readers, or readers in search of instant entertainment; it’s neither homogenized nor precooked—it’s not easy to digest. Each of its nearly fourteen hundred lines contains a riddle, variously cunning, trivial, or dense with meaning: with allusions to illustrious French forebears (this amiable and universal soul here reveals himself to be, oddly, something of a chauvinist: he explicitly addresses his “*lecteurs français.*” But perhaps this means only that he’s well aware of how essentially untranslatable his poetry is) such as Baudelaire, Lamartine, and Rimbaud. Look closely, though: these are ambiguous references, midway between homage and derision.

At every step, the reader encounters slang impudently grafted onto terminology borrowed from every field of natural science; words transcribed phonetically (“*l’histouar des humains,*” “*tu sais xé qu’un concept*”; certain distant insects have discovered “*que l’air est un espace où qu’on peut sdeplacer*”). Frequently the hiatus demanded by the poetic meter is expressed with arbitrary spelling (“*révolussilon*” for “*révolution*”), in keeping with a mannerism that appears in Queneau’s essays as early as 1937, and is later used elegantly to render “spoken French” in his novels.

The array of his verbal inventions is surprising. The *Diplodocus*, one of the largest fossil reptiles, is an “interminable idiot”; the mammoth cetaceans wandering through the deep are so many “*hercules*” but also “*erre-culs*”; the ships that attack Syracuse and its defenses designed by Archimedes are “*les flottes nazirêmes,*” that is, the author explains to the German translator, Roman triremes with bad intent: Nazi triremes, in other words.

Given the number of instances of puns, Sergio Solmi’s translation into hendecasyllabic verse is outstanding, because no one could have done better, and at the same time inadequate, because at least half of the book’s color and spice has inevitably been lost. It is in any case an excellent guidebook for the Italian reader: it encourages him and smooths the way, but the facing text remains indispensable.

I think I’ve said enough about Queneau’s erudite whimsies and I would like to make one thing clear: these are not merely the caprices of a learned writer setting out to amuse himself. In this cosmogony they have a specific role; puns, vulgarisms, and sophomoric pranks clip off like a pair of shears any suspicion of rhetorical yeastiness. This is the same manner that Ariosto and Heine often employ; by virtue of it, these poets remain readable today,

even for nonspecialists, while those who have spurned it are relegated to limbo. It's an inescapable law: the author who cannot laugh on his own, ideally even at his own expense, eventually becomes the unwilling target of laughter. Queneau, a grand virtuoso of laughter, obtains with his comic wit what so many others have reached for in vain, and blends into a homogeneous continuum the much discussed "two cultures."

It is no minor undertaking. In this baroque and heterodox yet fundamentally serious poem, a doctrine and a poetry emerge that are unusual, a pairing that had not been attempted since Lucretius: but Queneau is Queneau, and he fears protracted flights. His invocation to Venus closely follows the one that begins *On the Nature of Things*, but its lyrical impetus is at once solemn and buffoonish: the poetry of science is inextricably bound up with playfulness. It was Venus, "*mère des jeux des arts et de la tolérance*," who gave the gift of valleys to mountains, women to men, cylinders to pistons, and coal cars to locomotives. Thanks to the goddess, all animals, at their given place and time, take pleasure from the planet "*en y procréfoutant*."

Following the bilingual text is an extremely acute "Pocket Guide to the Pocket Cosmogony," written by Italo Calvino, who was a friend and follower of the author (and how many Queneauian nuances we find in his books, from *Cosmicomics* on!). Calvino takes up the challenge and plays along: his clear-eyed commentary faithfully preserves the lightness and spirit of the text, and he works with patience and reverence to untangle the knots; this, too, is an intelligent game. With patience, indeed: let readers be forewarned, this is a book that demands patience; it's not a cheap read.

Calvino has done the work of a philologist here, going back to the sources, consulting the comments of Jean Rostand, the renowned biologist and friend of Queneau, and questioning naturalists and chemists. He has solved many puzzles, but not all: the author himself had already admitted that there were some he couldn't explain, illuminations of a moment. Perhaps that's just as well for a reader who loves a game; he may be the one who comes up with the solution.

The reader's patience will be rewarded. Out of this labyrinthine text spring passages of gleaming poetry and at the same time themes that are current and absorbing. The "Prosopopeia of Hermes" that we read in the third canto in its way expresses a serious and profound thought, the poetry

of origins: a natural understanding of the universe that we rarely find in other “authorized” poets.

Poetry echoes all around anyone who pays attention: and not only in nature. “*Il voit dans chaque science un registre bouillant* / *Les mots se gonfleront du suc de toutes choses*” (“He sees in each science a boiling register / the words swell with the sap of all things”); there’s poetry in the buttercup and in the moon in springtime, but also in volcanoes, calcium, and the phenol function. “*On parle des bleuets et de la marguerite* / *alors pourquoi pas de la pechblende pourquoi?*” (“We speak of cornflowers and daisies / then why not also of pitchblende why?”) How can we disagree? The epic labor of the Curies, which led from pitchblende to the isolation of radium, waits in vain for the poet capable of telling the story.

The passage I’m talking about is the densest part of the poem. Shortly thereafter, Mercury describes the author to his readers in these words (the translation here is my own, and literal): “this one, you understand, is not at all didactic / what could he didactify, since he knows almost nothing?” This is one of the crucial elements of the work. It is not science that is incompatible with poetry but didacticism, speaking from a lectern, setting out with a dogmatic, programmatic, edifying intent. Queneau abhors the programmatic, he is the king of the arbitrary: he sets out to review all hundred chemical elements, and then, with a contrived excuse, he stops at scandium, which has an atomic number of 21, and calls an end to the game.

In this cosmogony, which starts from Chaos and comes all the way up to automation, the history of mankind is pointedly wedged into just two lines. But when he takes the opportunity to express what he feels, the cosmic and Biblical joy of the Beginning and, at the same time, the necessity of the end, Queneau spreads his wings and displays his power. He displays it, in his always surprising manner, in the very last lines of the poem: after describing the early days of Earth, the birth of the Moon, the mysterious transition from crystals to viruses, the primordial monsters, humans and their first devices, he lifts off with tones out of the *Excelsior*[1] into the apotheosis of calculating machines: but it is right here that his music stops, just like an old adding machine breaking down, and repeats itself, like a stuck record, stalling on the infinitives of verbs and finally ending. *Consummatum est*, the cosmogony is completed.

1. A nineteenth-century ballet (or series of ballets) celebrating the triumph of progress and machines.

Inspector Silhouette

That a retiree of either gender has both the right and the need for new pursuits, disinterested and enjoyable, is now taken for granted: there are tour operators, resorts, and hotels that cater exclusively to the elderly. For the elderly who choose to resist such disguised exploitation, or who lack the resources to enjoy it, let me suggest a household activity that I have enjoyed, that entails no risk, costs practically nothing, and is within reach of one and all. All you need is a dictionary; it involves searching for those common nouns that were originally proper nouns, names of people that over time, for whatever reason, have lost their capitalization. But for the discovery to be considered fair it is important that, in the mind of the player, the original proper noun has long since been erased, overlaid by the final common noun. In short, this game amounts to going lower-case hunting, much as you might go mushroom hunting.

I'll explain with an example. While reading a novel whose title I've forgotten, I happened on the Italian word *siluetta*, condemned by purists as a needless Gallicism, and a word I'd probably encountered countless times before without experiencing either curiosity or symptoms of intolerance. The purists suggest replacing it with *model*, *profile*, *outline*, *figure*; I'm no purist, and if the occasion presents itself, or if I find the occasion through some effort of my own, I will happily write *siluetta*, or even go back to the original French word, *silhouette*, because it's one I especially like. It's a painterly word: it's slight and light, tapered (perhaps because I subconsciously associate it with *siluro*, "torpedo," or with the French *sillon*, meaning "groove" or "furrow"?), and it has the distinct appearance of a graceful feminine diminutive, perfect for describing the body of a teenage

swimmer standing out against the sky, for instance, as she dives from a board. But a diminutive of what?

A diminutive of nothing. It is not a diminutive, it is feminine only in appearance, it has nothing to do with either *siluro* or *sillon*, and the lower-case first letter is an artifact. In any old Larousse you can find the true story of Étienne de Silhouette, of Limoges, the controller general of the sadly ruinous French public finances in 1759. It appears that he had the best of intentions but was heavy-handed. Obsessed with austerity, he issued decrees that were so hasty and bizarre that he quickly became unpopular, and in fact the king relieved him of his position just a few months after appointing him to it, perhaps in part because the reckless functionary had gone so far as to propose that the perquisites of the royal family be reduced. He was pilloried by the satirical broadsheets, and jokes, proverbs, and figures of speech circulated at his expense.

It started with describing as "*à la Silhouette*" any decree that was half baked, clumsy, or foolish; then the term came to designate anything poorly suited to its function or designed too emphatically on the cheap, and in particular portraits reduced to mere outline were said to have been done "*à la Silhouette*." In time, the outline itself came to be called a *silhouette*, and it was via this lengthy path, with the capital letter of his name lost to posterity, that the inspector went down in history, paradoxically not in spite of his wrongheadedness but precisely by virtue of it. All the same, there can be no doubt that, had his name been less elegant, this evolution would have had a different outcome or ended sooner. This is not the only case in which a lower-case letter perpetuates a poor reputation: the term "quisling" is used these days for someone who collaborates with the oppressor of his country by offering to serve as governor, and it will continue to be so employed long after Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegian traitor in the Second World War, has been forgotten.

As a rule, however, the initial capital letter is a tribute to the virtues or the ingenuity of the possessor of the name. The Maecenases of every time and place have kept alive for nearly two millennia the renown of Gaius Cilnius Maecenas, the learned friend of Horace and Virgil. For housewives everywhere on earth, the name of Justus von Liebig, a famous and versatile German chemist, is linked to the beef bouillon cube with which his name has become virtually synonymous: a *liebig* is a common noun for an everyday object. The fact is not without irony: Liebig was a pioneer in all

fields of pure and applied chemistry; he is certainly one of the founding fathers of modern chemistry; and yet his name is inextricably linked to his one successful commercial undertaking, which might rather be called speculative, for in reality what is needed to obtain beef extract is capital rather than knowledge or a spirit of invention.

For that matter, the handbooks for my previous profession teem with nouns that were once proper and have now become common, or used as common nouns: the Kipp generator, the Bunsen burner, the Buchner funnel, the Soxhlet extractor—clever objects developed in the chemical laboratories of the nineteenth century, which enjoy the decorous semi-eternity that was denied their inventors. Who still remembers Professor Soxhlet, the Moravian chemist, physician, and philosopher? He has been nothing but ashes for more than half a century, but the brilliant extractor he invented (the "Soxhlet") still works away in laboratories everywhere, with that slow, intermittent, and silent rhythm that makes it so similar to an organ in our bodies.

I felt, as I mentioned above, the giddy thrill of a mushroom hunter who finds a handsome porcini when I learned that derricks—that is, those metallic latticework structures that are used to drill into the earth to find and extract petroleum—take their name from a Mister Derryck, a hangman in sixteenth-century London: he loved his work, and invented a new model of gallows, latticed, tall and slender, that was clearly visible from a distance. This chance discovery so fascinated me that, in one of my books, I constructed a story around it. The case is significantly parallel to that of the guillotine, invented by Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, that of the chassepot rifle, and many others: in every era the tools for killing tend to be updated and improved. Another fine mushroom, albeit more evanescent than the other ones mentioned here, is the Marie of the bain-marie: it is said that the inventor of the bain-marie was the first alchemist in history, none other than Mary, or Miriam, Moses' prophetess sister.

Few Frenchmen know that *la poubelle*, the word for trash can, immortalizes the name of a Monsieur Poubelle, the prefect who invented it, in the nineteenth century. In Italy, a certain kind of extension ladder, mounted on a trailer and made up of telescoping sections that can be deployed one after another by use of a winch, is called a *scala-porta* (ladder-gate, ladder-door) or even, oddly enough, *vedova-porta* (widow-gate, widow-door). These names have nothing to do with the fact that the

ladder is portable (as *porta-ladder* might suggest), but instead commemorate (or were meant to commemorate) the Signor Porta who invented it, a century ago, and his widow, who long held the patent; but, in this case as well, if fate had chosen to assign Signor Porta a less strangely fitting surname, he might never have had the luck to lose his capital letter, and in all likelihood the ladder he invented would have been given a polysyllabic pseudo-Greek name, such as the periplanetic ladder or the anaptyctic ladder.

Writing a Novel

After thirty-five years of apprenticeship, and patent or camouflaged autobiographical writing, I decided one day to cross over the barrier and write a novel, without much interest in the debate now raging over whether the novel is dead or alive and, if alive, in good health. Now that the undertaking is complete, and the book is in print and in bookstores, I have the agreeable impression of having returned home from an exotic voyage and, like any returnee, I feel the desire to talk about the things I've seen and invite my friends over for a "slide show." Of course, one's friends are often bored by these unasked-for displays; if so, in this case they need only turn the page.

What does it feel like to write things you've made up? Writing about something you've seen is easier than inventing, and less rewarding. It's both writing and describing: you have an outline, you delve into your memories, whether recent or distant, you organize your various finds (if you have the talent), you catalogue them, then you take a sort of mental camera and start clicking. You may be a mediocre photographer, or a good one, or even a "fine art photographer"; you may ennoble the things you depict, or portray them in an impersonal fashion, understated and honest, or even give a distorted, flat, blurry, off-center image of them, under- or overexposed, but in any case you're being guided, led by the hand, by the facts, and you have your feet on the ground.

Writing a novel is quite another matter, it is a form of super-writing: you no longer touch earth, you're in flight, with all the thrills, terrors, and excitements of an early aviator in a biplane made of canvas, twine, and plywood; or perhaps, more accurately, in a tethered balloon whose

moorings have been cut. The initial sensation, destined to wane soon enough, is of boundless, almost licentious freedom. You can pick out the topic or story you like, whether tragic, fantastic, or comic, lunar or solar or saturnine; you can situate it in any era, from the First Day of Creation (or even earlier, why not?) to the present day—or even the most far-flung future—which you're free to shape as you please. You can set your story wherever you please: in the living room of your home, in the empyrean, at the court of Tamerlane, in the hold of a fishing trawler, inside a red corpuscle, in the depths of a mine, or in a bordello—in short, any place you've ever seen, or places you've heard about, or read about, or seen in photographs, or in the movies, or imagined, imaginary, imaginable, unimaginable.

The whole world belongs to you, no, the cosmos; and if this cosmos cramps your style, then you can invent a new one that suits your purpose. If it obeys the laws of physics and common sense, good; if it doesn't, that's fine, too, or perhaps even better. In any case, you won't unleash a catastrophe of any kind—at most, some nitpicking reader will write to express in the most urbane terms his disappointment or disagreement. In short, aside from any time you might have wasted, you run no greater risks than those which face a student turning in a classroom essay: at worst you get a bad grade. Nice work, isn't it?

As for the characters, here things get more complicated. Concerning this subject—the ménage à trois between the author, the character, and the reader—truckloads of books have been written, but, since I am now an expert, I am going to have my say, that is, put on my slide show. Where characters are concerned, too, at first you have an impression of unfettered liberty. Theoretically, you have absolute power over them, such as no tyrant has ever enjoyed on the face of this earth. You can create them as midgets or giants, you can afflict them, torture them, murder them, revive them; or endow them with the eternal beauty and youth, the strength, and the wisdom that you don't have, delight in every passing minute (but could you ever describe such a thing without boring your reader?), as well as love, riches, genius. But only theoretically, because you're tied more closely to them than might appear.

Each of these phantoms is born of your flesh, has your blood in its veins, for better or worse. You propagated it through budding. Even worse, it's a gauge, it gives indications about a part of you, the tensions inside you,

like those glass telltales that are cemented into a wall to determine whether a crack is likely to spread. They're your way of saying "me": when you move them or have them speak, you think twice about what you're doing, for they might say too much. They might even outlive you, perpetuating your bad habits and errors.

Truly, characters in a book are strange creatures. They have no skin, no blood, no flesh, they have less reality than a painting or a dream at night, they possess only the substance of words, black curlicues on a blank sheet of paper, and yet you can pass the time of day with them, converse with them across the centuries, hate them, love them, fall head over heels for them. Each of them is a depository of certain elementary rights, and knows how to assert them. As an author you have freedom in appearance only. If, once you have conceived your homunculus, you try to defy him, if you attempt to impose upon him an act contrary to his nature, or prohibit him from performing an act that would suit him nicely, you'll encounter a form of resistance, invisible but unmistakable: as if you were to command your hand to touch a red-hot iron, or an object that you (or your hand) finds repugnant. He, the nonexistent one, is there, present, exerting his weight, pushing back against your hand: willing and unwilling, wordless and stubborn. If you insist, he pines away. He grows remote and uncooperative, he stops suggesting to you his lines; he dwindles, flattens out, becomes thin and blank. He's paper, and he turns back into paper.

There is another way in which your freedom of invention is only apparent. Just as it is impossible to transform a person of flesh and blood into a character, that is, create an objective, undistorted biography of him, so it is impossible to perform the inverse operation, to create a character without infusing into him, along with your own authorial whims, fragments of people you have met, or of other characters.

The first impossibility is demonstrated by millennia of literature. The return on a written portrait is invariably low, even in the finest of works: the entire *Odyssey* is not sufficient to give us a picture of Ulysses, but not even in a full-scale, classical novel, or an openly avowed biography, in which the author strives to bring you a description of his subject's stature, the color of his hair, eyes, and complexion, his physique, the way he talks, laughs, walks, and gesticulates. Even here, one never attains the level of mimesis, and the reason lies in the basic inadequacy of our means of expression. Film and television come closest to achieving it; in fact, footage of people who

are dead tends to move us more deeply than a written profile. It disturbs us: the person we see move and speak on the screen isn't really dead. And if holograms ever prove capable of bringing us a third dimension, it will be all the more disturbing, it will carry overtones of sorcery. For a writer, it's a waste of time to try to compete with these media.

But the impossibility of creating a character out of nothing seems to me equally ironbound. I have already said that the author invariably transfers into a character (consciously or not, intentionally or not, in some cases coming to the realization that he has done so only when he rereads his pages years after writing them) a part of himself; but the rest, the non-self, is never entirely invented. It teems with memories: these, too, conscious or unconscious, voluntary or not. The character that you naïvely think you've fashioned in your workshop turns out to be a chimera, a mosaic of tiles, of snapshots taken who can say when and relegated to the attic of your memory. An agglomeration, in other words, and you can take credit for having rendered it vivid and credible; but for this art, of extracting an organism from a coacervate, I do not believe clear rules can be established.

We can try to set out some negative rules: it is not necessary for your character to be virtuous, or likable, or wise; nor is it necessary for him to be consistent; in fact, perhaps the opposite is true. A character who is too consistent becomes predictable, that is, boring: he makes no sudden moves, he is programmed, he has no free will. He should be inconsistent the way we all are, have shifting moods, make mistakes, lose his way, grow from page to page, or decline, or pass away. If he remains unvaried he will be not a simulacrum of a living creature but, rather, the simulacrum of a statue, that is, a double simulacrum.

Let there be no mistake: beneath this inconsistency lies a more profound consistency, but to define it is more than I can do; whether or not it has been respected becomes clear only later, when the words have been written, and the signal is given by the reader's blood, which for a brief moment flows a little warmer and a little faster.

Stable/Unstable

I read with genuine pleasure that the headquarters of the fire department for greater metropolitan Turin is planning to distribute (through the schools, I would guess) ten thousand copies of a handbook on how to prevent accidents, and especially fires in the home. With pleasure, along with astonishment that no one had ever thought of it before, as well as a small shiver of nostalgia for my old profession, in which fear of fire was a constant concern of all my working hours (and even of many hours of rest and relaxation); in compensation, though, it also made us quick and alert, and harked back to the days when that fear was instilled in children and lasted the rest of their lives, because houses were built of wood.

Anyone who has had occasion to work with wood, for professional or artistic reasons, or for amusement, will know that it is an extraordinary material, unequaled even by the most modern plastics. It has two great secrets: it is porous, and therefore light, and it has sharply differing qualities along or against the grain; suffice it to imagine the different effects caused by an ax blow delivered to the top or the side of a log. There is no such thing as “bad” wood and there is no variety of tree whose wood has failed to find some specific application: cedar for pencils, basswood for piano keys, balsawood for the long-ago watercraft that set sail from South America into the mysterious west, but also for the chairs that movie actors break over one another’s heads in brawl scenes.

For millennia wood has been the construction material, “material,” by definition, to such an extent that in some languages the same word is used to mean “matter” and “wood.” There can be no doubt that our forebears, ten thousand or a hundred thousand years ago, learned to work with wood long

before learning to cast bronze. And yet beside their bones we find flints, shells, bronze, silver, and gold, but never (or only under the most exceptional circumstances) wood, and this ought to put us on the alert.

It should remind us that wood, like all organic substances, is stable only in appearance. Its excellent mechanical properties go hand in hand with an intrinsic chemical fragility. In our oxygen-rich atmosphere, wood is roughly as stable as a billiard ball perched on a shelf edged by a rim no higher than the thickness of a piece of tissue paper. It may remain there for a long time, but all it takes is a tiny unnoticed push, or even a breath of air, to knock it over the barrier and onto the floor. Wood, in other words, is eager to be oxidized, that is, to be destroyed.

Its progress toward destruction may be exceedingly slow and take place in silence and cold, as is the case with buried wood, with the agency of air, aided by the bacteria found underground; or it can be instantaneous and dramatic, when the impulse is provided by a heat source. Then fire breaks out: a rare event in our cities of cement, iron, and glass, but common in the past. The memory remains strong in places where people still build with wood. Many years ago in Norway I spent the night in a wonderful hotel made entirely of wood, in the midst of a vast and silent forest. In the corner of each room there was a coiled length of heavy rope, one end of which was loose, while the other was secured to the floor: in case of fire, this would be used to lower oneself through the window down to the ground.

Because the enemy of wood is air, or, to be exact, the oxygen in the air, it is understandable that wood is the more endangered the greater the volume of air surrounding it: wood in thin sheets, in sticks, in shavings, in sawdust. The last, especially, is a source of risk that I hope is not overlooked in the handbook mentioned above: in part because it is widely used and is often piled up and forgotten like any other inert material. But it isn’t always inert, especially when it’s dry.

In a factory where I worked for many years, it was common practice to use sawdust to clean the floors. We knew that it was a substance that needed to be treated with care, so we never stored it in the production area: one time we bought ten drums of sawdust and stored them outdoors, under a shed roof; it never occurred to anyone to put lids on them, because the cleaning crews frequently came out to get sawdust, and because “that was how it had always been done.”

The drums stood there for many months, until one day a foreman came to tell me that one of the barrels was smoking. I went to see for myself: nine of the barrels were cold to the touch, the tenth was scorching hot and a sinister plume of smoke was rising from the surface of the sawdust. We dug into it with a shovel: at the center of the drum was a nest of embers and all around it the sawdust had already begun to char. If we had stored that barrel in a production area or a warehouse, the whole factory might have burned down.

Why did one burn and the other nine not? We talked it over at length, and then, deciding to take a closer look at the surviving barrels, we noticed that the sawdust was anything but uniform: perhaps it came from different sawmills, but it was certainly made of different kinds of wood. It probably also contained extraneous materials. These factors might explain why the barrels had behaved differently, but it didn't do much to help understand why one barrel caught fire the way it did. Then someone started talking about spontaneous combustion, and everyone felt reassured, because once you give something unknown a name you immediately have the impression that you know a little more about it.

In any case, I went to tell the story to the fire chief at the time, a no-nonsense, practical fellow. No, he didn't have very clear ideas about spontaneous combustion, in fact, he considered that to be a trick name, a word to cover up ignorance, not unlike what the physicians call cryptogenic fever; but he'd seen plenty of cases like ours, not all of them involving sawdust, some of them culminating in catastrophe, and all of them sharing a single unsettling trait. In each case, an apparently inert heap of material lying forgotten somewhere, in an attic, in a cellar, or in a dump, under a prompting that almost invariably remained unknown, suddenly "remembered" that it possessed energy, that it was not in a state of equilibrium with its environment, that it was, in other words, in the same condition as the billiard ball on the shelf.

The boundaries of this fragile stability, which chemists call metastability, are far-reaching. Lying within them, alongside everything that is alive, are also virtually all organic substances, both natural and synthetic, and still other substances, all those which we can see change their state abruptly, unexpectedly: a clear sky that is secretly saturated with humidity and suddenly turns cloudy; a tranquil body of water that, at a temperature below 0 degrees Celsius, freezes in mere instants when you toss a small

stone into it. But one is tempted to extend those boundaries a little farther, to include in that territory our social behaviors, our tensions, all of present-day mankind, condemned and accustomed to living in a world where everything seems stable but in fact isn’t, in which terrifying powers (and I’m not just talking about nuclear arsenals) sleep, but only lightly.

Masters of Our Fate

Is it permissible for someone who is unqualified, helpless, and naïve, yet not entirely unfamiliar with the evils of the world, to say a word or two in an entirely personal capacity, concerning that issue of issues—the looming nuclear threat? Recently Mondadori published the Italian edition of a fundamental, necessary, and terrifying book, *The Fate of the Earth*, by Jonathan Schell: after reading the book, one emerges stunned, frightened, and yet eager to act, to talk it over, or at least to think it over, which, oddly, is something we do not often do. To put it briefly: in the case of an extended nuclear war, not only will there be neither losers nor winners but the combined effects of the blasts and the subsequent radioactivity will result in the extinction, in the course of days or months, not only of the human race but of all warm-blooded animals; fish might survive a little longer; certainly insects and some plants will. What will the "privileged few" do when they emerge from their extremely expensive and sophisticated nuclear fallout shelters?

As you can see, this is a novel situation: the experience of history, the grim wisdom from recent wars, is in no way helpful. And yet we don't think about it, or at least we don't think about it much; young people, apparently, think about it least of all, and, perhaps because they were born in the atomic age, they seem to accept as natural the current balance of terror, even though it offers few assurances of long-term stability. Why? For a number of reasons.

Because we tend to repress all our sources of distress, much as we have all learned, from time immemorial, to repress our distress at our own individual death. Because we all need to focus on more pressing problems,

such as world hunger, our impending fate, disease, poverty, the uncertainty of justice and employment. And also because, perhaps, at some more or less conscious level, a modest quantity of optimism persists out of the memory of all that has happened around us since the day, forty years ago, when Fermi's atomic pile first went into operation, proving at the same time that mankind can in the future rely upon a limitless source of energy, and that the power unleashed by the transmutation of a few grams of matter can be enough to destroy two cities in a matter of seconds, and to create an incalculable measure of human suffering.

From that day to this, over forty years of tense confrontation, cold at times, at other times less so, we have seen that even amid the most serious crises a rudimentary prudence has prevailed: just as during the Second World War poison gasses were not put into use, even though horrifying arsenals of them were available on all sides, likewise during the Cuban Missile Crisis and in the grim morass of Vietnam the opposing sides looked each other straight in the eye and didn't push the nuclear button.

This is hardly enough to set our minds at rest; still, there is a glaring difference between the style of politics as it has been practiced in the first and the second halves of the twentieth century. In the first half we witnessed (and how many of us contributed to!) the emergence of personalities well outside the measure of man, still poorly deciphered, such as Hitler and Stalin (in certain aspects, and in their ambitions, the same can be said perhaps of the last Kaiser and of Mussolini); they were able to exploit the press, and subsequently the new mass media, to mobilize their people emotionally, and, in the interaction with them and with one another, they unleashed the horrors of two world wars.

Now those mass media have grown in terms of power and broad penetration, and yet, for reasons that elude us, the likelihood that uncontrollable, inhuman individuals, similar to the first two mentioned, might emerge in our midst seems to have diminished. We don't know why, but these days the world stage seems to be occupied by gray, tentative, fleeting men, who appear and act, but are neither demonic nor charismatic: qualities that only appear to be opposites, and which are equally detestable.

The last charismatic man was, perhaps, Mao, about whom we still know little, and whose pros and cons we cannot weigh. These new men seem chiefly concerned with preserving power for themselves and their followers. They arouse no enthusiasm, but we have learned to beware of

enthusiasm: there does not appear to have formed, or to be forming, around the small-scale imitators of those models of the distant past a clot of blind, brainless, fanatical support, such as that which seemed to give power to Hitler and Stalin. The future that these new and happily modest leaders promise us (though they may perhaps be individually disposed to undertake the most despicable acts) is no cause for exaltation, but it is not the apocalypse, which they seem to fear as much as we do, and whose "spontaneous" unleashing they also fear. Instead, it is an indefinitely protracted series of hypocritical negotiations, exhausting, largely secret, yet negotiations nonetheless: it is an interminable stalemate.

And yet it is to these bland masters of our fate—whether they have actually, or only apparently, or by no means at all, been elected by the will of their peoples—that we have entrusted enormous powers of decision making: they and they alone are in the control rooms. It is they whom we must influence, and we must make ourselves clearly heard by them, from every corner of the world, by every means available, with all possible initiatives, even the oddest and most naïve that our imaginations can come up with.

We don't ask much of them: only that they try to be a little more farsighted. In spite of all our problems, we're stronger than we've ever been. In the space of just a few decades we have expanded to a fabulous extent the boundaries of our knowledge, toward both the immensely large and the immensely small; soon perhaps we shall know whether, how, and when (but not why!) the universe was created. We have timidly set foot on the Moon, defeated the most horrifying pestilences, and concentrated in minuscule silicon chips astonishing "intellectual" capacities; the solutions to the challenges of energy and the population explosion are no longer utopian dreams, and we know that the degradation of our environment is not a fatal and irreversible curse.

As a species, we're not stupid. Shouldn't we be able to tear down the barriers of police states, and convey from one people to another our desire for peace? Couldn't we, for example, put on the table of our international summit conferences an old idea, inspired by the oath that Hippocrates once formulated for physicians? That every young person who intends to dedicate himself to the pursuit of physics, chemistry, or biology should swear not to undertake research and studies that are clearly harmful to the human race? It's naïve, and I'm aware of it; many will refuse to swear that

oath, many will swear falsely, but surely there are a few who will keep the faith, and the number of sorcerers' apprentices will decline.

It is speech that differentiates us from animals: we must learn to make good use of words. Much cruder minds than ours, thousands and millions of years ago, resolved more daunting problems. We must ensure that the murmur of voices rising from the depths is heard loud and strong, even in countries where murmuring is forbidden. It is a murmur that springs not only from fear but also from a generation's sense of guilt. We must amplify it. We must suggest, propose, and impose a few clear and simple ideas upon the men who lead us, and they are ideas that any good merchant will understand: that agreement is the best kind of deal, and that in the long term mutual good faith is the most cunning of tricks.

News from the Sky

Immanuel Kant recognized two wonders in creation: the starry sky above his head, and the moral law within him. Let's leave aside moral law: is it to be found within everyone? Is it true, can we admit that it's innate in us, that we are born with it, and in the course of an individual life it evolves and matures, or does it, rather, degenerate and die out? Every year that passes only amplifies our doubts. In the face of the political necrosis that afflicts our nation, and not ours alone; in the face of the senseless race toward nuclear rearmament, we can hardly avoid the suspicion that there is some perverse principle that outweighs the moral law, whereby power accrues to those who are completely indifferent to this law—which we see as unchanging over time and throughout the universe, the glue that holds together all civilizations—and cannot feel its sting, who lack it and don't seem to miss it.

The starry sky, however, is still there: it's overhead for one and all, even though we city dwellers see it only rarely, obscured as it is by our smog, squeezed between the roofs, defaced by television antennas. Speaking of which, let me open a parenthesis here and mention an idea I find unsettling. Unlike radio waves, the waves used to broadcast television aren't reflected back to Earth by the upper atmosphere: they are not contained within our earthly shell, they are no longer our private affair. The visible bandwidth of light—for instance, nighttime city street lighting—behaves in the same way, but those waves contain practically no information. Television waves, in contrast, are rich in information; they penetrate the ionosphere and escape into cosmic space. Earth, on those wavelengths, is "luminous," it's talkative. A perceptive extraterrestrial observer, properly equipped and

curious about our lives, could learn quite a bit about our collapsing governments, our laundry detergents, our aperitifs, and the diapers we use for babies. Such an observer would get a peculiar picture of the way we live.

But let's return to the starry sky. When we glimpse it on clear nights, from a vantage point far from the interference of our own lighting, it's still the same: its fascination hasn't altered. The "shimmering stars of the Bear"[1] are the same stars that restored Leopardi's sense of peace, the W of Cassiopeia, the cross of Cygnus, Orion the giant, the triangle of Boötes flanked by the Corona Borealis and the Pleiades that Sappho loved so well: these are all still the same; we learned to recognize them as children and they have been with us throughout our lives. It is the heaven "of the fixed stars," immutable, incorruptible; the antagonist to our earthly world, the noble-perfect-eternal that embraces and envelops the ignoble-changeable-ephemeral.

And yet we no longer have the right to look at the stars this way, in such a naïve and simplistic manner. The human sky is no longer what it was. We've learned to explore it with radio telescopes, we know how to send instruments into orbit that can detect the radiation that the atmosphere blocks, and we are obliged to realize that the stars visible to our eyes, whether naked or assisted, are no more than a tiny minority; the sky is being rapidly populated with a throng of new and unsuspected objects.

A hundred years ago, the universe was purely "optical"; it wasn't especially mysterious, and we believed it would become less and less so. We saw it as friendly and familiar: every star was a sun like ours, larger or smaller, warmer or cooler, but not fundamentally different; a few of the stars did seem to be somewhat unsettled, and here and there new ones had appeared, but everything suggested that the design of the universe was the same everywhere. Spectroscopes sent back reassuring messages: nothing to be afraid of, the stars were made up of hydrogen, helium, magnesium, sodium, and iron, the basic materials of Earth chemistry.

It was thought likely that every star-sun had its own entourage of planets: some astronomers (first among them Camille Flammarion, the eager and tireless popularizer) even asserted that each star *had* to have one, otherwise it would have no reason to exist. Indeed, every planet, including those orbiting our sun, had to be an abode of life, or to have once been one, or destined to be one in the future: excessively sharpeyed observers saw

fleeting lights and smoke on the Moon, and on Mars networks of canals too orderly and geometric to be the product of nature unaided. A universe inhabited by us alone, imperfect as we are, would be nothing but an immense and useless piece of machinery.

Now the sky that hangs over our heads is no longer familiar. It is becoming increasingly intricate, unpredictable, violent, and strange; its mystery grows instead of dwindling, and every discovery, every answer to old questions engenders myriad new questions. Copernicus and Galileo shoved mankind out of the center of creation: that was only a change of address, though many experienced it as a demotion and a humiliation. Today our awareness extends much further: we see that the imagination of the creator of the universe does not respect our own boundaries, indeed, it has no boundaries, and our astonishment, too, becomes boundless. Not only are we not the center of the cosmos but we are alien to it: we are a singularity. The universe is strange to us, and we are strange within the universe.

Generations of lovers and poets have gazed upon the stars with confidence, as if upon familiar faces: they were friendly symbols, reassuring, dispensers of destinies, obligatory presences in both popular and sublime poetry; Dante ended each of the three canticles of his poem with the word “stars.” The stars of today, both visible and invisible, have changed their nature. They are atomic furnaces. They transmit not messages of peace or of poetry but other messages, ponderous and unsettling, decipherable by only a few initiates, controversial, alien.

The directory of celestial monsters is virtually endless: our everyday language fails at description, unsuited to the task. There are “small” stars that are unimaginably dense, rotating dozens of times per second, shooting out into space a babble of radio waves intended for no one and devoid of meaning: they have always done this, and they always will. There are stars that emit energy at an intensity greater than the output of our entire galaxy, so far away that we see them as they must have looked at the dawn of time. There are others no hotter than a cup of tea; and, finally, the much discussed black holes, so far more the product of speculation than of observation—supposed celestial graves and sinkholes, whose gravitational fields are thought to be so intense that neither matter nor radiation can escape them.

The scientist and poet has not yet been born—and perhaps never will be—who might be capable of extracting harmony from this tangled darkness,

of making it compatible with, comparable to, assimilable by our traditional culture and the experience of our five paltry senses, designed to guide us within terrestrial horizons. This news from heaven poses a challenge to our reason.

It is a challenge that we must accept. Our nobility as thinking reeds demands it: perhaps the heavens are no longer part of our poetic heritage, but they will be—indeed, already are—vital nutrition for our thoughts. It's possible that our brain is unique in the universe: we don't know if that's true, nor in all likelihood will we ever, but we do know that it's something more complex and harder to describe than a star or a planet. Let us not deny it nourishment, let us not give in to panic at the thought of the unknown. Perhaps it will fall to those who study the stars to tell us what prophets and philosophers have failed to tell us, or have told us badly: who we are, where we come from, and where we're going.

The future of mankind is uncertain, even in the more prosperous nations, and the quality of life is declining; all the same, I believe that what is being discovered about the infinitely large and the infinitely small is enough to absolve this end of the century and the millennium. What a very few are boldly achieving in terms of our understanding of the physical world will ensure that this period is judged as something more than a return to barbarism.

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1. From Leopardi's poem "Le ricordanze" ("The Recollections").

Beetles

It is said that the famous British biologist J. B. S. Haldane, back in the days when he was a firm believer in Marxism (that is to say, before the Lysenko scandal undermined many of his certainties), replied to a churchman who asked to know his conception of God: “He is inordinately fond of beetles.” I would guess that Haldane, when he used the generic term “beetles,” was referring to coleoptera, and in this case we can certainly agree with him: for reasons that we don’t really understand, this “model” alone, albeit within the remarkably multiform class of insects, numbers at least 350,000 officially catalogued species, and new species are being discovered every day. Since there are many environments and parts of the world that have not yet been explored by specialists, it is estimated that there are currently one and a half million species of coleoptera. Now, we mammals, so proud of our role as the crown of creation, number no more than 5000 species; it is unlikely that many more than a few dozen new species will be discovered, while many of the existing ones are rapidly reaching extinction.

And yet the coleoptera’s invention doesn’t seem so innovative after all: it consists “only” of changing the purpose of the forward pair of wings. They are no longer wings but “elytra”: they are hardened and thickened, and their only function is to protect the rear wings, which are membranous and delicate. If you think of the meticulous ceremony with which a ladybug or a May bug prepares for flight, and you compare it with the instantaneous and directional takeoff of the fly, you will easily see that for most coleoptera flight is not a way of escaping attack but, rather, a method of transport that the insect resorts to only for long journeys: a bit like one of us who, when taking a plane, puts up with the purchase of the ticket, the

process of check-in, and the lengthy wait in the airport. A ladybug opens its elytra, fiddles around to untangle its wings, finally spreads them, lifts the elytra obliquely, and begins its flight, neither agile nor fast. We must conclude, it seems, that there is a high price to be paid for solid armor.

But the armor of the coleoptera is an admirable structure: to be admired, unfortunately, only in the vitrines of zoological museums. It is a masterpiece of natural engineering, reminiscent of the suits of armor, made entirely of iron, worn by medieval warriors. There are no chinks: head, neck, thorax, and abdomen, although they are not welded together, form a stout block that is virtually invulnerable, the fragile antennae can be retracted into channels, and even the leg joints are protected by jutting segments reminiscent of the greaves in the *Iliad*. The resemblance between a beetle pushing its way through the grass, slow and powerful, and a tank is so great that a metaphor comes immediately to mind, working in both directions: the insect is a tiny panzer tank, the panzer tank is an enormous insect. And the beetle's back is heraldic: convex or flat, opaque or glistening, it is an aristocratic coat of arms, though its appearance has no symbolic relationship with its owner's "calling"—that is, the way it eludes its predators, reproduces, and feeds.

It is here that the Almighty's "fondness" for beetles unleashes its full imagination. There is no organic material on Earth, living or dead or decomposed, that hasn't found a fan among the coleoptera. Many beetles are omnivorous, others feed only at the expense of a single plant or animal species. There are beetles that eat only snails and have transformed themselves into an ideal tool for that purpose: they have become living syringes, with a voluminous abdomen but a head and thorax that are elongated and penetrating in shape. They insert themselves into the soft body of their victim, inject digestive fluids into it, wait for the tissues to break down, and then suck them out.

The beautiful cetoniae (so beloved of Gozzano: "*Disperate cetonie capovolte*"—"Desperate upside-down cetoniae"—one of the loveliest lines of poetry ever composed in Italian) feed only on roses, while the no less beautiful sacred beetles live exclusively on cattle dung: the male beetle shapes the dung into a ball, seizes it between his hind tarsi as if between two hinges, then moves off in reverse, pushing it and rolling it until he finds suitable soil in which to bury it: then the female enters the scene and lays a single egg in it. The larva will feed on this material (no longer ignoble) that

the foresightful couple has assembled with such great effort, and, after the larva molts, a new beetle will emerge from the tomb: indeed, according to certain ancient observers, the same insect as before, risen from death like the Phoenix.

Other beetles live in sluggish or stagnant water. They are magnificent swimmers: some, for unknown reasons, swim in tight circles or complicated spirals, while others move in straight lines in pursuit of invisible prey. None of them have lost the ability to fly, though, because they are frequently forced to abandon a pond that has dried up and search for another body of still water, maybe a considerable distance away. Once, driving at night on a moonlit highway, I heard the windows and roof of my car being peppered as if by hail: it was a swarm of diving beetles, shiny, dark brown edged with orange, each half the size of a walnut; they had mistaken the asphalt of the highway for a river and were unsuccessfully trying to set down on the water. These beetles, for hydrodynamic reasons, have attained a compactness and simplicity of shape I believe is unique in the animal kingdom: seen from above, they are perfect ellipses, from which only the legs protrude, transformed into oars.

When it comes to escaping dangers and predators, these insects “think of everything.” Some exotic species, no bigger than a fava bean, are endowed with unbelievable muscular strength. Grasp one in your hand and it will force its way out between your fingers; if swallowed by a toad (a mistake! though a toad will swallow any small object it sees moving horizontally), it will not follow the tactics of Jonah swallowed by the whale or Pinocchio and Geppetto in the belly of the Terrible Dogfish, but, with the strength of its forelegs, meant for burrowing, will simply dig an exit through the body of the predator.

Other singular escapes are those of the Elateridae, or click beetles, handsome local beetles with elongated bodies. If picked up, or disturbed in any other way, they will fold up legs and antennae and play dead; but after a minute or two you’ll hear a sudden *click*, and the insect will shoot into the air. This brief jump, meant to disorient an attacker, does not rely on the legs: the click beetle has come up with a novel system of tension and release. In the position in which it plays dead, thorax and abdomen are out of alignment, forming a slight angle: they suddenly straighten when a sort of latch is released, and the click beetle is gone.

The cool light of the firefly (it, too, is a beetle) is not designed for defense; instead it serves to facilitate mating. This, likewise, is an invention unparalleled among animals that live out of water; but there are super-fireflies of other species, whose females imitate the steady light of the female firefly, thus attracting male fireflies and gobbling them up as soon as they set down next to them.

These behaviors trigger a complicated array of impressions: astonishment, curiosity, admiration, horror, hilarity. But it seems to me that what prevails over all is a sensation of strangeness: these little flying fortresses, these small but prodigious machines whose instincts were programmed a hundred million years ago, have nothing in common with us, and they represent a totally different approach to the problem of survival. To some extent, or even just symbolically, we humans recognize ourselves in the social structures of ants and bees, in the industriousness of the spider, and in the dance of the butterfly. But there is really nothing linking us to beetles, not even parental care, since it is exceedingly rare for a mother beetle (and even rarer for a father beetle) to see its offspring before dying. They are other, aliens, monsters. Kafka knew what he was doing in his atrocious hallucination, where the traveling salesman Gregor Samsa, “waking one morning from uneasy dreams,” finds he has been changed into an enormous beetle, so inhuman that no member of his family can tolerate his presence.

Let it be said, then: these “others” have shown admirable abilities to adapt to all climates, they have colonized all the ecological niches, and they eat everything: some even punch their way through lead and tinfoil. They have developed armor that has an extraordinary resistance to shocks, compression, chemical agents, and radiation. Some of them dig burrows that extend meters deep into the ground. If there were to be a nuclear catastrophe, they would be the leading candidates to succeed us (not the dung beetles, though; they would lack raw materials to feed on).

Above all, their technology is ingenious but rudimentary and instinctive; from the day they take over the world, many millions of years will have to pass before a beetle particularly beloved of God completes his calculations and finds, written on a piece of paper in letters of fire, that energy is equal to mass multiplied by the speed of light squared. The new kings of the planet will live long and peacefully, doing no more than devouring and parasitizing one another on an artisanal scale.

Ritual and Laughter

There are those who write in order to astonish, and, indeed, there have been times when striking wonder into the reader was considered to be the chief objective of the writer's profession: but the book that most astonished me, and which I happened upon by chance, was certainly never written with that aim. It is a book with a religious subject, or, to be precise, a ritual subject, and I am not a religious person; but I'm not going to comment on the book with any critical intent, because I respect believers and sometimes envy them. Its peculiarities made me reflect: they brought me back to a way of thinking about life and the world that is far from our own, but which we ought to understand if we hope to understand ourselves, and which it would be foolish to dismiss with scorn.

The book is called the *Shulchan Aruch* (*The Set Table*); it was written in Hebrew (though I read it in translation) in the sixteenth century by a Spanish rabbi. Although it is a book of considerable heft, it is a compendium of many preceding volumes, and it basically contains the rules, the customs, and the beliefs of the Judaism of its time. It is divided into four sections that concern, respectively: precepts for everyday life, the Sabbath, and holidays; food, money, purity, and mourning; marriage; civil and criminal rabbinical law. The author, Joseph Caro, was a Sephardi and knew nothing about the laws and customs of the Eastern Jews; therefore the text was later revised by the famous rabbi Moses Isserles of Kraków, who wrote a commentary, shrewdly entitled *The Tablecloth*, which he intended as a way of filling the gaps in the work and making it suitable for Ashkenazi readers.

Jews, as we know, are forbidden to utter the “true” name of God: even though it is printed in books, when one is reading aloud it must be replaced by synonyms. Normally, it is permissible to utter the word “God” in languages other than Hebrew (though I once knew a German Jew who, out of extreme reverence and fear of sinning, wrote *Gtt* instead of *Gott* in his letters; the few Italian disciples of the Lubavitcher Rebbe do the same thing, writing *D-o* instead of *Dio*), and yet the authors of *The Set Table* and *The Tablecloth* worry about what might happen in public baths, where the presence of naked human bodies makes the atmosphere intensely profane; and so, in the baths, it is preferable not to utter the name of God “even in German or Polish.” As you see, this is certainly a gloss by Isserles: for that matter, it does not seem that in sixteenth-century Spain public baths were very common. For similar reasons, one must not write *adiós*, *addio*, or *adieu* in the closing salutations of letters: the letter might become dirty or wind up in the garbage.

The concept of nudity is vast, especially where women are concerned: nudity includes every portion of the body that is habitually covered, and likewise the hair. In short, nudity includes everything that can attract a man’s attention and distract him from the thought of God; therefore “even the voice of a woman singing” is comparable to nudity.

The same extreme tendency, that of “building a hedge around the law,” is also observed with regard to the prohibition against working on the Sabbath. The fundamental labors of the lives of farmers and artisans of the period are extended with unrestrained imagination. It is forbidden to crush grapes: therefore, any “squeezing” is likewise forbidden; for example, one cannot squeeze fruit; but if the liquid so obtained is to be discarded, then it is permissible to squeeze, and one can squeeze and drain salad. It is forbidden to hunt; what should one do about a flea? It is permissible to catch it and cast it far away, but the flea must not be killed. To hunt is also to capture or to trap: therefore, before you close a crate or a trunk, you must make certain that it contains neither flies nor moths. If you were to shut them in, you would be guilty of hunting, inadvertently and unknowingly, and you would have violated the Sabbath.

How are you to behave if, on the Sabbath, you chance to notice that your vat is leaking? You can’t plug the leak, because that would be menial labor; nor can you explicitly ask your Christian servant or friend to take care of it, because ordering others to work is forbidden, too. Nor can you

suggest paying him the following day, because that would be a contract, and contracts, too, are forbidden on the Sabbath.

This is the solution offered: if the damage threatens to be serious, you can state impersonally, “If someone were to repair this, he would have no reason to regret it.”

On the day of rest and cheer it is also forbidden to write and erase, perhaps in commemoration of the time when writing meant chiseling letters into stone. This prohibition has given rise to an impressively ramified body of case studies. Tracing letters, or even curlicues, on a fogged glass is not permitted; when handling a book, one must take care not to scratch its cover with a fingernail; on the other hand, it is permissible to eat a cake that bears writing or images. To sweep is a form of abrasion and so, with reckless expansion of the concept, it is included among the tasks that are forbidden because it entails an erasure; but it is permissible to do so “in an unaccustomed way,” for instance, by using goose feathers instead of a broom. It is forbidden to light a fire and also to extinguish a fire. Of course, it is permissible to put out a fire on the Sabbath if it endangers human lives; however, “if an article of clothing catches fire, one may pour water on the part that is not burning, but not directly on the fire.”

Idolatry must be held in abomination. One must not even allow one’s gaze to rest on idols, or draw any closer to them than a distance of four cubits. If, when you pass close by an idol, a thorn may chance to pierce your foot, you must not bend down to remove it, because that might be seen by some as a gesture of respect, but you must refrain from bending over even if no one is there to see, because it might appear as such to you yourself later, in your memory. You must move away, or take a seat, or, at the very least, turn your back to the idol.

Concerning the prohibition against eating meat and dairy together, hypotheses and solutions that recall the studies and problems of chess players are formulated: that is to say, situations are imagined that are abstract and elegantly improbable, but useful for subtle reasoning. If two pious Jews dine together at the same table, and one is eating meat and the other dairy, they must draw a line on the tablecloth to separate the two areas, or in some manner mark a boundary. They must not drink from the same glass, because traces of food can stick to it. If along with the meat you make a dish with almond “milk,” you must leave a few whole almonds, to make it evident that it’s not real milk.

What can we say of this labyrinth? The product of bygone days? A waste of time and intelligence? A deterioration of religious sentiment to a mass of rules? Is this *Set Table* something we should discard, forget, or defend? And if we should defend it, just how? I don't think that we can shake off this book, or ritual in general, for that matter, with a shrug, the way we do with things that mean nothing to us. Ritual, all ritual, is a condensation of history and prehistory: it's a fruit pit with a fine, complex structure, it's a riddle to be solved; if solved, it can help us to solve other riddles that affect us more intimately. And besides, the Manes, or ancestral spirits, surely count for something.

Moreover, I sense in this *Table* an allure that belongs to all times, the allure of *subtilitas*, of the impartial play of the intellect: splitting hairs is not the pursuit of an idler but, rather, a form of mental training. Behind these curious pages I perceive an age-old taste for audacious discussion, an intellectual flexibility that isn't afraid of contradictions but, if anything, welcomes them as an inevitable ingredient of life; and life is rules, life is order prevailing over Chaos, but rules have wrinkles, unexplored inlets of exceptions, license, indulgence, and disarray. Woe to those who erase them: they may contain the seeds of all our tomorrows, because the machinery of the universe is subtle, subtle are the laws that govern it, and every year we discover new subtleties in the rules that particles obey. Einstein's observation has been quoted often: "Subtle is the Lord, but malicious He is not"; subtle, therefore, in His image, must be those who follow Him. It is worth noting that in the ranks of physicists and cybernetic engineers there are many Jews whose origins are in Eastern Europe: could their *esprit de finesse* be nothing more than a Talmudic heritage?

Above all, however, and beneath the serious exterior, I sense in this *Table* a laughter that I like: it is the same laughter one finds in the Jewish folk tales where the rules are boldly upended, and it is our own laughter, the laughter of "modern" readers. Whoever wrote that pinching a flea between thumb and forefinger is a form of hunting, or that to open a book on the Sabbath that has writing on the edges of the book block *is probably* unlawful (because, by so doing, one erases a written message), laughed as he wrote, the way we laugh as we read: he was no different from us, even if he was occupied with distinguishing between lawful and unlawful forms of work, and we with corporate balance sheets or reinforced concrete or alphanumeric codes.

The Invisible World

One day, my father, who was an expert habitué of all the used bookstalls along Via Cernaia, brought home a slim, elegantly bound volume for me; it had been printed in London in 1846, and the title, at once modest and pretentious, was *Thoughts on Animalcules; or, a Glimpse of the Invisible World Revealed by the Microscope,* by Gideon Algernon Mantell, Esq., LL.D., F.R.S. (Gentleman, Doctor of Laws, and Fellow of the Royal Society). Following the title page was a high-flown dedication, *"To the most noble Marquess of Northampton,"* that went on for twelve lines, some of which were set in gothic type.

I was fifteen years old, and I was immediately dazzled: primarily by the illustrations, since I didn't know a word of English. But I bought a dictionary, and I discovered to my happy astonishment that, unlike with Latin, this aid was sufficient to understand everything or almost everything; that is, I very clearly understood the text proper, which described with candid precision the appearances and habits of the "animalcules." I understood much less of the prolix preface, which cited Herschel, Shelley, Hobbes and Byron, Milton and Locke, along with many other elect spirits who had in one way or another concerned themselves with the invisible things that are suspended between the Earth and the sky.

I had the impression that the author might be confusing things that can't be seen because they're too small with other things that can't be seen because they don't exist, such as gnomes, fairies, ghosts, and the spirits of the dead; but the topic was so interesting, so different from the lessons I was being given at school, at the Regio Ginnasio, and so perfectly suited to the curiosities I was experiencing at the time that I buried myself in the slim

volume for several weeks, to the detriment of my progress as a scholar but with the side benefit that I picked up a little English.

The book's epigraph was electrifying, lying midway between the scientific and the visionary: "In the leaves of every forest—in the flowers of every garden—in the waters of every rivulet—there are worlds teeming with life, and numberless as are the glories of the firmament." Could that be true? Literally true, in the waters of every rivulet? Inside me there grew, as sudden and painful as a stomach cramp, an urgent need for a microscope, and I told my father so.

My father eyed me with a slightly alarmed expression. It wasn't that he disapproved of my interest in natural history. He was an engineer, he'd worked as an industrial designer in a major factory in Hungary; at the time of which I write, he sold and installed electric motors, but as a young man he'd frequented the positivist milieu of the Turin of his day: Cesare Lombroso, Amedeo Herlitzka, Angelo Mosso, scientists who were at once skeptics and easily led astray, and who seemed to take turns hypnotizing one another, reading Fontenelle, Flammarion, and Annie Besant, and levitating tables.

My father felt for science a love tinged with regret, and he would have been pleased to have me follow a path that the vicissitudes of life had forced him to abandon; still, it struck him as somewhat unnatural that his adolescent son should wish for a microscope instead of the many other blithe and straightforward pleasures that the world offers. I believe that he turned to someone else for advice: the fact remains that a few months later the microscope was delivered to our home.

In hindsight, that instrument wasn't much to speak of: it offered only a 200 power magnification, the illumination was dim, and it produced chromatic aberrations that would make your head spin, but I fell in love with it instantly, even more than with the bicycle I'd managed to obtain after two years of entreaties and cautious diplomacy. For that matter, the bicycle and the microscope were in a certain sense complementary: without a bicycle, and setting out from the center of town, how else could I have reached the gardens, the forests, and the rivulets mentioned by my text? In any case, before planning an expedition, I devoted myself to a microscopic inventory of everything I could find on my person and in my surroundings.

The hairs that I yanked out of my scalp had a completely unexpected appearance: they looked like the trunks of palm trees, and by looking

closely it was possible to make out, on their surface, those tiny scales that made a hair feel smoother if one ran one's finger from the root to the extremity rather than in the opposite direction: here was a first question that the microscope was capable of answering. The root of the hair, on the other hand, was quite repugnant; it looked like a flabby tuber covered with warts.

The skin of my fingertips was very difficult to observe, because it was practically impossible to hold my finger still in front of the lens; but when I managed it for a few seconds I saw a weird landscape, reminiscent of the terracings of the Ligurian hills and of tilled farmland: large pink translucent furrows, running parallel, but with sudden curves and bifurcations. A palm reader equipped with a microscope would have been able to predict the future in much greater detail than by examining the palm of the hand with the naked eye. It would have been interesting—indeed, to some extent basic—to examine blood and see the reddish globules described in the book, but I lacked the courage to puncture my finger, and my sister (who for that matter seemed singularly deaf to my enthusiasm) firmly refused to either puncture mine or allow hers to be punctured.

Flies, poor creatures, were a gold mine of observations: the wings, a delicate labyrinth of veins inset in the transparent and iridescent membrane; the eyes, a purplish mosaic of admirable regularity; the legs, an arsenal of claws, stiff hairs, and rubbery padding, slippers, Vibram soles, and crampons all condensed into one. Another gold mine was to be found in flowers, beautiful or ugly, it mattered little; not much was to be obtained from the petals (my magnification was not sufficient to reveal their structure), but every species deposited its pollen on the glass slide, and each pollen was exquisite and specific: it was possible to distinguish the individual granules, delicate and elegant structures, tiny spheres, ovoids, polyhedrons, some smooth and gleaming, others bristling with ridges or pinnacles, snow-white, dark-brown, or golden.

Equally specific were the shapes of the crystals that could be obtained by allowing solutions of various salts to evaporate on the slide: table salt, copper sulfate, potassium dichromate, and others that I wheedled out of the pharmacist. But here I found something new; it was possible to see the crystals come into being and grow, visibly—something was finally moving. The microscope was no longer confined to the immobility of plants and dead flies. It was a curious thing that the first moving objects were precisely

those which were least alive, crystals belonging to the inorganic world. Perhaps the term wasn't all that accurate after all.

In the water from vases of flowers I found movement, too, and this movement was not solemn and orderly like the growth of crystals. Instead, it was turbulent and dizzying, breathtakingly so: a teeming activity that was all the more frantic the more stagnant the water in the vase. There they were, at last, the animalcules promised by my book: I could identify them from the delicate, minute, slightly idealized illustrations, which had been patiently hand-tinted with watercolors (I realized it when I touched one with a tiny drop of water). Some of the animalcules were large, others were tiny: some shot across the microscope's field of view in an instant, as if they were rushing off to who knows where, others loitered lazily as if grazing, while still others spun around stupidly in place.

The loveliest of them all were the vorticellae: minuscule transparent chalices that waved like flowers in the breeze, attached to a straw by a long stalk so slender it was barely visible. All it took was the slightest jolt, a fingernail grazing the barrel of the microscope, and in an instant the stalk contracted into a spiral and the mouth of the chalice closed. A few moments later, as if the fear had passed, the tiny creature recovered, the stalk extended again, and if you looked closely you could make out the little vortex that gives the vorticellae their name: indistinct little particles swirled around the chalice, and it looked as if some of them were trapped inside it. Every so often, as if bored with staying in one place, a vorticella would hoist anchor, pull up its stalk, and set off in search of adventure. It was an animal just like us, and it moved from place to place, it reacted, driven by hunger, fear, or boredom.

Or by love? The suspicion, at once soothing and unsettling, dawned the day I rode my bicycle to the banks of the Sangone for the first time and brought home a sample of stagnant water and sand from the river, which back then was unpolluted. Here monsters could be seen: enormous worms nearly a millimeter long, which contorted as if being tortured; other transparent little beasts, visible to the naked eye as tiny scarlet dots, which under the microscope proved to bristle with antennae and tufts, moving jerkily, like shipwrecked fleas.

But the landscape was overrun by paramecia: streamlined, nimble, twisted like old slippers, they darted to and fro so fast that if I wanted to watch them I had to reduce the enlargement. They navigated the ocean of

their drop of water by gyrating on their axis, slamming against obstacles only to turn and shoot off again, like deranged speedboats. They seemed to be hunting for light and air, solitary and busy: but I saw two suddenly come to a halt as if each had noticed the other, as if they liked each other; I saw them approach, cling together, and continue on their way at a slower pace. As if in this blind coupling they'd exchanged something, drawing from it a mysterious and infinitesimal pleasure.

“The Most Joyous Creatures in the World”

Recently, Ceronetti, like the Semitic scholar that he is, “reread” the *Song of the Great Wild Rooster*; by curious coincidence, almost simultaneously I chanced to reread, like the zoologist that I am not, *In Praise of Birds*, by Giacomo Leopardi.[1] After decades of intensive and widely popularized studies of animal behavior, the impression one comes away with is singular and vaguely alienating, not unlike the feeling one might have when contemplating the morning star Venus (it is precisely during these clear dawns that it reaches its greatest splendor) after reading that its luminous brightness, hailed by countless poets, is the result of the sun’s light being reflected through an atmosphere out of Dante’s *Inferno*, stifling, scorching, supercompressed, and, further, saturated with clouds of sulfuric acid. In both the former and the latter case, the poetic discourse that we perceive in the nature around us persists intact, but it has changed in tone and content.

Not that the desolate message of *In Praise of Birds* has diminished in value. For us, too, if we restrict ourselves to the songbirds that we know best, the ones that populate our gardens, hills, and yards, birds remain “the most joyous creatures in the world.” They strike us as happy because fate endowed them with song and flight, and Leopardi saw them in the same way, in part because nature, which so sharpened their senses, also gave them “most vivid powers of imagination”: not “profound, fervid, and stormy” but, rather, varied and nimble like that of children, whom they also resemble in their continuous and apparently pointless liveliness.

According to Leopardi, it is possible for them to be happy because they are free of any awareness of life’s vanity. And so they are unacquainted with boredom, an affliction specific to conscious humans, and the more

dolorous the further human beings have distanced themselves from nature. Moreover, birds are protected against extremes of cold and heat, and if the environment turns hostile they can migrate until they find better living conditions. Yet even though they're independent, and free by definition, they're still sensitive to human presence, and their voices are loveliest where the customs of humanity are loveliest.

This song of theirs, which Leopardi identifies as the distinctive feature of birds and a marker of their happiness, is gratuitous, a laughter-song, an "expression of gladness," capable of transmitting this gladness to those who hear it, "by bearing witness, delusive though it may be, to the gladness of the world." Likewise, the agitation of birds, the fact that they are "seen never at rest," is a pure manifestation of joy; it occurs "for no apparent reason," while their flight is simply "a delight to them." In conclusion, Leopardi, or, to be exact, the imaginary philosopher of antiquity to whom *In Praise of Birds* is attributed, would like (but "only for a time") "to be converted into a bird, to taste the gladness of their life."

These pages are firm and lucid, still valid, and their power comes from the constant, but unstated, comparison with the misery of the human condition, with our essential lack of freedom, symbolized by our earthbound nature. All the same, we may ask ourselves what Leopardi would have written if, instead of relying on Buffon, and limiting his focus to the birds whose song he listened to during the long evenings in his village, he had, for example, read the books of Konrad Lorenz and had extended his observations to include other types of birds. I think that, first of all, he would have given up trying to compare birds to human beings. To attribute such feelings as gaiety, boredom, and happiness to animals (with the possible exception of dogs and certain monkeys) is acceptable only in the context of poetry—otherwise it's arbitrary and greatly misleading.

We might say the same of the interpretation of birdsong: animal behaviorists tell us that birdsong, especially when it is solitary and melodious (and therefore especially pleasing to us), has a very specific meaning, of defense of the bird's territory and a warning to potential rivals or intruders. It would be more appropriate, then, to compare it not to human laughter but to less friendly human artifacts, such as the fences and gates with which landowners surround their property, or the intolerable electric alarms designed to scare burglars away from apartments.

As for the liveliness of birds (of some birds: others, such as wading birds, are relatively calm), this is a necessary solution to a problem of survival. It is observed chiefly in birds that feed on seeds or insects, and which are therefore obliged to be frantically active in their search for food, which is scattered over vast areas and often hard to find; at the same time, their high body temperature and the hard work of flying make it necessary for them to eat a great deal. Clearly, it's a vicious cycle: working hard to obtain food, eating a great deal to make up for the costs of that hard work—a continuous loop that is not unfamiliar to most of the human race.

It was not my intent, with these rather simplistic considerations, to suggest that our admiration for birds is unjustified. It's entirely justified, even if we accept the explanations that scientists (not without disagreements among themselves) provide: in fact, especially if we accept them, but then that admiration shifts its focus to different and more subtle virtues.

How can we help but admire, for example, the adaptability of starlings? Intensely gregarious, they had always dwelt around farmland, where they sometimes ravaged vineyards and olive groves. In the past few decades, they've discovered the cities: apparently they first settled in London in 1914, and only in the past few years have they come to Turin. Here, for their winter quarters, they've selected a few large trees, on Piazza Carlo Felice, Corso Turati, and elsewhere, whose branches, bare of leaves in winter, seem at nightfall to hang loaded with strange blackish fruit.

At dawn they set out in serried regiments "to go to work," that is, to the fields outside the industrial belt; they come home at sunset, in gigantic flocks of thousands of individual birds, followed by scattered stragglers. Viewed from a distance, these flocks seem like clouds of smoke; then, suddenly, they display astonishing maneuvers, the cloud becomes a long ribbon, then a cone, then a sphere; at last, it spreads out again and, like an enormous arrow, points straight for its nightly shelter. Who commands that army? And how does he give his orders?

Nocturnal birds of prey are extraordinary hunting machines. Their unusual appearance, somewhat awkward when they are at rest, has always aroused curiosity and occasionally aversion. They are silent in flight, and have powerful claws and large forward-facing eyes that confer a vaguely human appearance, but even the biggest and most sensitive eyes are blind in total darkness. Nonetheless, it has been observed in rigorous experimental

conditions that an owl is capable of snatching up a mouse with lightning speed, even in total darkness, as long as the mouse makes even the slightest noise. There is no doubt that the bird locates its prey through its sense of hearing, and the asymmetry of the bird's ears, which has long been observed, probably plays a role; but just how the auditory signals are processed remains a mystery for now.

Deeper is the mystery of how birds orient themselves. We know that not all migratory birds use the same methods of orientation, and that many birds employ various strategies at the same time, relying upon one or the other depending on weather conditions; certainly, geographic landmarks and the position of the sun play a part, as do, probably, the Earth's magnetic field and birds' sense of smell.

But one is astonished, and struck by something approaching religious awe, to read that certain migratory birds who fly only on clear nights not only navigate by the stars but can determine their location with great precision from the configuration of the sky, even when they have been transported somewhere during an experiment. Moreover, it is not only birds that have previously flown with their flocks on migrations that are capable of this feat but even young birds on their first flight. In short, everything works as if they'd been born with a celestial map and an internal clock that is independent of local time, all stuffed into a brain that weighs under a gram.

No less wonderful is the behavior of the cuckoo, which by the light of our human morality seems to have been dictated by a twisted cunning. Instead of building a nest, the female cuckoo lays her egg in the nest of a smaller bird; the rightful owners of the nest often (though not always) fail to detect the intruder, sitting on the alien egg along with their own brood, until the baby cuckoo hatches. As soon as it emerges, still featherless and blind, it possesses a specific sensibility and intolerance: it cannot stand the presence of other eggs. It twists and turns and shoves until it has succeeded in pushing all the eggs of its supposed siblings out of the nest.

The two "parents" feed the chick frantically for days and days, until it has grown larger than them. It is like reading pulp fiction, and one is unsure whether to be more amazed at the perfection of the cuckoo's instincts or at the lack of instincts in its involuntary hosts: but even in the games of nature there must be winners and losers.

Birds, in short, like other animals, may not know how to do all the things that we do, but they know how to do other things that we cannot do, or that we cannot do so well, or that we can do only with tools of some kind. If the experiment that Leopardi dreamed of could be carried out, we would return to our human semblances with many more arrows in our quiver.

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1. Guido Ceronetti is an Italian philosopher and poet. The pair of texts mentioned are two of Leopardi's *Operette morali*.

The Mark of the Chemist

It's said that the Freemasons acknowledged one another by scratching the other's palm when they shook hands. I would like to suggest that chemists (or former chemists, like me) of my generation, when introduced to one another, should display the palm of their right hand: just in the center, where the flexor tendon of the middle finger crosses what palm readers call the head line, most of them have a small, very specific professional scar, whose origin I will explain.

In chemical laboratories these days, it is possible to assemble very complex equipment in minutes by using conically tapered ground glass joints: it's a quick and simple system, the joints maintain a good seal even under vacuum, the pieces are interchangeable, there's a vast assortment available, and putting them together is as easy as playing with Lego or Erector sets. But until 1940 or so, conical glass joints were unknown or prohibitively expensive in Italy, and, in any case, beyond the reach of students.

Corks or rubber stoppers were used for the seal; when (as was frequently the case; for instance to connect a flask to a cooler) it was necessary to insert a glass tube bent at a right angle into a drilled stopper, we would grip the tube and press down while twisting it: often, the glass tube would break and the jagged end would stab us in the hand. It would have been easy—in fact duty required it—to warn initiates of this minor and easily avoidable danger, but, as we know, an impulse survives in some dark tribal recess of our nature that drives us to want every initiation to be painful, to be memorable, and to leave its mark. This, in the palm of our

working hand, was our mark: the mark of chemists who were still to some extent alchemists, still to some extent members of a secret sect.

For that matter, and again in the field of hermetic seals, the older professors still used to speak, with odd nostalgia, of “lutes,” used by pioneering chemists before the advent of stoppers: these were mixtures (*lutum*, in Latin, means “mud”) of clay and linseed oil, or litharge and glycerine, or asbestos and silicate, or other things, which they used to connect their crude equipment. A distant descendant is the reddish glass mastic, based on minium or red lead, which fell out of use a few decades ago.

Being admitted into a laboratory actually had some of the flavor of an initiation rite. There was the white lab coat, for both boys and girls: only the occasional heretic, or those who wished to appear heretical, wore a black or gray lab coat. There was the spatula in the breast pocket, a symbol of the guild. There was the ceremony of the presentation of your glassware: fragile, sacred because it was fragile, and if you break it you pay for it; for the first time in our academic career, in fact, for the first time in our lives, we were responsible for something we didn’t own, something with which we had been solemnly entrusted (in exchange for a signed receipt).

This resulted in a peculiar market. Often, a piece of glassware improperly exposed to an open flame would emit a sinister *tick* and crack. If it was a small crack, we’d pretend nothing had happened, and hope that the warehouse man wouldn’t notice when the glassware was returned; if it was a large crack, the item was auctioned off—it was always good for something. It might be useful to someone who’d had a chemical preparation turn out badly, or who had produced a precipitate that needed to be weighed, or who, for whatever personal reasons, just needed to let off steam; he or she would pay a few lire for the damaged glass and then, publicly, with the greatest possible violence and noise, hurl it against the wall above the lab sink.

The enormous laboratory sink and its surrounding area were the site of a perennial crowd. People went there to smoke a cigarette, to chat, and even to court girls: but labwork, especially the work of analysis, is serious and demanding, and even when we were in the process of courting it was hard to shake off the anxiety that went with it. There was a lively exchange of information, advice, and complaints.

It was odd: to fail an oral examination certainly wasn't fun, but it was taken sportingly, both by the one who had failed and by his or her classmates; it was more of an occupational accident than a failure, it was a mishap that one could describe with a certain glee, almost boastfully, much as when one gets a sprain while skiing. Getting a chemical analysis wrong was worse, perhaps because, deep down, we knew that the judgment of other people (in this case, our teachers) is arbitrary and arguable, while the judgment of things is always inexorable and just: it's a law before which all are equal.

No one who "missed" an element in qualitative analysis boasted about it, much less someone who'd "invented" one—who had, that is, found something that wasn't present in the mysterious gram of fine powder that we were given to analyze. The "misser" might have been simply distracted or nearsighted; the "inventor" could only be a fool. It's one thing not to see something that's there, another to see something that's not.

In many ways, the two kinds of analysis, qualitative and quantitative, differed from everything we'd seen and done until then. It was no accident that individual values were often overturned, much as happened in gym classes in middle school. The "top of the class" students, with their proverbial memories, those who triumphed in oral exams, experts at untangling the complexities of theoretical chemistry, clever at setting forth clearly the notions acquired, or perhaps at passing off as understood things they hadn't understood, capable of acting confident even when they weren't, and in some cases endowed with exceptional minds, were not always competent when it came to laboratory practice. Here other virtues were required: humility, patience, method, manual skills; and even, why not? good eyesight and sense of smell, strong nerves and muscles, resilience in the face of failure.

In particular, quantitative analysis, and specifically the ponderal variety, was a daunting endeavor. The teacher, whether a professor or an assistant, handed each student a vial containing, in solution, an unknown quantity of an element. It was our job to "precipitate" it, that is, make it insoluble, by using a certain reagent under strict conditions; collect it *all* (this often required hours of work) on a filter; rinse it; dry it; calcine it; let it cool and then weigh it on the precision scale. The sequence offered no space for individual initiative; it entailed nerve-racking waiting periods and a maniacal attention to detail. It wasn't attractive work, because it was too

similar to something a machine could do (and in fact nowadays machines do it, much better and much faster than human beings can).

I can finally confess, now that many decades have passed: the top score of 30 that I received on my quantitative analysis exam in 1940 was undeserved, or perhaps I should say, was the reward for a dubious skill. I had taken it into my head to compile the results obtained by my classmates in measuring the element that was the subject of the practical examination, and I had realized that, with a few minor variations, they all fell into "quanta": that is, they were all whole-number multiples of a certain value. There was nothing metaphysical here, and the meaning was clear: in order to save himself time and effort, the professor, instead of weighing out for each candidate his or her own portion, more or less at random, must have used a burette, that is, a long vertical tube, calibrated and graduated, assigning to each one a whole number of cubic centimeters of solution.

I checked this one day by entering, on some pretext, the secret room where our practical quizzes were prepared: yes, there was the burette, in plain view, still full of the pale blue solution. All I had to do was perform even a superficial analysis, and then round the result up or down so that it matched the closest step in my scale. I told only two close friends about my discovery, and they, like me, got the top grade of 30.

I don't know whether quantitative analyses are still administered with this system. If so, then let this confession be a warning for lazy professors and students. Unfortunately, the trick is worthless when it comes to the countless practical cases in which a chemist, now with his degree, is faced with the sad task of doing a quantitative determination of a material of plant, animal, or mineral (or even commercial) origin. As we know, nature takes no leaps, at least no macroscopic ones.

The girls seemed to be more at ease in the laboratory than the boys. At a time when, at least in Italy, feminism still carried no weight, the female students glimpsed a reassuring continuity between housework and labwork: labwork was only a little more precise in its requirements, but the similarity was unmistakable, and the discomfort of the new proportionately less. It had become a pleasant custom among us for our female colleagues to serve us, at five, tea made in laboratory glassware; occasionally it was even accompanied by tiny experimental cookies, hastily and irreverently made, out of starch and malt enzymes, and baked in the drying oven for precipitates.

In spite of the challenges mentioned above, I believe that every chemist has tender memories and a feeling of nostalgia about the university laboratory. Not only because it was a place of intense camaraderie and shared effort but also because when we left that lab, every night and especially at the end of the semester, it was with the sensation that we had “learned to do something”; which, as life teaches us, is different from having “learned something.”

The Best Merchandise

The conference on Judaism in Eastern Europe that took place in Turin in February 1984 was the most wide-ranging examination of the topic that has been held in Italy, and perhaps in all of Europe, since the Second World War. It focused on the enormous differences between this branch of Judaism, which was for many centuries the principal one, and the many other branches, including Italian Judaism, and for those who attended it provided an excellent opportunity for reassessment.

In a little more than a generation, Eastern European Jews moved from a reclusive and archaic way of life to an active and enthusiastic involvement in labor struggles, national demands, and debates on the rights and dignity of man (and woman).

They were among the leading figures in the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and February 1917; in Warsaw alone, in the 1920s, they published no fewer than three daily newspapers and countless periodicals in every area of political debate; they were even able to generate a profoundly original body of film production, before the Nazis began their slaughter. What was the source of this impressive and spontaneous vitality? How did such a powerful voice come out of a meager social body?

It is worthwhile to study the reasons that Jews had so much “weight” in countries where that weight was viewed with respect and straightforward curiosity, but more often with an abiding bitterness, envy, and even a savage hatred. I believe that, as is always the case in the history of human affairs, there is not a single cause but, rather, intertwining causes; among them, however, there is one that strikes me as predominant.

There is a constant in Judaism, operative in every time and place, and it is the emphasis that has been placed for centuries on education. Beginning in the late Middle Ages, a distinctive educational system began to take root among the Jews of Eastern Europe.

Schooling was considered the highest value in life: “the best merchandise,” as the proverb has it. Education began at age four and continued for the rest of one’s life, at least theoretically and as the hardships of that life allowed; it was imparted at the community’s expense, and almost no child went without it. The uneducated were pitied or scorned, the learned were admired, and represented in fact the sole acknowledged aristocracy.

Of course, these were educational methods that were worlds away from those we use today: you can get an idea of them from the novels of Chaim Potok (*The Chosen* and the books that followed), which tell how those methods still survive, alongside more advanced pedagogical experiments, in Hasidic communities that have been transplanted to the United States.

Their foundation was strictly religious: immediately after learning the none too easy Hebrew alphabet, the child was directly shuttled along into the reading of the Torah and the literal translation of long sections from Hebrew into Yiddish; many other passages, some of them quite long, were to be learned by heart. In the following years, the child studied a number of commentaries on the Bible and the rules governing life and prayer. Corresponding to our universities were the rabbinical schools (yeshivas, according to the local pronunciation), where the course of study was extended to the Talmud.

Unmistakably, such a curriculum had many gaps in comparison with what is taught today: nothing about history, geography, or the language of their place of residence; nothing or almost nothing about the exact and natural sciences; a few notions of the medical art steeped in superstitious beliefs; little Western or secular philosophy; no literature, art, or music.

The teaching was onerous and obsessive, and, especially in the yeshivas, it filled the entire day, but it was not dogmatic. The teacher referred to a certain interpretation of a Talmudic passage, or pointed out some contradiction, or posed a question. There ensued a free-ranging, ardent, sophistical discussion, sometimes shrewd, always obstinate: in some cases the central topic was forgotten, and the class ventured into fanciful digressions in which the formal elegance or the audacity of the argumentation prevailed over both pertinence and rigor.

Wherever there was a synagogue, perhaps just an old wooden hut, there was also a library, consisting naturally of nothing but religious books, but frequented by the young, the adult, and the elderly. Every community, however small, was therefore a hotbed of culture, set in a vast territory where the non-Jewish population was almost entirely illiterate, and the Jewish population, generally quite poor, was certainly made up not of professional intellectuals but of artisans, shopkeepers, merchants, and farmers.

Adding to this educational pressure was enforced multilingualism. Until the fury of Hitler's whirlwind, and throughout the vast range of the tsarist Pale of Settlement, that is, from Poland and Lithuania all the way down to Moldava and Ukraine, the unifying language spoken in the archipelago of Jewish communities was Yiddish, with a few variants in terms of vocabulary and pronunciation: the *mame loshen,* as it was affectionately termed, the "mother tongue." But at a very early age, as mentioned above, children were taught the "sacred languages," Hebrew and Aramaic; moreover, the inevitable interaction with the surrounding populace forced the Jews, from childhood, to learn its language.

For that matter, Yiddish itself, a language that is fascinating to linguists (and not only to linguists), is intrinsically multilingual: onto the foundation of a medieval Rhenish dialect, which already contained loanwords from Latin and French, many Hebrew and Aramaic terms were added, frequently adopting German declension or conjugation in a nonchalant manner (for instance, from the Hebrew *ganav,* "thief," comes the past participle *geganvet*, "stolen"), along with a fair number of Russian, Polish, Czech, and other words.

It is the language of a wandering people, pushed by history from one country to another, and it bears the marks of every station along the way. Its evolution has not yet come to an end: the Yiddish of Eastern European Jews who immigrated in the nineteenth century to the United States has not died out; if anything, it is being enriched with English terms, thus moving forward to a further stage of development. Symmetrically, the most expressive and least replaceable Yiddish words enter "from below" into various professional jargons and then into everyday language.

The "mother tongue" is an essentially spoken language (though it has been dignified by a rich if late-blooming body of literature), which makes it eminently flexible and permeable; its profoundly hybrid nature makes it an

instrument of mental gymnastics for those who speak it and for those striving to understand it and reconstruct its origins.

I believe that these cultural factors played a preeminent role in the brief but intense flourishing of Ashkenazi Judaism, and, in more general terms, in the otherwise inexplicable preservation of the Jewish people through millennia of adversities, emigrations, and metamorphoses.

Of course, other factors worked and continue to work as cements: religion, collective memory, a shared history, tradition, persecution itself, and the isolation imposed from outside. Independent evidence is offered by the fact that, when all these factors wane or vanish, Jewish identity wanes in turn, and the communities tend to dissolve, as happened in Weimar Germany and as is happening in Italy today.

It may be that this is the price one must pay for an authentic equality of rights and status; if that is the case, the price would be very high, and not just for the Jews. The slaughter and scattering of the Jews of Eastern Europe was an irreparable loss for all of mankind. Judaism isn't dead, but it's struggling to survive: gagged and unrecognized in the Soviet Union, crossbred in both Americas, submerged in Israel by different traditions and profound sociological and historical transformations.

These days, we rightly fear the extinction of certain animal species, such as the panda and the tiger. The extinction of a culture, as prodigiously fertile and creative as the culture that was the subject of the conference, is a disaster of much greater scope. The verses, saved by happenstance, of Yitzhak Katzenelson, the Warsaw poet who was murdered with his whole family and his people at Auschwitz, should echo ominously in all souls: "Rising over the Lithuanian and Polish towns the sun will never find / A radiant old Jew at the window reciting psalms."

Fossil Words

Many years ago, when I first read Mario Rigoni Stern's *The Sergeant in the Snow*, I was startled to encounter the epic question, repeated obsessively in the night and the frozen chill of the river Don, "*Sergentmagiu, ghe rivarem a baita?*" (Sergeant-major, will we ever get home?). *Baita*, shelter, refuge, salvation, home.

It is odd that the word *baita*, used widely throughout the arc of the Alps, is quite similar to the Hebrew word *bait*, which in fact means "house." This coincidence first stirred my curiosity when I was eleven years old and struggling to read a little Hebrew, which, sadly, was later completely forgotten. It seemed clear to me that the alpine term must have come from Hebrew, which was the "oldest language on earth," and this supposed derivation gave me a childish pride: the Romans might have conquered my Judaean ancestors and destroyed Jerusalem, but at least one Hebrew word had taken the place of a corresponding Latin word.

In short, it was a small vindication. I hardly suspected I'd stumbled on a confirmation of the theory of areas that is so dear to linguists, and according to which the presence of a given word in outlying areas is evidence of its antiquity: it's a resurfacing of a language that in intermediate regions was buried by more innovative manners of speech.

For decades I clung to this curiosity, jumbled in with countless others in the great storage tank of unanswered questions, until I finally read in a dictionary that it was in fact an "alpine word dating back to the Paleo-European substratum ranging from the Basque area to the Aegean area": whereupon I felt an equally childish glee.

I had therefore chanced upon an illustrious fossil, a very rare relic of a linguistic past that predates history, perhaps an artifact of the golden age, when the entire Mediterranean basin spoke the same language, before the tower of Babel, before the fierce hordes of the Dorians, the Gauls, and the Illyrians swept down from the north, bringing war and the confusion of languages; when a Basque could say "*andiamo a baita*" to an Aegean and be understood.

As if there were still any need for it, I should confess that here I'm talking about an old weakness of mine, that of dabbling in my spare time in fields I know nothing about, not to construct a single coherent culture for myself but strictly for fun: the pure pleasure of the dilettante. I prefer eavesdropping to listening, peering through keyholes to taking in vast and solemn panoramas; I prefer to turn a single tile over in my fingers rather than contemplate the mosaic in its entirety. That is why members of my family laugh lovingly at me whenever they see me with a dictionary or a glossary in my hands rather than a novel or a treatise (and it's a common occurrence). It's true, I prefer the particular to the general, casual and fragmentary readings to systematic studies.

It's certainly a bad habit, but among the least harmful; reading aside, it manifests itself in the tendency to do things one doesn't really know how to do. In this way, it may even happen that you learn how to do them, but that's an accident, a by-product: the chief objective is the attempt itself, vagabondage, exploration.

I remember reading, some time ago, a wonderful essay on this topic, dilettantish, of course, by poor Paolo Monelli: the title was *Elogio dello schiappino* (*In Praise of Duffers*), and it praised those who try to struggle along in other people's professions, autodidacts, skiers who venture out onto the snow without having taken lessons or read the handbooks, those who strive to learn a foreign language not with a grammar book but by poring over a newspaper or engaging freely in conversation with the first foreigner they encounter, Sunday painters—in other words those who try to learn from their own raw experience, rather than from treatises or teachers, that is, from the boundless sea of other people's experience. This praise, of course, is paradoxical: one learns better and faster by following more traditional paths, but the spontaneous approaches are more fun and hold more surprises.

A particular instance of this “casual” libertinage is, for me, the heedless perusal of etymological dictionaries: a pursuit that is all the more rewarding inasmuch as it is done entirely for its own sake, without any practical purpose, and without critical intent, which I would be incapable of, in any case, and without any serious language training. I own five of them, Italian, French, German, English, and Piedmontese: the one I cherish most is the last, because it conceals in its folds unsuspected certificates of nobility for this dialect of ours, a dialect that I speak poorly, but which I love with the “proper love” that binds us to the place where we were born and grew up, a love that becomes homesickness when we are far away.

The certificates in question are the words in Piedmontese that derive from Latin without the mediation of Italian. They are considerable in number, and nearly all belong to the language of the countryside: an area where the spoken language passed from rustic Latin (often tainted with local Celtic or Ligurian dialects) straight to a dialect fairly similar to present-day Piedmontese, and where Italian has been spoken only for the past few decades, as required by the administration and spread by domestic migration, by the radio, then by the movies, and finally, triumphantly, by television.

It stands to reason, but at the same time it’s surprising and moving, that the weasel should still be called *musteila* in Piedmontese (*mustela* in Latin): in the Italianized city of Turin, weasels have never been seen, and there has been no need to hand down the name from one generation to the next. Our *bulé* is the Latin *boletus*: where mushrooms are concerned, no other neo-Latin dialect[1]—neither the national language of Italian, nor the neighboring French—has proved to be as faithful to Latin as the language spoken by us Allobroges. Besides, no *fritto misto* pays such homage to mushrooms as does the *fritto alla piemontese*; and I wouldn’t be surprised—in fact, I’d feel a chauvinistic pride—if someone were to show me that the relationship is reversed, in other words, that the ancient Romans first learned to call the boletus mushroom *boletus* from some long forgotten Transpadane people, that is to say, from us.

I experienced a similar feeling of joy when, perusing Andrea Zanzotto’s recent translation of Virgil’s *Copa*, published by Vanni Scheiwiller, I found, in the Latin text provided on the facing page, no less than our Piedmontese term *topia*, unknown in Italian, and used by both Romans and Greeks with a definition only slightly different from that found in Piedmontese (flower

bed, rather than pergola or bower). Also Piedmontese and Latin without any Italian intrusion are *tisoire* (scissors, or *ferramenta tonsoria*), *pàu* (fear, *pavor*), *arsenté* (rinse, *recentare*), *ancheui* (today, *hanc hodie*), *aram* (the Italian is *rame*, copper, but the dialect word is much closer to the Latin *aeramen*), the word *stibi*, still widely used by masons (a low partition wall, *stipes;* the Italian *stipite* has a different meaning), *pré* (a chicken gizzard, called *petrarius* because it often contained pebbles), *malavi*, which corresponds not to the Italian *malato*, or sick, but to the Latin *male habitus*, in poor condition.

The jewel in this crown is, to come back to where we started, the very adjective *latin* or *ladin* itself, which in Piedmontese means "easy," "quick," "smooth-flowing." Present-day Italian no longer perceives Latin as the "easy" language par excellence, but even Ariosto still considered it as such, when he tells us that Count Orlando spoke the Saracen tongue "as if it were Latin." Well, not so many years ago I heard a local boy singing the praises of his bicycle (in Piedmontese), saying that it was more "*latina*" than his older brother's.

These are minor discoveries, already made countless times by experts in the field, but one still feels a lovely pleasure at rediscovering them. Much the same is the pleasure we feel when, in the midst of the forest of ski lifts, we climb all the way up to the Banchetta with just our skis and sealskins.

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1. Author's note: After the first publication of this article, I was informed that in Catalan as well the word for mushroom is *bolet*.

The Skull and the Orchid

Many years ago, shortly after the end of the war, I was subjected (or, rather, I subjected myself: almost voluntarily) to a battery of psychological tests. Without much conviction, if not in fact reluctantly, I'd applied for a job with a large manufacturing company. I needed a job, but I didn't care for large companies; I felt quite ambivalent, and I both feared and hoped that my application would be rejected. I received an invitation to undergo "a number of exams," accompanied by the proviso that the result of these exams would have no effect on the decision whether or not to hire me, but would prevent "a round man from being put into a square hole." This vivid image had astonished me and stimulated my curiosity: I was younger than I am now, and I liked new things. Let's try, and see how it goes.

In the waiting room, I found myself in the company of thirty or so other candidates, almost all male, almost all young, almost all anxious. We underwent a hasty medical examination and a careless clinical interview; it all brought back unpleasant memories of the ceremony, in truth far more brutal, that a few years earlier had marked my entrance into the concentration camp—as if a stranger were peering inside you to see what you contain and how much you're worth, as one does with a box or a bag.

The first test consisted of drawing a tree. I hadn't drawn a thing since elementary school. However, a tree has certain specific attributes; I included them all and handed in my drawing. It couldn't have been more treelike.

The next test was more challenging: a young man with a dubious expression on his face handed each of us a booklet that contained 550 questions, each to be given a simple yes-or-no answer. Some of the

questions were stupid, others were extraordinarily indiscreet, while still others seemed to have been badly translated from a poorly understood language. “Do you sometimes think that your problems can be solved by suicide?” Maybe they can, maybe they can’t, but I’m certainly not going to tell you about it. “In the morning, do you have a sensation of tenderness on the top of your head?” No, I really don’t. “Do you have, or have you ever had, problems with micturition?” The man at the neighboring desk was from Taranto, and he elbowed me and asked, “Friend, what is this mixturition?” When I explained, he brightened. “Do you believe that a revolution can improve the current political situation?” What kind of a fool do you take me for! I’m no revolutionary, but even if I were. . . .

The young man exited the room with his stack of booklets, and a girl came onstage, a brunette who was unmistakably younger than the youngest man there. She told us to come, one by one, into her office, which was nearby. When my turn came, she showed me four or five cards on which enigmatic scenes were printed, and she asked me to express freely the sensations that they prompted in me. One picture showed an empty rowboat, without oars, tipped on its side and abandoned in a patch of bushes and trees. I told her that our old housekeeper, whenever we asked her, “How’s it going?” would always reply disconsolately, “Like a boat in the woods,” and the young woman seemed satisfied.

Another card showed a few peasants fast asleep, stretched out on the ground amid haystacks, their hats pulled down over their faces; to me they suggested thirst, exhaustion, and well-earned if temporary rest. A third drawing featured a young woman crouching at the foot of a bed in a forced and unnatural position, her head tucked between her shoulders and her back curved, as if she were trying to use her back as a suit of armor against something or someone; on the floor was an indistinct object that could have been a gun. I can’t remember the subjects of the other drawings; I liked that work of interpretation, and it made me feel comfortable, and the girl told me that she had noticed it, but she said nothing else and ushered me into the adjoining room.

Here, seated at a desk, was a stylish and very beautiful young woman. She smiled at me as if she’d known me for years, and asked me to sit down across from her. She offered me a cigarette and then began asking me a series of technical, personal, and intimate questions, the kind that confessors ask during confession. She was especially interested in the

feelings I had for my mother and father: she persisted with these to an annoying extent, but without ever relaxing her professional smile.

Now, at the time I'd already read my Freud and I didn't feel completely unprepared. I acquitted myself with distinction; in fact, I even dared to tell the lovely woman that it was too bad we had so little time, otherwise we might be able to arrive at the transference and I could ask her out to dinner, but she cut me off, with a look of annoyance. At this point, I was really starting to enjoy myself: my anguish at feeling that I was being weighed and probed had vanished.

Then came another small room with another examiner: this woman was older than her colleagues and also more arrogant. She wouldn't even look me in the eye as she spread out the ten figures of the Rorschach test before me. These are large shapeless but symmetrical blobs, obtained by folding in half a blank sheet of paper with black or colored splotches of ink in the middle: at first glance they might look like pairs of gnomes, or skeletons, or masks, or insects seen under the microscope, or birds of prey; at a second glance they no longer mean anything. Apparently, the way subjects interpret them provides clues to their overall personality. Now, it just so happened that a few days earlier a friend of mine had told me about these figures, and he'd also lent me the handbook that comes with them, and which explains with an abundance of curious details how to interpret their interpretation; that is, what is hidden inside someone who sees a skull in the blobs or, instead, an orchid. It struck me as ethical to inform my examiner that this test would be contaminated.

I told her, and she swelled up with fury. How dare I commit such a transgression? It was unheard of: these were confidential matters, private, and civilians had no right to pry into them. Their profession was a sensitive one, and no one else should try to poach on it. Most important, though: now what was she going to write in my file? She certainly couldn't leave it blank. In other words, I'd put her in an impossible situation. I took my leave with some vague excuse, and filed the matter away; when the letter arrived offering me the position, I replied that I'd already taken another job, which was the truth.

A few months later, I happened to learn that the real candidates weren't the thirty of us but them, the test givers: they were a team of psychologists on probation, and the tests they were administering constituted their first job, what apprentice craftsmen call their "masterpiece."

Since then, I've never again been subjected to tests of this kind, and I'm glad. I mistrust them: it seems to me that they violate certain fundamental rights of ours, and that, moreover, they're useless, because there is no longer such a thing as a virgin candidate. But I like them when they're taken playfully: then they're stripped of their presumptuousness, and they even stir the imagination, giving rise to new ideas, and can teach us something about ourselves.

My Grandfather’s Shop

My grandfather on my mother’s side had a fabric shop on the old Via Roma, before the ruthless gutting of that part of Turin in the 1930s. It was a long shadowy room, and it had only one window, facing perpendicular to Via Roma and set below street level. A few doors down there was another, parallel cave-like space, a café-bar that had been disguised as a grotto, with large brownish cement stalactites inset with small multicolored mirrors; in the back, a succession of vertical strips of mirror had been attached to the bar. These strips, I couldn’t say whether intentionally or by chance, were not level but attached at a slight angle to one another: that meant that when you walked past the front door of the bar, you saw your legs proliferate in the play of the mirrors, as if you had five or six instead of two, and the children of the time, us, that is, found this so amusing that we asked to be taken to Via Roma just to see it.

My grandfather’s surname wasn’t Ugotti, but everyone called him Monsù Ugotti because he’d bought the shop from a merchant of that name. The merchant must have been a popular fellow, because the name stuck to my uncles as well, and for a few years after the war there were some on Via Roma who even called me Monsù Ugotti.

My grandfather was a solemn and corpulent patriarch; he was witty, but he never laughed; he spoke little, with rare and precisely calibrated phrases, laden with meanings both patent and hidden, frequently ironic, always full of calm authority. I don’t believe that he ever read a book in his life; his world was bounded by home and shop, which could not have been more than four hundred meters apart, a distance that he walked four times a day. He was a skillful businessman, and at home an equally talented chef, but he

set foot in the kitchen only on special occasions, to concoct exquisite but indigestible dishes; in that case, he would spend the whole day there, and banish all women, wife, daughters, and household help.

The staff of his shop was an odd collection of anomalous specimens of humanity. Against a drab background of frequently changing shop clerks loomed the perennial and good-natured bulk of Tota Gina, the cashier. She was indistinguishable from the cash register, the counter, and the high dais upon which the whole mass stood. Glimpsed from below, her majestic bosom spread across the surface of the counter, spilling over the edges like homemade dough. She had gold and silver teeth, and she'd give us Leone candies.

Monsù Ghiandone mispronounced his *r*'s and wore a toupee. Monsù Gili wore garish ties, chased women, and drank too much. Francesco (no Monsù to his name: he was a menial worker) came from Monferrato, and he was known as Sciapalfàr, Iron-Breaker, because he had once been attacked and, tearing loose one of the long cranks used to raise the awning, shattered the skull of his attacker. He knew how to walk on his hands, he could turn cartwheels, and after the shop was closed he'd even do a somersault over the sales counter.

Along with my grandfather and the clerks, two of my uncles also sold cloth. They probably would have preferred some other line of work, but my grandfather's authority, never expressed with harsh words or even with orders, remained unquestioned and unquestionable. Among themselves, the sales staff spoke in Piedmontese dialect, inserting, however, twenty or so technical terms that the customers (and those customers were almost exclusively women) would never in theory be able to decipher, and which constituted a skeletal micro-parlance, an elementary but essential code, whose vocabulary was uttered rapidly and in a whisper.

Numbers played a primary role in this jargon: reduced for simplicity's sake to a series of digits, which were of course coded, my grandfather used them to inform the sales clerk of the price to be offered (discounted, or, on the contrary, inflated) to this or that customer; in fact, there were no fixed prices, and they varied according to a customer's personality, solvency, family ties, and other elusive factors. "*Missià*" referred to an annoying customer; "*tërdes-un*" ("thirteen-one") was the most feared kind of customer, one who would make you pull forty different items down off the shelves, argue price and quality for two hours, and then leave without

buying a thing. In recent times, the term had been deciphered, and by none other than a *tërdes-un*, who caused a scene; after that, the term was replaced by the equivalent “Savoy,” which also soon fell out of use. Other terms stood simply for “yes,” “no,” “hold out,” and “give in.”

My grandfather maintained cordial, but diplomatically complicated, relations with a number of his competitors, some of whom were also distant relatives. They would pay calls on one another’s shops that were at the same time spying missions, on Sunday afternoons they’d arrange Homeric banquets, and they called each other Signor Thief and Signor Fraudster. Relations with the shop clerks were also ambivalent. In the shop, the clerks were completely subjugated; occasionally, however, on Sundays when the weather was fine, my grandfather might invite them out on excursions to the Boringhieri beer hall (in what is now Piazza Adriano). Once, but only once, he even took them on the local train all the way to Beinasco.

Relations were unclouded, on the other hand, with the shopkeepers along Via Roma and neighboring areas who sold shoes, linen, jewelry, furniture, wedding dresses. My grandfather used to send the youngest and sharpest shop clerk over to the Porta Nuova station to greet trains coming in from the provinces: his job was to scout couples engaged to be married who had come to Turin to do their shopping, and steer them to the shop. But, once they’d bought the fabrics they needed, the young man’s mission continued: he had to tow the couple to the shops of the other, affiliated merchants, who were ready to return the favor, of course.

At Carnival, my grandfather invited all the grandchildren to watch the parade of allegorical floats from the shop’s balcony. In those days, Via Roma was paved with wonderful wooden tiles, providing a surface upon which the iron-shod hooves of the draft horses wouldn’t slip; electric tram tracks also ran up and down the street. My grandfather provided us with an abundant supply of confetti, but forbade us to throw streamers, especially when the weather was damp: a legend circulated in which a little boy had tossed a wet streamer over the tram wire and had been electrocuted.

At Carnival, my grandmother also came out onto the shop’s balcony, a rare event: she was a small, fragile woman, but her face bore the regal air of a mother of many children, and even in person she had the timeless, rapt expression that emanates from the portraits of our forebears in their massive frames. She herself came from an immense family, of twenty-one children, who had been scattered like dandelion seeds in the wind: one was an

anarchist who had fled to France, another had been killed in the Great War, yet another was a renowned sculler and a neuropath, while one (the story was told in whispers and in tones of horror), when still in the care of a wet nurse, had been eaten in his crib by a pig.

A Long Duel

"Some folk delight to raise the dust of Olympia with speeding chariot, and graze the turning post with their scorching wheels": thus, or something close to it, said Horace, and the tiny clan to which I belonged was jolted by a slight and delightful shock of electricity. Ours was a monstrous high school freshman class made up of forty-one students, all males and virtually all louts, savagely impermeable to the knowledge that was being administered to us. Some students rejected it or ridiculed it with arrogance, while others (the majority) let it dribble over them like a tedious rain.

Not us. There were five or six of us, and in our hearts we proclaimed ourselves the chosen élite of our class. We had elaborated our own private moral code, outrageously tendentious: to study was a necessary evil, which we would accept with the patience of the strong, given the fact that we needed to be promoted successfully; but there was a precise hierarchy assigned to subjects of study. Philosophy and the natural sciences were the best; ancient Greek, Latin, mathematics, and physics were acceptable, as tools to understand the first two subjects; Italian and history were indifferent; art history and physical education were sheer afflictions. Those who failed to accept this ranking (which, little did we know, had been engendered primarily by the talent and the human warmth of the respective teachers) were automatically excluded from our clan.

There were other dogmas: it was necessary to talk about girls, and to girls, without sentimentalism—indeed, in the crudest sort of barracks language. We accepted the athletic activities of swimming and fencing; we gave skiing a grudging pass, "something strictly for the rich"; we dismissed soccer, "because it toughens your knees"; and ruled out tennis entirely, as

effeminate, good for high-born young ladies. I, who played tennis every summer in Bardonecchia, at times even in mixed doubles, never confessed the fact: but, for that matter, I was permanently at the clan's margins, accepted because I was good at Latin and willing to hand around copies of my classwork, envied because I possessed a microscope of my own, but considered a dissident because, in spite of my efforts, my vocabulary was not vulgar enough. But the prince of sports was track and field: anyone who competed in track and field was ipso facto among the elect, while those who ignored it were outcasts. Two years earlier, in 1932 at Los Angeles, Beccali had triumphed in the 1500 meters, and we all dreamed of emulating him, or at least of placing first in some other event. Our little Olympic games were held in the afternoon, in the stadium that stood where the Polytechnic is now.

It was a magnificent structure, one of the first reinforced-concrete buildings erected in Turin: completed around 1915, by 1934 it was already abandoned and decrepit, a stunning example of the waste of tax money. The oval of the track, 800 meters in length, was by now bare earth, punctuated with potholes ineptly filled in with gravel; weeds and scrawny saplings grew in the gigantic tiers of seats. Officially, entrance was forbidden, but we made our way in through the café, wheeling our bicycles.

Some of us threw the shot put (a chunk of cement) or a homemade javelin, others did the high jump or the long jump to the best of their abilities: but Guido and I stuck strictly to the *pulverem Olympicum* declaimed by Horace. We'd found a vocation as middle-distance runners, but Beccali's 1500-meter race was too much for us; the very dusty 800 meters of the track was plenty and more than enough. Those three lines reconciled us with Latinity; the ancient Romans weren't pure fossils after all—they knew the fever of competition, they were people like us. Too bad the Latin they wrote was so hard.

Guido was a young barbarian with a sculpted body. He was intelligent and ambitious, and he envied me my scholastic success; I, symmetrically, envied him his muscles, his height, his handsomeness, and his precocious lusts. This intersecting competition had created between us an odd, rough-hewn friendship, exclusive, contentious, never affectionate, not always loyal, entailing relentless competition, an all-out contest, and in fact making us inseparable. We were fifteen or sixteen years old, and this competitive tension would have been more or less normal if we'd been on an even

footing, but such was not the case. I enjoyed a certain starting advantage, culturally speaking, because I had lots of books at home, and my father, an engineer, would instantly bring me more if I so much as hinted at a specific wish (with the exception of Salgari,[1] whom he detested and forbade me to read), while my rival had been born into a humble family; but Guido was neither stupid nor lazy, and he asked me to lend him all the books I mentioned, read them voraciously, discussed them with me (we were almost invariably of opposing views), and then refused to return them; his cultural handicap thus shrank month by month.

In contrast, his advantage in physical terms was unshakable. Guido was sixty kilos of solid muscle, while I barely reached forty-five; any kind of hand-to-hand competition was out of the question, but competition was what we needed and yearned for (perhaps I yearned for it more than he did), and before competing openly on the track we had devised all sorts of indirect contests. For weeks we challenged each other to see who could hold his breath the longest, at first without any particular contrivances, then, over time, refining our weapons. I came up with the idea of oxygenating my blood in advance, by taking a series of long, deep breaths; Guido discovered that it was possible to gain a few seconds by competing flat on his back on the floor instead of sitting upright; I perfected the technique of internal respiration, contracting and expanding my chest with my glottis clamped shut. It worked, but Guido noticed what I was doing and immediately copied me. We both held out stubbornly until we were on the verge of fainting; we took turns competing, each holding the stopwatch out before the other’s progressively bulging eyes. There was no need to check on each other. It would never have occurred to us to cheat in terms of the actual blockage of our respiratory channels, because we were both out to test our own willpower rather than to vanquish the other. As I recall, the results were hardly dazzling; we held our breath for something approaching a hundred seconds, and then, in a break from tradition, we agreed to suspend the competition “because if we don’t, we’ll wind up stunting our growth.”

There is no doubt that it was Guido who invented the slapping game. The rules, unstated and unwritten, developed on their own: the objective was to catch the adversary off guard, on the street, at his desk, if possible in class, and slap him square in the face, without warning, with all one’s strength, in the middle of a peaceful conversation. It was considered fair—

in fact, excellent gamesmanship—to distract one's opponent with idle conversation, and even to hit him from behind, but always and only on the cheek, never on the nose or in the eyes; it was forbidden to hit a second time, taking advantage of his dazed state; it was allowed, but practically impossible, to block a slap; it was dishonorable to protest, complain, or act offended; obligatory to slap back, not then and there but later, or the next day, when things were relaxed, suddenly and without warning. We'd become experts at reading in the other's face the imperceptible contraction that came just before the slap: "Behold, your eyes roll eager for gore," I quoted from Dante's *Inferno,* and Guido praised me chivalrously. Against all odds, I emerged victorious from the savage tournament, on points: my reflexes were faster than Guido's, possibly because my arms were shorter, but the slaps I landed, even though they were more numerous than his, were much less violent.

Guido enjoyed an easy retaliatory win in a contest he'd invented himself at a time before the striptease existed, even in America; I was unable to overcome my own modesty, and so I competed just once, and I quit after taking off my shoes. As I said above, we were all males in that class; by no means were we all brutes, but the brutes among us were the real leaders, certainly not us "intellectuals." Guido challenged them and beat them all. The ordeal consisted of undressing in class, and it could take place only during the natural science period because the teacher was shortsighted and never ventured out into the classroom. Some made it to bare-chested, four to their underpants, but Guido alone stripped naked from head to foot. The danger of being called to the blackboard was just part of the game and spiced it up: in fact, from time to time, we'd see the teacher call on someone, who would then frantically pull his trousers on underneath the desk.

Guido, who possessed the instincts of a general, had taken his precautions. By some pretext he had arranged to have his seat moved from the second row to the last, he had practiced getting his clothes back on in a hurry, he had waited until the day after a quiz, and at last, as our teacher was explaining the parts of a skeleton with his pointer, not only did he strip completely but, naked, he climbed onto his chair, and then onto his desktop, as we all held our breath, hovering between admiration and scandal. There he remained for a good long moment.

Loyal to our collective mythology, we finally dedicated ourselves to track and field, but it was soon obvious that Guido would triumph in all events but one, and that event was the 800-meter race. But he was determined to beat me in the 800 meters, so that his athletic supremacy would be unsullied.

The race around the track was a grueling effort. We wore tennis shoes, and the gravel hurt our feet, and diminished the thrust of our stride. We had run the course together just once, and it was mutual massacre; neither of us was willing to allow the other to get ahead, even by a few feet: we didn't know that the only rational way to run a race is to let your opponent push through the air ahead of you, saving your breath for the final sprint. Instead, we were both completely beat by midway through the distance; I slowed down, not out of generosity or calculation but out of total exhaustion; Guido, to his honor, ran another ten meters or so, then he left the track, too.

After that, each aghast at the other's obstinacy, we ran against the chronometer: one gasping down the track, the other following him on a bicycle and calling out the split times; but Guido was no sportsman, and instead of respecting my furious concentration he would tell dirty jokes to make me laugh. We went on like that for many weeks, filling our tracheas with the dust of Olympia, coexisting civilly at school, hating one another at the stadium with the unconfessed hatred of athletes. At every race, each of us would make use of all his ferocity to nibble a few seconds off the other's time.

At the end of the school year I stopped nibbling: Guido's superiority was patent, thoroughly established; an abyss of no less than five seconds separated us. Chance, however, offered me a meager revenge: the stadium café had closed, and in order to get onto the track by now we were forced to climb to the top of the bleachers, where some entrance had been forgotten and left open. Now I noticed that the gates barring the entrance on the ground floor had sixteen-centimeter spaces between the bars: my cranium would just fit through, but back then I was so skinny that if my cranium fit through the rest of me passed through easily, too.

I alone was capable of accomplishing this feat: well, wasn't that also an event? A gift of nature, just like Guido's quadriceps and deltoids? By forcing the term, like any good sophist, I could describe this as an athletic achievement, a sport that could be regulated by a proper set of rules. Perhaps, to the list of the untamed, the unsatisfied, first started by Horace,

one could add an item, those who pass through gates. Guido didn’t seem to agree.

I lost track of Guido, and so I cannot say which of us two won the laurels in the endurance race of life; but I’ve never forgotten that strange bond which perhaps was never friendship, but which both united and divided us. In my memory, his image remains fixed, as if in a snapshot: standing naked on an absurd high school desk, symmetrical to the obscene skeleton our teacher was inventorying for us; provocative, Dionysian, and obscene in a completely opposite way, a fleeting monument to earthly vigor and insolence.

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1. Emilio Salgari, an author of adventure stories that take place in exotic lands.

The Language of Odors

Recently, Lorenzo Mondo published in these pages a fine review of the poetry of Giorgio Caproni, published by Garzanti, and in it he pointed out a curious aspect of the work: how important odors are for Caproni and how often they appear in his work, both poetry and fiction. They are the odors of nature, but also and above all human odors; to be even more specific, the odors of women, faint and vivid, sweet and harsh. They are messages, and explicit, even if they are uttered in a language that (for the moment) remains undeciphered, and they attest to the persistence of our ties with the land and with the “lovely family of herbs and animals.”

This is a topic that has always fascinated me: I have often suspected that my youthful inclination for chemistry was dictated, at some deeper level, by reasons quite different from those I rationalized and frequently stated. I became a chemist not (or not merely) out of a need to understand the world around me; not as a reaction to the dogmatic and insubstantial claims of the Doctrine of Fascism; not in the hope of scientific glory or wealth, but to find or create an opportunity to make use of my nose.

Let me inform non-chemists, in fact, that even now, in spite of the most sophisticated analytical instruments, the nose still provides outstanding service to the chemist it belongs to, in terms of simplicity, rapidity, and low investment—indeed, no investment. All one need—and must—do is keep that nose in practice. If I were in charge, I would require that all aspiring chemists take a course and a test in olfactory recognition; and I would ensure that the laboratory for that course (actually nothing more than an archive, a thousand or so vials with coded labels, and a few grams of the substance to be identified in each vial: this, too, would require only a trivial

investment!) remain open to all those, young and old, who wish to introduce into their sensory universe an extra dimension, who wish to perceive the world in a different way. Isn't the education of one's senses also a form of "physical education"?

This brings us to the problem of whether all human beings are equally endowed with a teachable sense of smell, or whether there are also those who remain refractory, just as there are those who, well endowed in every other area, are unable to distinguish colors. I have no data, but, to judge from people's behavior in the presence, respectively, of appealing or unpleasant odors, I would guess that the "anosmics," whom I would exempt from my course, are a distinct minority, like those born blind. A good nose is much more the product of practice than a gift of nature, and as a rule our sense of smell is not so much atrophied as neglected.

The degree to which our culture neglects it is demonstrated by the poverty of our language when it comes to odors: we have an assortment of specific adjectives that apply to clearly defined colors, even if some of them ("rosy," "violet") still betray, in Italian at least, their original exemplary nature; in contrast, we lack even a single independent term that describes a smell, and so we are forced to say "a fishy smell," or "a vinegary smell," or "a moldy smell." The fact that practice brings results is shown by the olfactory discernment of chefs and perfumers; but even they lack a terminology unbound from its concrete substrata.

Of course, no matter how hard we try, we'll never be able to equal a dog's sense of smell, shaped by millennia of natural and human selection, and constantly exercised: a bloodhound hot on a trail, muzzle to the ground and moving practically at a run, is performing with every second a complex qualitative and quantitative analysis of the air that challenges what the best gas chromatograph now made could do; moreover, that piece of equipment costs millions of lire, is unable to run (in fact, it's fragile and difficult to transport), and will never learn to love its master.

But even the most citified of dogs, even the most pampered and unambitious household pet* can find its way through the myriad messages that its fellow canines leave for posterity at every street corner. How the dogs must pity us! I quote from memory the verses that G. K. Chesterton, in *The Flying Inn*, attributes to the dog Quoodle: "They haven't got no noses / they haven't got no noses / and goodness only knowses / the Noselessness

of Man!" (*sic:* the reader should remember that it's a dog speaking, or, rather, singing).

And about Flush, another, far more celebrated literary dog, Virginia Woolf has this to say: "Where two or three thousand words are insufficient for what we see . . . there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived. Love was chiefly smell; form and colour were smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science were smell. To him religion itself was smell."

It is likely that the human sense of smell has been crushed, in the course of evolution, by the senses of sight and hearing; in our social lives, those senses predominate, because we are capable of voluntarily broadcasting complicated visual signals (gestures, facial expressions) and auditory signals (words and so on), while we broadcast olfactory signals whether or not we wish to.

Nevertheless, our greatly neglected noses are capable of alerting us when something is on fire, and they warn us when in their opinion something we're about to put in our mouths smells suspiciously off, and any chemist can recognize by smell, without hesitation, the primary amine group, the nitrite group (which smells "like shoe polish": though it would be more precise to say that shoe polish is traditionally scented with nitrobenzene), what our predecessors justly named the aromatic ring, the terpenes, and various other groupings.

In this connection, it's interesting to consider whether odors are more or less agreeable. Disagreeable in an absolute sense, and to everyone, are such destructive effluvia as ammonia and sulfur dioxide; for other odors, the criteria are cultural, and depend on the civilization one lives in. The dung that Woolf refers to may be repugnant to a city-dwelling poet, but not to a farmer who is accustomed to it and perceives it as a precious substance, bound up with fertility. The smell of gasoline irritates the pedestrian but pleases the car nut, who links it to the thrill of driving. Vance Packard writes about how men's deodorants have often been commercial failures: many individuals perceive their own odor, unpleasant to others, as a part of their personality and a manifestation of power, and they subconsciously fear its elimination.

But all odors, agreeable or otherwise, are extraordinary prompters of memories. It is obligatory to cite the fragrance of the *petite madeleine* that evokes in Proust, decades later, “the immense edifice of memory.” When I revisited Auschwitz nearly forty years afterward, the visual landscape instilled in me a reverent but distant emotion; in contrast, the “odor of Poland,” innocuous, released by the fossil coal used to heat homes, struck me like a sledgehammer: it reawakened all at once an entire universe of memories, brutal and concrete, that were lying dormant and left me gasping.

With equal violence, “down there” we were struck by occasional smells of the free world: hot tar, evocative of boats in the sun; the scent of the forest, odorous of moss and mushrooms, carried by the wind off the Beskid Mountains; the fragrance of soap trailing a “civilian” woman encountered on the job.



The Scribe

Two months ago, in September 1984, I bought myself a word processor, that is, a device for writing that every time you reach the end of the line automatically goes to the next, and allows you to insert, erase, and change words and even whole sentences instantaneously; in other words, it lets you produce in a snap a finished, clean document, without any inserts or corrections. I'm certainly not the first writer who made up his mind to take the leap. Just a year ago, I would have been considered reckless or a snob: not anymore, which is a sign of how fast electronic time rushes along.

Let me hasten to add two clarifications. In the first place, those who want or have to write can certainly continue to do so with a ballpoint pen or a typewriter: my gadget is a luxury, it's fun, it's even exciting, but it's unnecessary. In the second, let me reassure the hesitant and the ignorant: I myself was, and in fact continue to be, even as I write on my screen, ignorant. I have only the vaguest idea of what's going on behind it. At first, this ignorance of mine was deeply humiliating. A young man came to my aid, paternally offering me his guidance, and said, You belong to that austere generation of humanists who still expect to understand the world around them. That expectation has become ridiculous: let habit take over, and your discomfort will vanish. Think about it: do you know, by any chance, or do you have the illusion of knowing, how a telephone or a television works? Yet you use them every day. And, aside from a few learned people, how many of us know how our heart or kidneys work?

Despite this advice, my first encounter with the device was upsetting: the fear of the unknown, something I hadn't experienced for many years. The computer came with an assortment of manuals; I tried studying them

before touching the controls, and I felt lost. It seemed to me that they were apparently written in Italian but were actually in an unknown language; in fact, a prankish, misleading language, in which familiar words, such as “open,” “close,” and “exit,” are used in unaccustomed ways. There is a glossary that attempts to define them, but it proceeds the opposite way from ordinary dictionaries. Those define abstruse words by using more common terms; the glossary tries to give a new meaning to falsely familiar terms by making use of abstruse words, and the effect is devastating. How much better it would have been to invent a decidedly new terminology for these new things! Once again, however, my young friend intervened, and pointed out that it’s as foolish to expect that you can learn to use a computer from a manual as it is to think that you can learn to swim by reading a treatise, without going into the water—in fact, he specified, without knowing what water is, having only heard vague talk of it.

And so I set to work on both fronts, that is, checking the instructions provided by the manuals against the device, and I was immediately reminded of the legend of the Golem. The story goes that many centuries ago a rabbi-magician created out of clay an automaton possessed of herculean strength and blind obedience, to protect the Jews of Prague from pogroms; but it remained inert, inanimate, until its creator slipped into its mouth a scroll of parchment upon which a verse from the Torah was written. Thereupon the terra-cotta Golem turned into a wise and willing servant: it wandered the streets and was a good watchman, except that it turned to stone again when the parchment was removed from its mouth. I wondered whether the builders of my device might not have known this strange story (no doubt they are well-read people with a sense of humor); in fact, the computer even has a mouth, off-kilter, half open in a mechanical smirk. Until I insert the program disc, the computer won’t compute a thing—it’s nothing but a lifeless metal case. But when I switch on the power a polite blinking light appears on the small screen, and this, in the language of my personal Golem, means that it’s eager to swallow the floppy disc. When I’ve satisfied its hunger, it buzzes quietly, purring like a contented cat, then it comes alive and immediately displays its personality: it is responsive, helpful, stern when I make mistakes, stubborn, and capable of many miracles that I don’t yet know and which intrigue me.

As long as it’s fed the proper programs, it can manage a warehouse or an archive, translate a function into its diagram, compile histograms, and

even play chess: all exploits that for now are of no interest to me, and which, in fact, make me as gloomy and grouchy as the swine before which pearls were cast. It can even draw, and for me this is a problem of the opposite kind: I hadn't drawn a thing since elementary school, and to find myself with a servomechanism at my disposal that will produce for me, to measure, pictures that I don't know how to draw, and at my command print them for me right under my nose, amuses me to an indecent extent, distracting me from the machine's proper uses. I have to force myself to "exit" the drafting program and go back to writing.

I've noticed that when you write this way you tend to be wordy. The effort of the old days, when writing meant chiseling away at stone, led to a "lapidary" style. Now the opposite takes place; there is practically no handwork, and if you aren't careful you can veer into prolixity. Fortunately, there is a word counter, and it should not be lost sight of.

As I look back on my initial anxiety, I realize that it was by and large groundless: it consisted in part of the writer's age-old fear, a fear that the words you labored over, the unique, invaluable words destined to bring you eternal fame, might be stolen or flushed down a sewer. Here you write, the words appear distinctly on the screen, in neat rows, but they are shadows: they're insubstantial, deprived of the reassuring foundation of paper. "*La carta canta*"—"Paper talks"—but the screen doesn't; when you're satisfied with what you've written, you "copy to disc," where it becomes invisible. Does it still exist, hiding in some corner of the hard drive, or have you deleted it with some erroneous command? Only after days of experimenting with "vile bodies" (that is, pretend texts, not written but merely copied) can you bring yourself to believe that the catastrophe of lost words has been fully taken into account by the clever gnomes who designed the word processor: deleting a text entails a series of steps that has been made intentionally complicated, and along the way the device itself warns you: "Look out, you're about to commit suicide."

Twenty-five years ago, I wrote a humorous short story in which, after extensive ethical misgivings, a professional poet finally makes up his mind to buy an electronic Versifier and successfully hands off all his work to the machine. So far, my device hasn't got that far, but it does lend itself very well to the composition of verse, because it lets me revise endlessly without the page becoming untidy or splotchy, while reducing to a minimum the manual effort of the draft: "And thus in me one sees the law of counter-

penalty."[1] A writer friend of mine points out that this means we will lose the philologist's noble joy of painstakingly reconstructing, through a succession of erasures and corrections, the path that led Leopardi to the perfection of "L'Infinito": he's right, but you can't have everything.

As far as I'm concerned, ever since I put saddle and bridle on my word processor, I've felt the boredom of being a giant moa, a survivor of a species on the path to extinction, fade inside me: the ennui of being a "survivor of my own time" has practically vanished. The ancient Greeks used to say, of an uneducated man, "He can neither swim nor write"; nowadays, we would have to add "nor use a computer." I still don't know how to use it very well, I'm not an expert and I know I never will be, but I'm no longer an illiterate. And then there's the delight of being able to add another item to your personal list of memorable "first times": when you first saw the sea; left the country; kissed a woman; breathed life into a Golem.

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1. *Inferno* XXVIII:141–42.



To a Young Reader

Dear Sir,

I hope that you will forgive me for replying publicly to your letter dated _____, though of course I am leaving out your name and any other information that might reveal your identity. Still, for the benefit of others who may find themselves in your situation, or in similar circumstances, and who—like you—have written to me, I do feel obliged to reveal here at least the following: you are twenty-seven years old, you live in a small city, you completed the Liceo Classico (classical high school) without enormous effort, and you have managed to secure for yourself a modest position, which provides you with not much money, a certain degree of security, and little satisfaction.

You would like to become a writer, specifically an author of narrative fiction, and, indeed, you do write, but you'd like me to give you advice and some direction: how best to write. You neither ask me, nor ask yourself, the fundamental question, that is, whether or not to write at all, and you thus put me in an awkward position from the outset. In fact, from what you tell me I gather that you think of writing fiction as a profession, which in my opinion it is not.

In today's Italy, every profession comes with a certain guarantee: if you write for a living, then you have no guarantees. Therefore, pure narrative authors, those who eke out a living from their creativity alone, are very few: no more than a few dozen or so. The others write in their spare time, dedicating the rest of their days to advertising, journalism, publishing, film, teaching, or other pursuits that have nothing in common with writing.

Therefore, let me first of all recommend, indeed, let me order you, to hold on to your current position.

If you truly have writing in your blood, you'll find the time to write one way or another—it will expand around you. What's more, your day-to-day work, dull though it may be, can hardly fail to supply you with invaluable raw materials for the writing you do at night or on Sundays, just the human interactions, just the boredom itself. Boredom is boring by definition, but writing about boredom can be a gripping pursuit, and one that may fascinate a reader: you studied the classics, and so you surely know this already.

But you skip over this fork in the road and expect me to provide you with specific practical advice: the secrets of the profession, or, rather, of the non-profession. They exist, I cannot deny it, but luckily they are not universally applicable; I say "luckily" because, if they were, then all writers would write in exactly the same way, thus producing a volume of boredom so immense that any attempt to palm it off as Leopardian ennui would be useless, and would ultimately overwhelm the circuit breakers of even the most indulgent of readers. Therefore I can do no more than impart to you my own secrets, at the risk of creating with my own hands the rival who, on the very strength of my own "letter of introduction," will chase me out of the market.

The first secret is to let the writing rest in a drawer, and I believe that this is valuable in general. Let several days pass between the first and the final drafts; for reasons unknown to me, for a certain period of time the writer's eye is not very sensitive to what he's just written. It is necessary, as it were, to let the ink dry thoroughly; return to it too soon, and you tend to overlook the defects—repetitions, gaps in logic, inaccuracies, sour notes.

An excellent surrogate for that period of rest might be a test-reader, in possession of common sense and good taste, and not too indulgent: one's spouse, a friend. Not another writer: writers are not typical readers, and they will have their own preferences and personal whims, they will be dismissive of bad writing, envious of good. I am right now violating this precept to let your writing rest, because as soon as I've written this letter I will mail it; you will therefore have an opportunity to test the precept's validity.

After ripening, a process whereby a piece of writing comes to resemble a wine, a perfume, or a medlar, the time comes to strip away the excess. Almost inevitably, a writer realizes that he or she has overdone things, that

the text is pompous, repetitive, wordy: or, in any case, as I said, this is what happens to me. Unfailingly, in my first draft I am addressing a rather dull reader, and ideas have to be hammered into his head. Once the text has been put on a diet, it is more nimble: it comes closer to what is, more or less consciously, my goal, the greatest amount of information in the smallest space.

It is worth noting that there are different ways to achieve the greatest amount of information, some of them quite subtle; one fundamental method is to select from an array of synonyms, which are almost never truly equivalent to one another. There's always one that's "righter" than the others: but you often have to go in search of it, depending on the context, in the old Tommaseo dictionary, or among the neologisms in the Nuovo Zingarelli,[1] or among the barbarisms foolishly abhorred by traditionalists, or even drawing directly on the vocabulary of other languages; if there's no word for it in Italian, why tie yourself in knots?

It strikes me that, as you do this work, it's crucial to remain aware of the original meaning of every word; if you remember, for instance, that "to unleash" once meant "to free from a leash," you'll be sure to use the word properly and avoid clichés. Not all your readers will appreciate the effort involved, but all will at least realize that the choice of language was not obvious, that you did some work on their behalf, that you didn't choose the path of least resistance.

Ninety years after the birth of psychoanalysis, and years of efforts both successful and unsuccessful to transfer the subconscious directly onto the page, I feel an acute need for clarity and rationality, and I think that most readers share that desire. There's no rule stating that clear writing is simple; it can be read at various levels, but I believe that, at the lowest level, a text should be easily accessible to a broad audience. Don't be afraid of mistreating your id by muzzling it. There's no real danger of that; "the tenant on the floor below" will always find a way of making himself heard, because to write is to strip oneself naked—even the sparest writer strips himself bare. If baring yourself isn't something you'll enjoy, then be content with your current job. And I was forgetting to mention that, if you wish to write, you should have something to write.

Please accept my best regards.

Yours,

1. Tommaseo refers to an eight-volume nineteenth-century dictionary of the Italian language; the Nuovo Zingarelli is a modern dictionary.

The Need for Fear

Nearly all of us are afraid of the *Forficula*: I'm talking about the earwig, the dark-brown insect with an elongated, flattish body whose abdomen terminates in a pair of dangerous-looking pincers. Earwigs lie hidden under the bark of trees, or sometimes nest in sun-warmed clothing, in the folds of umbrellas or lounge chairs. They're harmless: the pincer isn't venomous, in fact, it doesn't even pinch (it's an organ that facilitates mating); and it isn't true, even though the story's been handed down persistently from one generation to the next, that "if you're not careful, they'll crawl into your ear." This belief is so firmly rooted in our collective memory that it is acknowledged in the binomial nomenclature of the little creature, which is in fact officially called *Forficula auricularia*; but the English and the Germans didn't wait for the scientific baptism, and for centuries they have respectively dubbed it "earwig" and *Ohrwurm*, the insect or worm of the ear. Aside from its pincer, the *Forficula* possesses another property that strikes a strange fear into us: like all nocturnal animals, if exposed to light it passes suddenly from immobility to flight, and its startlement reverberates in a startlement of our own.

All women, and many men, are afraid of bats. This, too, is a localized fear with a false basis: "They fly into your hair, and since they have hooked claws, you can't disentangle them"; it's no accident that bats, too, are nocturnal animals, and have an irregular flight, made up of uneasy, sudden swerves. Now, our domestic bats are harmless and helpless and afraid of human beings, never approaching them or allowing themselves to be approached; but our racist aversion as diurnal animals to the "bad people, bad people who wander about in the night" (in the words of Don Abbondio)

persists even in the absence of any experimental confirmation. Those who wander about in the night are wicked by definition, and in his most widespread image the devil, when he has wings, has the wings of a bat, while fairies have butterfly wings and angels the wings of a swan. Perhaps our enmity toward bats is reinforced by their distant parentage with the ill-famed vampire, but vampires, the real ones, not the vampires of the dark legends of the Carpathians, are themselves virtually harmless: the quantity of blood that they consume in a session (rarely blood drawn from a human being) is less than a twentieth of what we give in a single donation to a blood bank, voluntarily and without any harm to ourselves, indeed, without noticing the loss.

All women and many men feel horror for rats, likewise nocturnal and furtive. Do you remember Winston, the main character in Orwell's terrifying *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? He withstands ferocious torture and keeps his dignity intact, but he breaks down, and betrays his woman ("Do it to Julia! Not me! . . . Strip her to the bones"), when his torturer threatens to thrust a rat into his face. When you reread that page of the book, there is no doubt: the obsessive fear that Orwell attributes to his character is *his own* fear, a phobia of his, perfectly compatible with the admirable courage that he showed throughout his life, in peacetime and in war. To Winston, and to Orwell, "the worst thing in the world happens to be rats." We all know the absurd and picturesque justification (anatomical, as in the two previous cases) offered by folk mythology for this phobia: rats like holes, and, if they are able, they will crawl up one's intestine or up the female genitalia.

I don't believe that there's any need to trouble the field of psychoanalysis for an interpretation of these or any other atavistic fears, a field that in the hands of amateurs so easily lends itself to after-the-fact explanations of all mental phenomena, along with their opposites, and yet is so inept at predicting them in advance. There's nothing archetypal or innate at work here, and it strikes me that we can settle for a simpler approach: in every culture there are dangers, real or presumed or exaggerated, that are handed down from father (or more frequently from mother) to children, along chains of countless generations, and they create corresponding fears. The fact that some people are immune to them proves nothing: each individual has certain predispositions or defenses. For that matter, a comparable transmission of fears takes place among bovines: mother cows, when they see their newborns approach a clump of poisonous hellebore to

graze on it, shove them away with their horns; but precisely because there is no such thing as a bovine “culture,” the only prohibitions and rules handed down are those dictated by experience, not those which emerge from intellectual constructs.

Along the borderline of this vast region of traditional fears (and not of animals alone: when I was a child a long forgotten nanny forbade me to touch buttercups “because they’ll make your fingernails fall out”) lies the fear of snakes; or perhaps on the far side of that border, since there are, in fact, snakes in Italy whose bite can be fatal. These are only three or four species of viper, but their populations seem to be rising, both because of the spreading abandonment of mountain farmlands and because of the stupid extermination of predatory birds, their natural antagonists. They do in fact exist, despite fundamentalist ecologists, who postulate an unfailingly benign and friendly nature, and they pose a not insignificant danger, especially to children; but around the core of the silent, death-dealing creature that slithers along on its belly, we have over the millennia constructed an intense emotional aura and a swarm of legends.

The flesh-and-blood snake, like any other animal, is impervious to issues of morality: it’s neither good nor evil, it eats and is eaten. It occupies a variety of ecological niches, and its structure, so (apparently) simple and uncommon, is the product of a very lengthy and nonlinear evolutionary history; in fact, like the cetaceans, snakes once possessed four limbs that “they realized” they could do without, and traces of them can still be glimpsed in their skeletons. Snakes have patented a diverse array of ingenious and specific inventions: a “thermal eye” that is sensitive to infrared rays, that is, to heat emitted by birds and mammals, and which only recently (and for the same purpose: to locate a victim at night) has man succeeded in imitating; a jaw that can be unhinged at will, allowing the snake to ingest enormous prey into its stomach; and, in venomous species, a double syringe with instantaneous effects.

The literary serpent, on the other hand, is morally stained: from the very first pages of Genesis, where it appears as the canniest of animals and the advisor of the original sin, it is evil and cursed, and its slithering is at once a punishment and a symbol. To the ancients, man’s vertical nature was a sign of his quasi-divine status: he tends toward the heavens, he is the link between Earth and the stars. Quadrupeds are something intermediate, they are prone, their gaze is directed earthward, but they are separate from the

dust: they run, they leap. The serpent clings to the dust, it is made of dust, and dust it shall eat (Genesis 3:14), like the worm, of which it is an enlarged version, and the worm is the child of putrefaction.

The serpent is the beast by definition, and it contains nothing that is human: significantly, the Italian word for snake, *biscia*, is nothing other than a variant on the Latin and Italian *bestia* ("beast"), and we see the legless creature as something more distant from us than ants or crickets or spiders, which all have legs (perhaps too many legs, and legs with too many knees). In fact, Dante identifies the snake with the thief, who, like the snake, slithers silently, and creeps into men's houses by night; in the seventh circle of hell, thieves and serpents endlessly turn into one another. In the 237 fables of La Fontaine, the wolf appears fifteen times, the lion seventeen times, the fox nineteen times, and they are all intensely humanized, both in their vices and in their virtues; the serpent occurs only three times, in marginal and vaguely allusive roles.

As far as I can recall, the only "positive" snake in literature is Kipling's python Kaa. Kaa, the Flathead, is wise, cautious, vain, deaf, and old as the jungle, but he regains his youth anew every time he sheds his beautiful skin. He is a friend to Mowgli, but a distant one: a cold-blooded friend, cunning and incomprehensible, from whom the Frog, man-cub, can learn a great deal, but of whom he must always be wary.

There aren't many snakes in my own personal history. Once, in a village square, I was holding my infant son in my arms, watching some hens peck and scratch; a shoelace was dangling from the beak of one of the hens. Every so often the hen would lay the shoelace down on the ground, only to snatch it up jealously if one of her colleagues ventured over to take it away from her. Suddenly I noticed that the shoelace was moving: it was a small snake, in poor shape from the pecking it had received. I felt a Biblical hatred awaken inside me: it was a serpent, and therefore a viper, and so it was my duty to kill it. I thrust the child into the arms of the first person who happened by, and to the astonishment of the onlookers I started chasing the hen, which was even more astonished and justifiably indignant. After a brief pursuit, I managed to lay hands on the already doomed victim, and I crushed it underfoot with the clear conscience of a man who knows he's performing his duty as both a father and a citizen. I wouldn't do it now, or at least I would give it some thought: vipers, even healthy ones, are much

slower than folk zoology would have you think, and also, therefore, less dangerous.

Perhaps we have a deep-seated need for these false fears, midway between reality, playacting, and simple play—fears of rats, buttercups, and spiders. They are a way of falling into line with tradition, confirming that we are children of the culture in which we grew up; or perhaps they help us to relegate to the shadows other fears, much closer and much vaster.

The Eclipse of the Prophets

In recent years there has been a great deal of talk about malaise, and that malaise has been the subject of round tables and conferences. Malaise is a real thing, certainly: still, it's a cumulative term, covering an array of different phenomena, and it varies in extent from country to country. It would be black humor to speak of malaise in places where people are dying of starvation, thirst, disease, and war: let us restrict ourselves to the countries we know best, and where people "live well," in particular Europe.

Europeans, these days, fear neither civil nor European wars; they aren't starving; if they get sick, they won't die in the dust but will find medical care that is more or less effective; their children have a reasonable chance of living to adulthood; they live better than their parents and grandparents did; and yet they experience malaise and they give this malaise various names. The leading cause of this malaise is, or ought to be, fear of the bomb. Seen in this light, the situation is unprecedented in human history: there has never before been anything remotely similar, where a single decision, a single action can lead to the instantaneous destruction of the human race and the probable disappearance, in a matter of weeks, of all forms of life on Earth.

This fear is strange and formless; it's too vast to be rationally accepted. It doesn't weigh on us as one might expect but has assumed the form of an obscure unease, due to the novelty of the condition, a condition for which we find ourselves unprepared. There exists, and it has been made into a theory, something we could call a "mathematical fear," which is mathematical hope with its sign reversed; it is the product of the damage expected (or, respectively, the advantage expected) multiplied by the

probability that it will take place. This concept is abstract, and it doesn't help us. The damage here is maximal: is it infinite? No, because death, even if it's horrendous, even if it means the death of us all, puts an end to suffering; still, the damage remains incalculable. But we cannot estimate its probability, the second of the two factors. Unconsciously, imperceptibly, each of us has calculated it to be minimal, close to zero, so that the product, our fear, remains within tolerable limits and allows us to sleep, eat, make love, have children, follow the soccer championships, watch TV, and go on vacation. We've managed to minimize that probability (and we may even be right, let that be clear) because the situation is a new one. We lack the one tool that can help us estimate the probability of a future event: a count of the number of times and the circumstances under which it has taken place in the past.

This tool is useful only when the event has occurred many times; grave international tensions are followed by wars, and wars—experience tells us—are followed by epidemics and famine. But here we have no experience: total, all-encompassing, definitive war is something new, in the face of which we are all blank slates. The damage is new, and our ignorance of its likelihood is new. Our only hope rests on the thought that powerful politicians must surely know that they'd wind up in the furnace, too, along with their quibbles and their systems. That hope is not entirely misplaced, and it is further amplified by our tendency to repress our fears.

To be exact: there is a tendency, irrational but observed over the centuries, and unmistakable in situations of danger, to place the likelihood of a terrible event at the extremes of a range of values, zero and one—impossibility and certainty. We noticed it in the concentration camps, a ferocious sociological observation post. If I may be permitted to quote myself, I wrote nearly forty years ago, in *If This Is a Man*:

> If we were logical, we would resign ourselves to this evidence, that our fate is utterly unknowable, that every conjecture is arbitrary and has absolutely no foundation in reality. But men are rarely logical when their own fate is at stake; they prefer in every case extreme positions. Thus, depending on our character, some of us are immediately convinced that all is lost, that one cannot survive here and that the end is certain and near; others are convinced that, however hard the life that awaits us, salvation is likely and not far off, and, if we have faith and strength, we will see our homes and our dear ones again. The two classes, pessimists and optimists, are not in fact so distinct: not just because the agnostics are many but because the majority, without memory or consistency, go back and forth between the two extreme positions, according to the moment and the person they are speaking to.

It seems to me that, except for a few changes in the units of measurement, these observations likewise apply to the world we Europeans now live in, free from want but not from fear. As far as I can tell, we have difficulties with the entire gamut of possibility; total credulity and total incredulity are the chosen alternatives, and the latter prevails over the former. We are extremists: we overlook the middle ground, we are despairing or (as we are today) carefree; but we live badly. Still, we ought to reject this inborn tendency of ours toward the radical, because it's the root of evil. Both the zero and the one push us toward inaction: if some future damage is either impossible or certain, then the question "What is to be done?" becomes moot. Now this is not the state of things: nuclear holocaust is a possibility, and its likelihood depends on a great number of factors, including our specific behaviors, both individual and collective. It's not easy to say what we ought to do, but certainly, in all our private and political choices, the fact that the future is *at least partly* in our own hands, that it is plastic, not rigid, should never be forgotten. In particular, those who are closest to power should not forget it: politicians, soldiers, scientists, and great engineers. If they unleash the apocalypse, they'll be destroyed by it as well, and uselessly: to the detriment of all, to the benefit of none.

And so I believe that a great deal of our malaise comes from the extreme unknowability of the future, which discourages any long-term planning. This did not seem to be the human condition even just twenty years ago. We were not so helpless then, or, rather, we were but we weren't aware of it. We had always operated on the basis of models, gilded distant idols, and we've shown a singular versatility (and gift for forgetfulness) in the way we dispensed with old models and replaced them with new ones, different or even opposite: as long as we had some model. Long ago, Pliny the Elder wrote about the improbable Hyperboreans, who lived long and happy lives beyond the icy, snowbound Ripaean Mountains, in a land of perpetual springtime (even though the night there lasted six months), and who killed themselves only when they were tired of living. We've had Eden, Cathay, and Eldorado; under the Fascist regime we chose the great democracies as our model (and rightly so); then, at different times, according to various trends, the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and Sweden. We tended to prefer far-off lands, because a model, by definition, must be perfect; and since no real country is perfect, it's helpful to choose little known, distant models that we can safely idealize without fear of

clashing with reality. In any case, we'd constructed a destination for ourselves: our compass needle pointed in one definite direction.

Just as we followed models, we followed human beings, who, like us, were made of the same clay as Adam, but we idealized them, blew them out of proportion, hailed them as godlike: they were all-knowing and all-powerful, they were always right, they were free to contradict themselves and to erase their pasts. Now the delirious handover of responsibility seems to be finished, both in the West and in the East: we no longer have the Fortunate Isles or charismatic leaders (perhaps the last deplorable instance of this is Khomeini, and he won't last long). We're orphans, and we live with the malaise of orphans. Many of us, nearly all of us, had found it convenient and easy to place our faith in a prepackaged truth: it was a human choice, but a mistake, and now we're paying for that failure. Our future isn't written, it's not certain: we've awakened from a long slumber, and we've seen that the human condition is incompatible with certainty. No prophet now dares to reveal our tomorrows to us, and this—the eclipse of the prophets—is a bitter pill to swallow, but a necessary one. We must build our own tomorrow, fumbling blindly; build it from the roots up, without succumbing to the temptation to reassemble the shards of shattered idols, and without constructing new ones.

Translator's Afterword

A story attaches to the title "Other People's Trades," one that Primo Levi almost certainly enjoyed concealing in plain view. The title describes the book's ostensible subject, the work that people other than the author do. If we look carefully, though, half a dozen of these essays are about his original profession, that of chemist, and a dozen more are about writing, which was his second line of work. So he does write about other people's trades here, but not exclusively.

It is also perplexing that the first essay in the collection is about the Turin apartment where Levi lived his entire life. If there is a trade depicted in this essay, it is not that of an absentminded chemist but that of a barnacle or limpet that, having gone briefly out into the world, in the larval stage, to swim freely, in the end affixes itself to a rock and remains there for the rest of its life. What does this have to do with other people's trades? A strong indication comes in the author's preface. These essays, Levi confides, "are the product of a decade and more of vagabond and dilettantish curiosity . . . 'field invasions,' incursions into other people's professions," prompted, ultimately, by the impulses of "a voyeur and a busybody"—other people's business, in short.

The title, it turns out, comes from a venerable piece of Italian folk wisdom: stick to your knitting, or mind your own business. An old book renders it as: "Every man to his trade." The full proverb goes: "*Chi fa l'altrui mestiere, fa la zuppa nel paniere*." He who meddles in other people's business (or tries to practice a trade other than his own) might as well make soup in a breadbasket. And by breadbasket, the proverb means one made of wicker. Hardly a suitable stockpot.

But Levi defiantly hacks off the rest of the expression, clearly showing his contempt for the tidy picket fences separating fields of knowledge.

In the Preface, Levi writes: "I have frequently set foot on bridges that join (or ought to join) scientific culture with literary culture, crossing a crevasse that has always struck me as absurd. . . . It is an unnatural,

needless, toxic schism, the product of long-ago taboos and the Counter-Reformation, and in some cases it can even be traced back to a small-minded interpretation of the Biblical prohibition against partaking of a certain fruit."

Indeed, Levi seems to argue that we should eagerly devour as much of that forbidden fruit—knowledge—as we can get our hands on. Once this is understood to be the theme of the book, the way in which Levi ordered the fifty-one essays written over nearly twenty years for the Turin daily *La Stampa*, takes on a new meaning, pointing to knowledge, however unseemly or arcane, as a good in and of itself.

The first essay is, as noted, about the apartment where Levi was born and lived almost his entire life. The second is about Aldous Huxley, and how singularly wooden Huxley's depictions of those outside his social class seem. The third is how all that Levi has learned as a chemist can be used in looking at things outside the realm of chemistry: how being a chemist justifies his work as a writer. The fourth—an appreciation of Rabelais's masterwork, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—is a panegyric to the getting and enjoying of knowledge, a ceaseless and vital pursuit free of any false piety. The fifth (written just before the Moon landing in July 1969) explores the human impulse to look beyond and to inquire within. The sixth is a subtle critique of Alphonse Daudet's book *Tartarin of Tarascon*, which plumbs the author's attitude of dislike toward his own character and a deep strain of hidden racism. It is as if Levi had written a series of preambles setting forth his right to stick his nose into other people's knowledge.

There are various leitmotivs: the importance of language, the relatively puny status of man in the universe, the pointlessness of arbitrary barriers. One essay decries the practice of writing impenetrable prose, another explores a book of "odd facts," and delights in the surprising perspectives its author provides; yet another proudly describes Levi's youthful intuition of a linguistic link between the Alpine dialect word *baita* and the Hebrew word *bait*—both meaning "house" or "home."

Throughout the book, common sense is the refrain—whether tinged with humor, learned references, or personal experience. After all, when we stop listening to common sense, we ignore the most intuitive lesson of all, the one that Martin Niemöller, the anti-Hitler Lutheran minister imprisoned by the Nazis from 1937 to 1945, learned at his own expense: after they've

come for the Socialists, the trade unionists, and the Jews, they'll eventually come for you.

—ANTONY SHUGAAR

Stories and Essays

Translated by Anne Milano Appel

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TRANSLATOR’S AFTERWORD

Preface

I hope that the reader will show some indulgence for the extreme range of topics, tone, and style that he will find in this collection. In my own defense: the “pieces” extend over a period of time spanning nearly a quarter of a century, the period of my almost absolute fidelity to *La Stampa*. And in twenty-five years many things change, within and around us. Moreover, the pieces reflect an intrinsic libertinism of mine, in part intentional, in part owing to the course that destiny had in store for me; I have drunk from various springs and breathed different types of air, at times salubrious, at other times quite polluted. I have no regrets, and no complaints: “The world is beautiful because of its variety,” the protagonist of one of my books recites, with his typical lack of originality.

I beg the reader not to go looking for messages. It is a term that I detest, because it puts me in a difficult situation and makes me put on clothes that aren’t mine, that, on the contrary, belong to a type of human being whom I distrust: the prophet, the oracle, the seer. I am not such a man; I am an ordinary man with a good memory who fell into a vortex, who came out of it more by good fortune than by virtue, and who since that time has had a certain curiosity about vortexes, large and small, metaphoric and material.

PRIMO LEVI
OCTOBER 1986

To My Friends[1]

Dear friends, and here I’m saying friends
in the broad sense of the term:
Wife, sister, fellow workers, relatives,
Schoolmates,
Persons I’ve seen once
Or known for all my life:
As long as between us, for at least a moment,
a line has been stretched,
a well-defined connection.

I speak for you, companions
On a crowded way, not free of trouble,
Also for you, who’ve lost
Your soul, your spirit, your will to live.
No one, a few or maybe only one,
Or you who read me: remember the time
Before the wax hardened,
When each of us was like a seal.
Each of us carries the imprint
Of the friend met along the way;

In each the trace of each.
For good or ill
In wisdom or in folly
Each stamped by each.

Now that time bears down,
Now the doing is over,
To all of you the quiet wish
That autumn be long and mild.

December 16, 1985 (TRANS. J. GALASSI)

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1. Addressed to Levi's writer friends Mario Rigoni Stern and Nuto Revelli, among others.

STORIES

The Thaw

When all the snow has melted
We'll seek out the old path,
The one that's disappearing under brambles
Behind the monastery wall;
Everything will be the way it was.

Under the thick heather on either side
we'll find a certain low-growing herb
whose name I can't think of:
Every Friday I remember it
But every Saturday it slips my mind;
I've been told it's rare,
And helps with melancholy.

The ferns that line the path
Are delicate, like little animals:
They've barely poked their spiral curls
Out of the ground, and yet
They're ready for their changeable
Green loves, more intricate than ours.

Their tiny male and female seeds
Gnaw at the brakes
In rusty sacs of spore.
They'll explode with the first rain,
Swimming in the first drops,

Eager and agile: long live the lovers!

We’re tired of winter. The bite
of frost has left its mark
On flesh, mind, mud, and wood.
Let the thaw come, and melt the memory
Of last year’s snow.

February 2, 1985 (TRANS. J. GALASSI)



The Interview

It was still pitch-dark and it was drizzling. Elio, returning from his night shift, was tired and sleepy. He got off the tram and set out toward home, first along a street with an uneven surface, then along an unlit lane. In the darkness he heard a voice ask: “Will you grant an interview?” It was a slightly tinny voice, devoid of any dialect inflections; strangely, it seemed to come from the ground, near his feet. He stopped, a bit surprised, and said all right, but that he was in a hurry to get home.

“I’m in a hurry, too, don’t worry,” the voice replied. “We’ll be done in a couple of minutes. Tell me: how many inhabitants are there on Earth?”

“Four billion, more or less. But why are you asking *me*?”

“Purely by chance, believe me. I had no way of choosing. Please listen: how do you digest?”

Elio was irritated. “What do you mean, how do we digest? Some people digest well and others poorly. Who are you, anyway? Don’t tell me you want to sell me medicine at this hour, here in the dark in the middle of the street?”

“No, it’s just for statistical purposes,” the voice said imperturbably. “I come from a nearby star, we’re compiling an inventory of the inhabited planets of the Galaxy, and we need some comparative data.”

“But . . . how is it that you speak Italian so well?”

“I speak various other languages, too. You know, your TV transmissions don’t stop at the ionosphere—they continue on into space. It takes them well over eleven years, but they reach us quite clearly. That’s how I learned your language, for example. I find your commercials interesting: they’re very instructive, and I think I understand how you eat and what you eat, but

none of us have any idea of how you digest. That's why I'm asking you to please answer my question."

"Well, you see, I've always had a good digestion, and I don't know if I can give you many details. We have a . . . a pouch that's called the stomach, with acids in it, and then a tube; we eat, two or three hours go by, and the food liquefies, in short, it becomes flesh and blood."

". . . flesh and blood," the voice repeated, as if taking notes. Elio noticed that the voice was just like the ones you heard on TV: clear but bland and lifeless.

"Why do you spend so much time washing yourselves and washing the objects around you?"

Elio, with some embarrassment, explained that washing takes only a few minutes a day, that you wash so as not to be dirty, and that if you're dirty there's the danger of catching some disease.

"Right, that was one of our theories. You wash so you won't die. How do you die? At what age? Does everyone die?"

Here, too, Elio's answer was a little confused. He said there weren't any rules, both young and old died, very few reached a hundred. "I see. Those who use white sheets and wax the floors live a long time." Elio tried to correct him, but the interviewer was in a hurry, and went on, "How do you reproduce?"

Ever more embarrassed, Elio got tangled up in a muddled account about men and women, about chromosomes (which he had learned about just a few days earlier on TV), heredity, pregnancy, and childbirth, but the alien interrupted him: he wanted to know at what age clothing begins to grow. As Elio, exasperated by now, explained to him that clothing doesn't grow on you, you buy it, he realized that dawn was breaking, and in the uncertain light he saw that the voice was coming from a kind of puddle at his feet; or rather, not really a puddle but a sort of big splotch of dark jam.

The alien, too, must have realized that some time had passed. The voice said, "Thanks so much, sorry to bother you." Right after that, the splotch contracted and stretched upward, as if trying to lift off the ground. It seemed to Elio that it was unable to, and he heard the voice again, saying, "Please, you who are so kind, could you light a match? Sometimes if I don't have some ionized air around, I can't take off." Elio lit a match, and the splotch rose, as if sucked up by a vacuum cleaner, and was lost in the hazy morning sky.

May 22, 1977

Made for Each Other

It was the first time that Plato had managed to make a real date with a girl. Plato lived with his parents in a pretty but rather small one-family house: everything was very simple, the doorway nothing more than a dark narrow rectangle revolving around a point. The girl's name was Surfa and she lived nearby, that is to say, nearby as the crow flies, since a stream ran between the two dwellings, and Plato was unable to get to her house except by walking upstream and going around the stream's source—a distance of almost thirty kilometers, however—or by wading or swimming (it didn't make much difference to him).

There were no bridges, because in that village there was no above and below. Therefore a bridge couldn't exist, or even be conceived. For the same reason, it was inconceivable to cross the stream by stepping or jumping over it, even though it wasn't very wide. In short, measured by our usual criteria, it was an inconvenient village: there was no way to cross the stream without getting wet, so Plato swam over and then dried off by turning around in the sun, which was moving slowly across the horizon.

Since he wanted to arrive before nightfall, he continued on eagerly, not letting himself be distracted by the landscape, which in fact wasn't much to look at: a circular line around him, broken here and there by green segments of trees, behind which the intensely luminous segment of the sun appeared and disappeared.

After an hour's walk, Plato began to make out, to the left of the sun, the blue-green hyphen that was Surfa's house. He reached it quickly, and was glad to see the girl coming toward him, a thin dash that gradually lengthened as the distance diminished. Before long, he made out the red and

yellow strokes of her favorite skirt, and soon afterward the two held out their hands. They did not clasp hands; they were content with spreading their fingers and fitting their hands together, yet they both felt a small shiver of pleasure.

They talked for a long time, looking into each other's eyes, though doing so forced them into a slightly strained position; the hours passed and their desire grew. The sun was setting: Surfa managed to let Plato know that there was no one home, and that no one would return until late that night.

Timid and uncertain, Plato entered that pleasant house, which he wasn't yet familiar with, although he had been there countless times in his dreams. They didn't light the lamp; they withdrew to the most secluded corner, and as they went on talking Plato felt his profile being deliciously redrawn, so that one side of it ended up reproducing, in negative and with precision, the corresponding side of the girl: they were made for each other.

They came together at last, in the dusk and the solemn stillness of the plain, and were a single figure, delineated by a single contour. And in that magical moment—but only in a flash that quickly vanished—the intuition of a different world burst upon them both, a world infinitely richer and more complex, in which the prison of the horizon was shattered, vanquished by a radiant, concave sky, and in which their bodies, shadows without depth, were reborn, solid and full. But the vision exceeded their comprehension, and lasted but an instant. They separated, said goodbye, and Plato sadly started off on the path toward home, creeping along the now darkened plain.

November 27, 1977

The Great Mutation

For some days, Isabella had been agitated: she was barely eating, was running a slight temperature, and complained that her back itched. Her parents had the shop to run and didn't have much time for her. "She must be developing," her mother said. She kept her on a diet and rubbed her back with ointment, but the itching grew worse; the girl was unable to sleep. Her mother, applying the ointment, noticed that the skin felt rough: it was covered by a dense layer of short, stiff whitish hairs. Then she got frightened and discussed it with Isabella's father, and they sent for the doctor.

The doctor examined the girl. He was young and attractive, and Isabella was surprised to notice that at the beginning of the visit he appeared concerned and puzzled, and then grew increasingly attentive and interested. In the end he seemed as cheerful as if he had won a prize in the Lottery. He announced that it was nothing serious, but that he had to consult certain books of his and would return the following day.

He returned the following day, with a magnifying glass, and showed the mother and father that those hairs were branching and flat; in fact, they weren't hairs that were growing but feathers. He was even more cheerful than the previous day.

"You'll see, Isabella," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of: in four months you'll be flying." Then, addressing her parents, he added an explanation that was quite baffling: Was it possible they hadn't heard about it? Didn't they read the newspapers? Didn't they watch television? "It's a case of the Great Mutation, the first in Italy, and right here, in this remote, secluded valley!" The wings would develop little by little, without causing

any harm to the organism. Then, too, there might be other cases in the area, perhaps among the child's schoolmates, because the thing was contagious.

"But if it's contagious, it must be a disease!" the father said.

"It is contagious, and it appears to be a virus, but it's not a disease. Why should all viral infections have to be harmful? Flying is a fine thing! I'd like to be able to do it myself, if for no other reason than to visit patients in the outlying districts. This is the first case in Italy, as I told you, and I will have to report it to the district medical officer, but the phenomenon has already been identified, and various centers of infection have been observed in Canada, Sweden, and Japan. Just think how lucky, for you and for me!"

Isabella wasn't sure that it was really so lucky. The feathers were growing rapidly; they bothered her when she was in bed and they could be seen through her blouse. Around March the new bone structure became quite visible, and by the end of May the wings had almost completely emerged from her back.

Photographers and journalists came, along with medical commissions, from both Italy and abroad. Isabella was enjoying herself and felt quite important. She answered their questions seriously and with dignity, even though the questions were dumb and never varied. She didn't dare approach her parents, because she didn't want to frighten them, but she was worried: sure, she would have wings, but where would she learn how to fly? At the driving school in the provincial capital? At the airport in Poggio Merli? She would have liked to learn from the young doctor at the health service; or maybe he, too, would sprout wings, hadn't he said they were contagious? That way they could go together to visit the patients in the outlying districts. And maybe they would even cross the mountains and fly over the sea together, side by side, beating their wings to the same rhythm.

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At the end of the school year, in June, Isabella's wings were well formed and quite beautiful to look at. Isabella was blond, and they matched the color of her hair—they were speckled with golden brown at the top, near the shoulders, but the remiges were white, shining, and sturdy. A committee from the National Research Council arrived, a substantial grant came from UNICEF, and a physical therapist from Sweden appeared. She put up at the

town’s only inn, did not understand Italian very well, nothing suited her, and she made Isabella do a series of extremely boring exercises.

Boring and useless: Isabella felt her new muscles quiver and stretch; she studied the confident flight of the swallows in the summer sky and she no longer had any doubts. She had the definite sensation that she would learn to fly on her own, or, rather, that she already knew how to fly; at night now it was all she dreamed of. The Swede was stern, and made it clear that she must delay a while longer, and not expose herself to risks, but Isabella was waiting only for the right opportunity to present itself. When she was able to go off by herself, into the sloping meadows, or at times even indoors, in her room, she tried flapping her wings. She could hear their scratchy rustling in the air, and felt an almost frightening power in her thin adolescent shoulders. She had come to hate the weight of her body; when she flapped her wings, she could feel it diminish, almost disappear. Almost. The Earth’s pull was still too strong: a halter, a shackle.

Her opportunity came in August, around the Feast of the Assumption. The Swede had returned to her country for the holidays, and Isabella’s parents were in the shop, busy with the vacationers. Isabella followed the Costalunga mule track, crossed the ridge, and found herself in the steep meadows on the other side; there wasn’t a soul in sight. She crossed herself, like someone about to jump in the water, spread her wings, and began running downhill. With each step, the impact against the ground became lighter, until the earth fell away. She felt a great sense of peace, and heard the wind whistling in her ears. She stretched her legs back: she was sorry she had not worn her jeans; her skirt, billowing in the wind, got in the way.

Her arms and hands were also in the way; she tried crossing them over her chest, then stretched them out along her sides. Who said flying was difficult? It was the easiest thing in the world, she felt like laughing and singing. If she increased the tilt of her wings, her flight slowed and pointed upward, but only for a little while; then the speed decreased too much and Isabella felt she was in danger. She tried beating her wings and felt supported; with each stroke, she gained altitude, smoothly, easily.

Even changing direction was easy as pie, and quickly learned: all you had to do was twist the right wing slightly, and immediately you turned to the right. You didn’t even have to think about it: the wings themselves saw to it, just as the feet see to it that you veer left or right when you walk. Suddenly she had a sensation of bloating, a cramping in the pit of her

stomach; she felt wet, touched herself, and her hand came back slick with blood. But she knew what it was, and that it would happen one day, and she wasn't afraid.

She stayed aloft for a good hour and learned that a current of warm air rose from the crags of the Gravio, allowing her to gain altitude with no effort at all. She followed the provincial road and went straight over the town, perhaps two hundred meters up. She saw a passerby stop, then point out the sky to another passerby. The second one looked up, then ran to the shop: her mother and father hurried out, with three or four customers. Before long the streets were teeming with people. She would have liked to alight in the piazza, but there were too many people, and she was afraid of landing clumsily and being laughed at.

She let the wind carry her beyond the stream, to the meadows behind the mill. She began to descend, lower and lower, until she was able to make out the dusty pink flowers of the clover. Even when it came to landing, her wings seemed to know a thing or two more than she did: it seemed natural to position them vertically, and whirl them energetically, as if to fly backward. She lowered her legs and found herself standing on the grass, only a little out of breath. She refolded her wings and set off for home.

In the fall, four of Isabella's schoolmates, three boys and a girl, sprouted wings; on Sunday mornings it was amusing to watch them chase one another around the belltower in midair. In December the postman's son got wings, and immediately took over from his father, much to everyone's benefit. The doctor developed his wings the following year, but took no notice of Isabella and promptly married a wingless young woman who came from the city.

Isabella's father's wings emerged when he had already passed his fiftieth birthday. He did not benefit much from them; fearful and shaky, he took a lesson or two from his daughter, and dislocated an ankle during landing. The wings wouldn't let him sleep; they filled the bed with fluff and feathers, and made it difficult to put on his shirt, jacket, and overcoat. They were in the way when he stood behind the counter in the shop as well, so he had them amputated.

August 21, 1983

That Quiet Town of Auschwitz

It may seem surprising that one of the most frequent states of mind in the Lager was curiosity. And yet we were not only frightened, humiliated, and hopeless but also curious: starved for bread and also for understanding. The world around us seemed upside down, therefore someone must have turned it upside down, and therefore must be upside down himself: one, a thousand, a million anti-human beings, created to warp what was straight, to soil what was pure. It was an unwarranted simplification, but at that time and in that place we were not capable of complex ideas.

As far as the lords of evil are concerned, this curiosity—which I admit I still harbor, and which is not limited to the Nazi bosses—survives. Hundreds of books have been published about the psychology of Hitler, Stalin, Himmler, and Goebbels, and I've read dozens of them, without being satisfied, though, most likely, this is due to an essential inadequacy of the documentary page: it hardly ever has the power to restore the essence of a human being. The playwright or the poet is more suited to this purpose than the historian or the psychologist.

Still, this research of mine has not been entirely fruitless. Years ago, a strange, even provocative, fate put me on the track of "someone from the other side": certainly not one of the great evildoers, perhaps not even a legitimately evil man, nevertheless a specimen and a witness. An unwilling witness, who did not want to be one but who testified without wanting to and maybe even without knowing it. Those who testify through their behavior are the most valuable witnesses, because they are unquestionably truthful.

He was an almost-me, a me inverted. We were the same age, not dissimilar in terms of our studies, perhaps not even in temperament: he, Mertens, a young German Catholic chemist, and I, a young Italian Jewish chemist. Potentially two colleagues; in fact we worked in the same factory, but I was inside the barbed wire and he was outside. However, there were forty thousand of us working in the Auschwitz Buna-Werke, and it's unlikely, or in any case can no longer be verified, that the two of us ever met, he an *Oberingenieur* and I a chemist-slave. Nor did we meet afterward.

What I know about him comes from the letters of mutual friends. The world sometimes turns out to be ludicrously small, enabling two chemists from different countries to be linked by a chain of acquaintances who help to weave a net of information exchanged, which, though a poor substitute for the face-to-face encounter, is nevertheless better than mutual ignorance. In this way I learned that Mertens had read my books about the Lager, and quite likely others as well, because he was neither a cynical nor an insensitive man. He tended to deny a certain part of his past, but he was open enough to refrain from lying to himself; he didn't permit himself lies, but there were gaps, blank spaces.

The first information I have about him dates back to the end of 1941, a time of second thoughts for all Germans still capable of reasoning and resisting the propaganda: the Japanese are victoriously running rampant through Southeast Asia, the Germans are besieging Leningrad and are at the gates of Moscow, but the period of the Blitz is over, Russia has not collapsed, and instead the aerial bombardment of German cities has begun. Now the war is everyone's affair, in every family there is at least one man at the front, and no one at the front is sure of his family's safety anymore. In the houses, behind closed doors, the rhetoric of war is no longer current.

Mertens is a chemist in an urban rubber factory, and the company's management makes him a proposal that is nearly an order: there will be advantages to his career, and perhaps political benefits as well, if he agrees to move to the Auschwitz Buna-Werke. The area is peaceful, far from the front and beyond the range of the bombers, the work is the same, the wages are better, no difficulty about lodging; many Polish houses are vacant. . . . Mertens talks it over with his colleagues. The majority of them advise against it: you don't trade what's certain for what is uncertain, and, moreover, the Buna-Werke are in an ugly region, swampy and unhealthy. Unhealthy historically as well: Upper Silesia is one of those areas of Europe

that have changed masters too many times and are inhabited by a mixture of populations hostile to one another.

But no one has any objections to the name Auschwitz: it's still a neutral name, without resonance—one of the many Polish cities that changed their names after the German occupation. Oświęcim became Auschwitz, as if this were enough to make the Poles who had been living there for centuries Germans. It's a town like any other.

Mertens thinks it over: he is engaged to be married, and setting up house in Germany, under the bombings, is unwise. He asks for a leave and goes to have a look. What he might have seen during this first inspection is not known. The man returned, got married, and, speaking to no one, left for Auschwitz again to settle there with his wife and furniture. His friends—in fact, those who wrote me this account—urged him to speak, but he did not.

Nor did he speak during his second return home, on vacation in the summer of 1943 (because even in wartime Nazi Germany people went on vacation in August). Now the scenario has changed. Italian fascism, assailed on all fronts, has crumbled, and the Allies are moving up the peninsula. The aerial battle against the British has been lost, and by this time no corner of Germany is safe from the merciless Allied retaliations. The Russians not only did not collapse but in Stalingrad inflicted a stinging defeat on the Germans, and on Hitler himself, who led the operations with the obstinacy of a madman.

The Mertenses are the object of a wary curiosity, because at this point, in spite of all the precautions, Auschwitz is no longer a neutral name. Vague but sinister rumors have circulated: it is to be considered alongside Dachau and Buchenwald, indeed, it seems that it may be worse. It's one of those places about which it's risky to ask questions, but these are close friends, going way back. Mertens has just come from there, surely he must know something, and if he knows he must speak.

But while the conversations proceed, as in all sitting rooms, the women talking about evacuations and the black market, the men about their work, someone whispering an anti-Nazi joke, Mertens keeps to himself. There's a piano in the next room; he plays and drinks, returns to the sitting room every so often only to pour himself another glass. By midnight he's drunk, but the host has not lost sight of him. He drags him over to the table and says to him outright: "Now, you sit down here and tell us what the devil is

going on where you are, and why you have to get drunk instead of talking to us."

Mertens feels torn between drunkenness, prudence, and a certain need to confess. "Auschwitz is a camp," he says, "or, rather, a group of camps; one is actually adjacent to the factory. There are men and women there, who are filthy and ragged and don't speak German. They do the hardest jobs. We aren't allowed to speak to them." "Who said you couldn't?" "Management. When we got there, we were told that they were dangerous people, criminals and subversives." "And you never spoke to them?" the host asked. "No," Mertens replied, pouring himself another drink. Here young Mrs. Mertens joined in: "I met a woman who did the cleaning at the general manager's house. All she said to me was '*Frau, Brot,*' 'Ma'am, bread,' but I—" Mertens must not have been so drunk after all, because he said sharply to his wife, "Stop it," and then to the others, "Would you mind changing the subject?"

I don't know much about Mertens's actions after Germany's fall. I know that he and his wife, like many Germans in the eastern regions, fled ahead of the Soviets along the interminable roads of the retreat, roads covered with snow, rubble, and corpses; and that he subsequently resumed his job as a technician, but avoided all contacts and became more and more closed off.

He spoke a little more some years after the end of the war, when the Gestapo was no longer there to instill fear in him. This time, he was interrogated by an "expert," a former prisoner who today is a famous historian of the camps, Hermann Langbein. In response to specific questions, Mertens replied that he had agreed to move to Auschwitz to avoid having a Nazi sent there instead; that he had never spoken with the prisoners for fear of punishment, but that he had always tried to alleviate their working conditions; that he knew nothing about the gas chambers at the time because he had not asked anyone anything. Didn't he realize that his obedience was a material aid to Hitler's regime? Yes, today yes, but not then; it had never occurred to him.

I never attempted to meet Mertens. I felt a complex reluctance, of which aversion was only one component. Years ago, I wrote him a letter: I told him that if Hitler had risen to power, devastated Europe, and led Germany to ruin, it was because many good German citizens behaved just as he had, trying not to see, and remaining silent about what they did see. Mertens did not reply, and he died a few years later.

March 8, 1984

Two Flags

Bertrando had been born and brought up in a country called Lantania, which had a very beautiful flag. Or, at least, so it seemed to Bertrando, to all his friends and schoolmates, and to the majority of his fellow citizens. It was different from all other flags: an orange oval stood out against a background of vivid purple, and in the oval was a volcano, green at the base and white with snow at the top, a plume of smoke rising above it.

There were no volcanoes in Bertrando's country, but there was one in the adjacent country, Gunduwia. For centuries Lantania had been openly at war with its neighbor, or in any case relations had been hostile. In fact, the Lantanian national epic, in a passage whose interpretation is controversial, referred to the volcano as the "Lantanian altar of fire" or the "fire of the Lantanian altar."

In all the schools of Lantania it was taught that the annexation of the volcano by the Gunduwi had been a criminal undertaking, and that the first duty of every Lantano was to have military training, to despise Gunduwia with all his might, and to prepare for an inevitable, desirable war that would check Gunduwia's arrogance and win back the volcano. The fact that every three or four years this volcano devastated dozens of villages, and every year caused disastrous earthquakes, had no importance: it was Lantanian and must return to Lantania.

Moreover, how could a country like Gunduwia not be despised? The name itself, so sinister, so sepulchral, inspired aversion. The Lantani were a rowdy, argumentative people, they would come to blows or knife one another over the slightest difference of opinion, but when it came to

Gunduwia they were all agreed that it was a country of scoundrels and bullies.

As for their flag, it represented them perfectly: it could not have been uglier. It was dull and insipid, its colors and design clumsy. Merely a brown disk on a yellow background: no image, no symbol. A primitive, vulgar, dung-like flag. The Gunduwi must really be imbeciles, and must always have been so, to have chosen such a flag, and to soak it with their blood when they died in battles, which occurred three or four times a century. Moreover, they were notorious for being miserly and spendthrift, lustful and sanctimonious, reckless and cowardly.

Bertrando was a decent young man, respectful of laws and traditions, and the mere sight of his country's flag caused a wave of pride and gratification to flow through his veins. The combination of those three noble colors—green, orange, and purple—when, at times, he spied them together in a spring meadow, made him feel strong and joyful, happy to be a Lantano, happy to be in the world, but also ready to die for his flag, preferably wrapped in it.

By contrast, the Gunduwian yellow-and-brown had been disagreeable to him since earliest childhood, as far back as he could remember: irritating colors when separate, loathsome to the point of nausea when side by side. Bertrando was a sensitive, emotional boy, and the sight of the enemy flag, mockingly reproduced on wall posters or in satirical cartoons, put him in a bad mood, made his neck and elbows itch, and caused him to salivate intensely and suffer spells of vertigo.

Once, at a concert, he found himself sitting next to a pretty girl who, surely out of carelessness, was wearing a yellow blouse and a brown skirt. Bertrando had to get up and move away, and since there were no other seats, he had to stand through the entire concert. If he had not been rather timid, he would have told off that girl as she deserved. Bertrando liked apricots and medlars, but he ate them with his eyes closed to avoid the disgust of the brown pit poking out of the yellowish pulp.

The sound of the Gunduwian language, which was harsh, guttural, and nearly inarticulate, had similar effects on Bertrando. It seemed outrageous to him that the enemy language was taught in some schools in Lantania, and

that there were actually academics who studied its history and origins, its grammar and syntax, and who translated its literature. What kind of literature could it be? What good could come from that brown-and-yellow land of perverts and degenerates?

And yet there was a university professor who claimed to have demonstrated that Lantanian and Gunduwian were descended from the same language, extinct for three thousand years but documented by some tomb inscriptions. Absurd, or, rather, intolerable. There are things that *cannot* be true, that must be ignored, unspoken, buried. If it were up to Bertrando, all the philogunduwi would be buried three meters underground, along with those who, out of snobbishness, secretly listened to Gunduwian radio and repeated its filthy lies (unfortunately, nearly all the young people!).

Not that the border between the two countries was watertight. It was well guarded, on both sides, by sentinels who were happy to shoot, but there was a gap in it, and from time to time trade delegations crossed it in both directions, since the two economies were complementary. Weapons smugglers also crossed it, to everyone's surprise, with enormous cargoes that the border guards appeared not to notice.

Once Bertrando had seen a Gunduwi delegation pass along the main street of the capital. Those bastards were not much different from the Lantani after all: apart from their ridiculous way of dressing, it would have been difficult to distinguish them if not for their furtive glances and typically shifty expressions. Bertrando had moved closer to see if it was true that they smelled bad, but the police held him back. Of course they must smell bad. In the subconscious mind of the Lantani, an etymological connection had for centuries been established between Gunduwia and "stench" (*kumt*, in Lantanian). Then again, it was known to everyone that in Gunduwian *latnen* are "boils"; to the Lantani, this seemed like a malicious travesty, to be cleansed with blood.

Now it happened that, after lengthy, secret negotiations, the presidents of the two countries made it known that they would meet in the spring. After an awkward silence, the Lantanian daily paper began to let unusual material filter out: photographs of the Gunduwian capital with its imposing

cathedral and beautiful gardens; images of Gunduwian children with neatly combed hair and laughing eyes. A book was published in which it was demonstrated how, in remote times, a Lantanian-Gunduwian fleet had routed a motley group of pirate vessels, ten times as powerful in number. And finally it was announced that a soccer match would be held between the two champion teams in the stadium of the Lantanian capital.

Bertrando was among the first to rush to buy a ticket, but it was already too late; he had to resign himself to spending five times as much at the scalpers. The day was splendid and the stadium was packed; there wasn't a breath of wind, and the two flags hung limply from the gigantic flagpoles. At the appointed time, the referee blew the starting whistle, and at that very moment a steady breeze arose. The two flags, for the first time side by side, waved gloriously: the purple-orange-and-green of the Lantani alongside the yellow-and-brown one of the Gunduwi.

Bertrando felt an icy, searing shiver run down his spine, as if a rapier had been thrust between his vertebrae. His eyes must be lying, they could not be transmitting that double message to him: that impossible, lacerating yes-no. He felt loathing and love at the same time, in a toxic combination. Around him he saw the crowd explode, divided as he was. He felt all his muscles—the smooth muscles and the striated ones and the tireless heart muscles—contract painfully, the adductors and the abductors now enemies; he felt the tumultuous secretions of all his glands, inundating him with conflicting hormones. His jaws locked as if from tetanus, and he fell over like a block of wood.

May 17, 1984

An Erector Set Made with Love

One can fall in love at any age, with emotions that, while intense in all cases, encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from the edenic idyll to overwhelming passion, from bliss to desperation, from hard-won peace to devastating humiliation, and from shared interests (even business interests: why not?) to competitive squabbling. At the age of eleven, during an interminable summer vacation, I fell in love with a Lidia who was nine years old, gentle, homely, sickly, and not too bright. I gave her stamps for her collection, which I myself had encouraged her to start; I felt shivers of disgust hearing the often repeated story of her tonsillectomy and I helped her do her vacation assignments.

Most of all I was enchanted by her rapport with animals, which seemed magical to me, like a divine gift. There was a German shepherd who snarled at everybody, punctured all the rubber balls with his teeth, and chewed the cyclists' tires, yet he let Lidia pet him, closing his eyes and wagging his tail, and in the morning he would whimper outside her door, impatient for her to come out. Even the hens and chicks in the barnyard came running when she called and pecked the feed from the palm of her hand. She reminded me of Circe in the *Odyssey*, which we had just read in school.

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It would have been a sublime, tranquil love had I not become aware that the girl, though affectionate with me and grateful for my chivalrous services, nevertheless preferred another: Carlo, my best friend during those months, who was more robust than I. It was no use deluding myself: that

was the factor which determined Lidia's preference, and it was an enormous, quantitative factor that could not be eliminated by propitiatory rites. On the other hand, Carlo seemed completely indifferent to Lidia's timid advances; he preferred playing ball, scuffling with the local boys, and pretending to drive an old truck without a motor that was rusting away in the middle of a field.

The basis of my friendship with Carlo was the Erector set: we had nothing else in common, but this model-construction play-work kept us together for many hours of the day. I had only set No. 4, while Carlo, who was from a wealthier family, had No. 5 plus quite a few extra pieces, in all, practically the fabulous No. 6. Both jealous of our possessions, we had stipulated a precise agreement as to the exchange, loan, and common use of the pieces: taking into account the two sets, we had a fairly large assortment. We balanced each other. Carlo had good manual dexterity, I was better at planning and design. When we worked separately, his models were simple, solid, and pedestrian. Mine were imaginative and complex but not very sturdy, because I would neglect to tighten the bolts, so as not to lose time—something that my engineer father never stopped scolding me about. When we worked together, our skills were complementary.

In this situation, my dual love for Lidia and for the Erector set led to an obvious conclusion: I would seduce Lidia by means of the Erector set. I was careful not to disclose my real objective to Carlo, and revealed merely the more mundane aspect of my project to him: for Lidia's name day we would together construct something unprecedented, something unique, never proposed, not even in the rather unreliable illustrated manuals of the Erector company. I thought that Lidia would not be fooled: she would know that Carlo, that Carlo of hers, was only the physical laborer, the one who tightened the bolts, while I, her devoted servant, was the inventor, the creator, and that the machine we would launch in her presence was my personal, secret homage, a declaration in code.

What sort of machine to construct? We discussed it: Carlo had no idea of the message I intended to entrust to the work. Moreover, he had a spring-operated motor and his ideas were obvious and ordinary; it had to be something that moved by itself, a car or an excavator or a crane. I didn't want one of the usual toys; indeed, I didn't want a toy—I wanted a gift, an offering. Symbolic, of course, to be taken back after the ceremony. I was in love, true, but I would certainly be careful not to materially give Lidia even

a single perforated strip; besides, you don't give a girl pieces of an Erector set. I pondered it at length, then I suggested to Carlo that we construct a clock. Thinking back on it today, I wouldn't know how to explain my choice: maybe I confusedly thought that a clock beats like a heart, or that it's faithful and constant, or maybe I connected it to the recurrence of the name day.

Carlo looked at me, perplexed; up until then we had been satisfied with simpler models. My audacity as a planner aroused his respect and, at the same time, his mistrust. But a clock works with a spring mechanism, and therefore the motor, his pride and my envy, would find a worthy use. "Use it for the clock," he said to me, in a challenging tone. And I, in the same tone, replied that there was no need for his motor: clocks used to work by means of weights, and ours would, too. It would run even better, I explained to him, because a compressed spring has less force as it slackens, while a weight that descends exerts a constant force.

We set to work, I with enthusiasm, Carlo somewhat irritably; perhaps he had intuited the subservient role that in my heart I had in store for him. The clock that took shape in our hands was quite hideous and did not at all resemble a clock. At first I meant to give it the form of a pendulum clock with a base, but I soon saw that our supply of parts would not allow us to construct a tall, slender structure; the available vertical supports were too weak. And yet it had to be tall, because the weight needed room to descend. I got around the difficulty by affixing the shapeless gadget to the wall: the pendulum swung freely in the air, and the weight had an arc of about a meter and a half. The escapement—that is, the device that transmits the rhythm of the pendulum to the spool around which the weight's cord is wrapped, thus regulating and controlling its descent—cost me quite a bit of effort. I think I did it with two ratchet wheels, one mine and one Carlo's.

August 3 arrived, St. Lidia's Day. I pulled up the weight and set the pendulum going: the gadget started up, with a clattering *tick-tock*. I should explain that I had not proposed constructing a clock that kept time; the mere fact that the weight descended at a constant speed seemed a triumph, since we did not have gears capable of transforming the uniform motion of the spool into a cycle that would last exactly an hour. Though our clock had a

cardboard face and a hand (only one), the hand marked an arbitrary time: it made one sweep in twenty or twenty-one minutes, and stopped soon afterward, because the pendulum had reached the end of its run.

With unwitting cruelty Lidia asked me, “What’s it for?” She devoted no more than half a minute to our masterpiece; she was more interested in the cake and the real gifts. I felt my mouth fill with the bitter taste of betrayal when I saw that the most welcome present, the one that Lidia was proudly showing her friends, was a small cellophane envelope: it had been given to her publicly, brazenly, by Carlo, and contained a series of stamps from Nicaragua.

January 20, 1985

A Wartime Pipette

A few days ago, a group of friends and I were talking about the influence of small events on the course of history. This is a classic controversy and, in classic fashion, lacks a definitive, absolute resolution. One can safely declare with impunity that the history of the world (all right, let's be modest: let's say of the Mediterranean basin) would have been totally different if Cleopatra's nose had been longer, as Pascal claimed, and one can declare with equal impunity that it would have been exactly the same, as Marxist orthodoxy and the historiography proposed by Tolstoy in *War and Peace* claim. Since it's not possible to reconstruct a Cleopatra with a different nose, but only with an entourage exactly equal to that of the historical Cleopatra, there is no possibility of proving or refuting one or the other thesis through experimentation, and the problem remains a pseudo-problem.

On the other hand we were all in agreement regarding the observation that small events can have a determining effect on individual histories, in the same way that a railway switch tongue, shifted just a few centimeters, can send a train with thousands of passengers to Madrid rather than to Hamburg.

At this point, each of us wanted to tell about the small event that had radically altered his existence, and, once the confusion had calmed down, I, too, told about mine; or, rather, I described its details, because I had already recounted it a number of times, both verbally and in writing.

A little over forty years ago I was a prisoner in Auschwitz and I worked in a chemical laboratory. I was hungry, and tried to steal small, unusual objects (and therefore of high trade value) that I could swap for bread. After

various attempts, successful and failed, which I've described elsewhere, I found a drawer full of pipettes. Pipettes are slender, precisely graduated glass tubes used to transfer precise quantities of liquid from one receptacle to another; with your lips you suck up the liquid from one end (nowadays, actually, more hygienic systems are used) so that it rises exactly to the highest graduation, and then let it descend by its own weight. There were a great many pipettes: I slipped a dozen into a hidden pocket that I had sewn inside my jacket and brought them to the Lager. As soon as roll call was over, I ran to the infirmary; I intended to offer them to a Polish nurse I knew, a man who worked in the Infectious Diseases Ward. I explained to him that they could be used for chemical analyses.

The Pole looked at the stolen goods with little interest, then told me that it was too late for that day, he had no more bread: all he could offer me was a little soup.

I accepted the proposed compensation; the Pole disappeared among the patients in his ward and returned soon afterward with a half-full bowl of soup. It was half-full in a curious way, that is, vertically: because of the extreme cold, the soup had congealed, and someone had scooped out half of it with a spoon, as if eating half a cake. Who would have left half a bowl of soup in that realm of hunger? Almost certainly someone who was gravely ill, and, given the setting, also contagious: in recent weeks, in the camp, diphtheria and scarlet fever had broken out in epidemic proportions.

But in Auschwitz precautions of this kind did not exist; first came hunger and then all the rest. Leaving something edible uneaten was not what is commonly called "a sin"; it was unthinkable, indeed, physically impossible. That same evening my friend and alter ego Alberto and I shared that suspect soup. Alberto was the same age and height as me; he had the same temperament, the same occupation, and we slept in the same bunk. We even looked a little alike. Our foreign companions and the Kapo considered it superfluous to distinguish between us, and expected that when they called "Alberto!" or "Primo!" whoever was closest would answer.

We were therefore interchangeable, so to speak, and anyone would have predicted the same fate for both of us: both drowned or both saved. But it was just at this point that the switch tongue came into play, the small cause with decisive effects. Alberto had had scarlet fever as a child, and was immune; I, on the other hand, had not.

I became aware of the consequences of our imprudence a few days later. Whereas Alberto was fine at the wakeup call, my throat hurt intensely; I found it hard to swallow and had a high fever. But reporting in sick in the morning was not permitted, so I went to the laboratory as I did every day. I felt deathly ill, yet just that day I was assigned an unusual task. Also working in that laboratory (or pretending to work) were eight girls, Germans, Poles, and Ukrainians; the supervisor told me that I was to teach Fraulein Drechsel a certain analytical method.

The Fraulein was a hefty young German girl, graceless and surly. For the most part she avoided looking at us three chemist-slaves; when she did so, her pale eyes expressed a vague hostility, made up of mistrust, embarrassment, repulsion, and fear. She had never spoken a word to me. I found her disagreeable and also suspect, because earlier I had seen her go off with the young SS fellow who guarded the unit. Then, too, she was the only one who wore a badge with the swastika pinned to her shirt. Perhaps she was a squad leader in the Hitler Youth.

She was a terrible student because she was stupid, and I was a terrible teacher because I did not speak German well and, most of all, because I was not motivated; in fact, I was counter-motivated. Why on earth should I have had to teach that creature anything? The normal teacher-student relationship, which is descending, stood in contrast to our ascending relations: I Jewish and she Aryan, I filthy and sick, she clean and healthy.

I believe that was the only occasion on which I deliberately did wrong. The analysis that I was to teach her involved the use of a pipette: yes, a sister of those to which I owed the illness that was running through my veins. I showed Fraulein Drechsel how to use it, inserting it between my feverish lips; then I handed it to her and proposed that she do the same. In other words, I did what I could to infect her.

A few days later, while I had been admitted to the infirmary, the camp was disbanded in the tragic conditions that have been described numerous times. Alberto was a victim of the small event, of the scarlet fever from which he had recovered as a child. He came to say goodbye to me, and then he set out that night in the snow, along with sixty thousand other ill-fated souls, on the deadly march from which few returned alive. I was saved, in the most unforeseeable way, by the matter of the stolen pipettes, which had brought me a providential disease, just at the moment when, paradoxically, not being able to walk was fortunate. At Auschwitz, in fact, for reasons

never made plain, the Nazis who fled refrained from carrying out the orders from Berlin, which were clear: Leave no witnesses behind. They left, abandoning the sick to our fate.

As for what may have happened to Fraulein Drechsel, I have no idea. Perhaps she was guilty of nothing more than a few Nazi kisses. If so, I hope that the small event guided by me did not cause her great harm: at seventeen one soon recovers from scarlet fever and it has no aftereffects. Nevertheless, I feel no remorse for this personal attempt of mine at bacteriological warfare. I learned later that others, in other camps, had acted in a more systematic and more precisely targeted way. In places where exanthematic typhus raged—an often fatal disease that is transmitted by body lice—prisoners assigned to iron the uniforms of the SS went looking for companions who had died of typhus, collected the lice from the corpses, and slipped them under the collars of the military jackets. Lice are not very likable creatures, but they have no racial prejudices.

May 23, 1985

Frogs on the Moon

The “country” interlude lasted for the entire school vacation, that is, nearly three months. Preparations began early, usually on St. Joseph’s Day. My father and mother would go through the valleys, still covered with snow, looking for a place to rent, preferably somewhere served by the railroad and not too far from Turin. This was because we did not have a car (almost nobody did) and because my father’s vacation was limited to three days in mid-August, even though he hated the summer heat. And so, just to sleep in a cool place and be with the family, he subjected himself to the punishment of daily train travel, to Torre Pellice, or Meana, or Bardonecchia. In a show of solidarity, we went to wait for him at the station every evening; he left at dawn the following day, even on Saturday, in order to be in the office by eight.

Around mid-June my mother got started on the luggage. Aside from duffel bags and suitcases, the bulk of it consisted of three large wicker baskets that, when full, must have weighed almost a hundred kilograms each. Porters arrived, miraculously hoisted them onto their backs, and carried them down the stairs, sweating and swearing. The baskets held everything: linens, pots, toys, books, food supplies, light clothing and heavy clothing, shoes, medicines, tools, as if we were leaving for Atlantis. In general, the choice of place was made jointly with other families, friends, or relatives; this way, you were less alone—in other words, you brought a piece of the city with you.

The three months passed slowly, quiet and tedious, punctuated by the sadistic abomination of the vacation homework. They brought an ever new contact with nature: humble grasses and flowers whose names it was a

pleasure to learn, birds with various calls, bugs, spiders. Once, in the basin in the washhouse, nothing less than a bloodsucker, with its gracefully undulating swim, like a dance. At other times, a bat in the bedroom, a weasel glimpsed at twilight, a mole cricket that was neither cricket nor mole: a fat, repugnant, and menacing little monster. In the garden-courtyard orderly lines of ants bustled, their astuteness and obtuseness fascinating to study. The school textbooks held them up to us as an example: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard.” They never took a vacation. Yes, of course, but at what cost!

The most interesting place was the stream, where my mother brought us every morning to sunbathe and splash around in the clear water while she knitted in the shade of a willow. The stream could be forded without danger from one bank to the other, and it was home to creatures never seen before. Black insects that looked like big ants crawled along the bottom; each dragged with it a cylindrical case made of little pebbles or vegetable matter which housed its abdomen, and from which only its head and legs stuck out. If I disturbed one, it withdrew abruptly into its ambulatory little house.

Marvelous dragonflies with deep blue metallic reflections hovered in midair; their droning, too, was metallic and mechanical. They were tiny war machines: all of a sudden they would descend like arrows on an invisible prey. Nimble green beetles ran along the dry sandy edges, and the conical pits of the ant lions would open up. We watched their ambushes with a secret sense of complicity, and thus of guilt, to the point where my sister, every so often, could not help showing mercy, and with a twig she would turn aside a little ant that was headed toward a cruel, sudden death.

The left bank was teeming with tadpoles, hundreds of them. Why just the left bank? After much discussion we observed a path there, used on Sundays by fishermen. The trout had noticed it, and stayed far away, along the right bank. The tadpoles, in turn, had settled on the left side in order to stay away from the trout. The tadpoles aroused conflicting emotions: laughter and tenderness, like puppies, newborns, and all creatures whose head is too big for their body; and indignation, because from time to time they devoured one another.

They were chimeras, impossible beasts, all head and tail, yet they navigated swiftly and confidently, propelling themselves with an elegant waving of their tails. Despite my mother’s disapproval, I brought home a dozen and put them in a small basin, covering its bottom with sand from the

streambed. They seemed to be comfortable there, and in fact, after a few days, they began their metamorphosis. This really was an extraordinary spectacle, full of mystery, like a birth or a death, enough to make the vacation homework pale, and the days flew by while the nights seemed interminable.

The tadpole's tail would swell into a small knob, near its root. The knob grew, and in two or three days two webbed feet emerged, but the little creature did not use them: it let them hang inert, and continued to wriggle its tail. After a few more days, a pustule formed on one side of its head; it grew, then burst like an abscess, and from it emerged a front leg, perfectly formed, tiny and transparent, like a small glass hand, which immediately began to swim. Soon afterward the same thing happened on the other side, and, at the same time, the tail began to shrink.

That this was a dramatic period was obvious at first glance. It was an abrupt, brutal puberty: the creature grew restless, as if perceiving in itself the anguish of one whose nature is changing, and who feels distress in body and mind; perhaps it no longer knew who it was. It swam in a frenzy, bewildered, its tail growing shorter and the four little legs still too weak for its needs. It swam in circles, looking for something, perhaps air for its new lungs, perhaps a platform from which to take off toward the world. I realized that the walls of the small basin were too steep for the tadpoles to climb, as they evidently wanted to, and I put two or three wooden boards in the water on a slant.

It was the right idea, and several tadpoles took advantage of it; but was it still right to call them tadpoles? No longer; they were no longer larvae, they were frogs, brown and no bigger than a bean, but frogs, creatures like us, with two hands and two legs, who swam "frog style" with some difficulty but with the correct form. They no longer ate one another, and we now experienced a different feeling toward them, maternal and paternal: in some way they were our children, even though we had been more of a hindrance than a help to their transformation. I set one on the palm of my hand: it had a nose, a face, it narrowed its eyes as it watched me, then suddenly opened its mouth. Was it looking for air or did it want to say something? At other times it would start out determinedly along a finger, as if on a diving board, then suddenly take a foolish leap into space.

Raising tadpoles was not so easy after all. Only a few appreciated our rescue boards, and emerged onto dry land. The others we found drowned in

the morning; now lacking the gills that had served them in their aquatic infancy, they were exhausted by too much swimming, just as a human swimmer would be, trapped within the walls of a sluice. Even the more intelligent ones, those who had grasped the use of the landing boards, did not have a long life.

A completely understandable instinct, the same one that drove us to the moon, drives the tadpoles to leave the expanse of water where the transformation took place. It doesn't matter where they go—anyplace but that one. It's not unlikely that there are other places in nature, marshy meadows or swamps, near a pool or a bend in a stream; and so some survive, migrating and colonizing new environments, but, even in the most favorable conditions, a great number of them are destined to die. This is why mother frogs exhaust themselves giving birth to an interminable succession of eggs: they "know" that infant mortality will be frighteningly high, and they provide for it as our great-grandparents did in the countryside.

Our surviving tadpoles scattered throughout the garden-courtyard, in search of water that was not there. We chased them in vain among the grass and stones; one of them, the boldest, which, with clumsy hops, was struggling to cross the granite path, was spotted by a robin, which made a single mouthful of it. That same instant, the white cat that was our playmate, and had been watching the scene, motionless, made a prodigious leap and swooped down on the bird, which had been distracted by its lucky catch. The cat did not quite kill it but carried it off to a corner to toy with its death throes, as cats do.

August 15, 1985

The Mirror Maker

Timoteo, his father, and all his ancestors, going back to the remotest times, had always made mirrors. A bread chest in their house still held copper mirrors green from oxidation, silver mirrors darkened by centuries of human exhalations, and others of crystal, framed in ivory or precious woods. When his father died, Timoteo felt released from the shackles of tradition; though he continued to fashion perfectly made mirrors, which he sold profitably throughout the region, he began again to ponder an old plan.

Ever since he was a boy, he had been secretly breaking the rules of the guild, behind the backs of his father and grandfather. By day, in the hours spent in the workshop, as a dutiful apprentice he made the usual boring mirrors: flat, transparent, colorless, the kind that, as they say, render a truthful (though virtual) image of the world and, in particular, of the human face. In the evening, when nobody was watching, he created different mirrors. What does a mirror do? “It reflects,” like the human mind. But normal mirrors obey a simple, inexorable physical law; they reflect like a mind that is rigid and obsessed, that claims to grasp *the* truth about the world. As if there were only one! Timoteo’s secret mirrors were more versatile.

There were some of tinted glass, streaked and milky: they reflected a world that was redder or greener than the real one, or multicolored, or with delicately blurred edges, so that objects and people seemed to cluster together like clouds. There were some multiple ones, made of thin sheets or cleverly angled fragments: these shattered the image, reducing it to a pretty but unintelligible mosaic. A contrivance that had cost Timoteo weeks of work inverted top and bottom and reversed right and left. A person looking

at it for the first time experienced intense vertigo, but if he persisted for a few hours he became used to the upside-down world, and then felt nausea in a world that was suddenly right side up. Another mirror was composed of three panels, and a person who looked in it saw his face multiplied by three. Timoteo gave it to the parish priest so that at catechism time he could help the children understand the mystery of the Trinity.

There were mirrors that magnified things, as, it is foolishly said, ox eyes do, and others that shrank things or made them appear infinitely far away; in some you saw yourself elongated, in others short and fat, like a Buddha. As a gift for Agata, Timoteo made a wardrobe mirror from a slightly wavy sheet of glass, but got a result that he had not anticipated. If the subject looked at himself without moving, the image showed only a slight distortion; if instead he moved up and down, bending his knees a little or rising up on tiptoe, stomach and chest flowed impetuously upward or downward. Agata now saw herself transformed into a stork-woman, her shoulders, breast, and stomach compressed into a bundle that hovered on two long, skinny legs; immediately afterward, she was a monster with a spindly neck from which all the rest hung: a squashed, squat mass of hernias, like potter's clay that sags under its own weight. The affair ended badly. Agata broke the mirror and the engagement, and Timoteo grieved, though not too much.

He had a more ambitious project in mind. In great secrecy he experimented with various types of glass and silver plating, subjected his mirrors to electric fields, irradiated them with lamps that he sent for from distant countries, until he thought he was close to his objective, which was to produce metaphysical mirrors. A Spemet, that is, a *specchio metafisico*, a metaphysical mirror, does not obey the laws of optics but reproduces your image as it is seen by the person facing you. The idea was an old one: Aesop had already thought of it and who knows how many others before and after him, but Timoteo was the first to realize it.

Timoteo's Spemets were the size of a business card, flexible and adhesive: in fact, they were intended to be pasted to the forehead. Timoteo tried out the first model by sticking it to the wall, but he didn't see anything special in it: just his usual image, that of a thirty-year-old whose hairline was already receding, with a penetrating, dreamy, and somewhat disheveled look. But, of course, a wall doesn't see you; it doesn't harbor images of you. He prepared about twenty samples, and it seemed only right to offer

the first one to Agata, with whom he had maintained a stormy relationship, in order to be forgiven for the matter of the wavy mirror.

Agata accepted it coldly, listening to his explanations with an appearance of distraction. But when Timoteo suggested that she apply the Spemet to her forehead, she did not wait to be asked twice: she had understood all too well, thought Timoteo. In fact, the image of himself that he saw, as if on a tiny television screen, was not very flattering. He wasn't going bald but was bald, his lips were half open in an inane smile that revealed his rotten teeth (ah, yes, he had been putting off the treatment recommended by the dentist for some time now), his expression was not dreamy but moronic, and his eyes looked strange. Why strange? It didn't take him long to figure it out: in a normal mirror the eyes are always looking at you; in this one, instead, they were looking sideways toward the left. He moved closer and shifted a bit: the eyes leaped to the right. Timoteo left Agata with conflicting emotions: the experiment had gone well, but if Agata truly saw him that way the breakup could only be final.

He offered the second Spemet to his mother, who did not ask for any explanations. He saw himself as a sixteen-year-old, blond, rosy, ethereal and angelic, his hair neatly combed and his tie knotted at the right height: like a memento of the dead, he thought to himself. Nothing to do with the school photos he had found a few years ago in a drawer, which showed a lively boy, though interchangeable with the majority of his fellow students.

The third Spemet was for Emma, no doubt about it. Timoteo had drifted from Agata to Emma with no sudden jolts. Emma was petite, languid, gentle, and shrewd. Under the covers, she taught Timoteo several tricks that he would never have thought of on his own. She was less intelligent than Agata, but did not possess the latter's stony severity: Agata-agate, Timoteo had never noticed it before, names do mean something. Emma did not understand a thing about Timoteo's work, but she often knocked at the door of his workshop, and would sit and watch him for hours, spellbound. On Emma's smooth forehead, Timoteo saw a magnificent Timoteo. He was half length and bare-chested; he had the well-proportioned torso that it had always pained him not to have, a classically handsome face with thick locks graced by a laurel wreath, and a gaze that was at once serene, joyful, and hawk-like. At that moment, Timoteo realized that he loved Emma with an intense, sweet, and abiding love.

He distributed various Spemets to his closest friends. He noticed that no two images corresponded; in short, no real Timoteo existed. He also noticed that the Spemet possessed a distinct virtue: it strengthened long-standing, steady friendships, and quickly dissolved routine, conventional ones. Nevertheless, all attempts at commercial exploitation failed; the sales representatives were united in reporting that there were too few clients who were satisfied with their image as reflected on the foreheads of friends or relatives. Sales would still be meager, even if the price were cut by half. Timoteo patented the Spemet and nearly ruined himself for several years in an effort to keep the patent valid. He tried in vain to sell it, then he resigned himself, and went on making plain mirrors, of excellent quality, in fact, until he reached the age of retirement.

November 1, 1985

The Man Who Squeezed Through Walls

Memnone had lost count of the days and the years. He knew every wrinkle, crevice, and bump of the four walls within which he was locked up: he had studied them with his eyes by day, with his fingers by night. He went on running his fingers across the stone, from the floor up as high as his arms could reach, as if reading and rereading the same book: an alchemist always learns something from matter, and besides he had nothing else to read.

It was his art itself that had led him to prison. The guild was powerful, rigid in its orthodoxy, and recognized by the Emperor. Its dictate was clear: matter was infinitely divisible. Its image was water, not sand; to maintain that there were those ultimate grains, atoms, was heresy. Was it possible that those who spent their life dividing water would encounter a barrier in the end? Memnone had dared to think so, and had proclaimed, written, and taught this to his apprentices. He would not be released until he recanted.

He could not recant. His mind's eye told him that matter was vacuous and scattered, like the starry sky. Minuscule grains suspended in space, guided by hatred and love. This was why they had walled him up alive: so that the ruthless solidity and impenetrability of the stone might speak to disprove him. But Memnone knew that the stone lied, and knew that this was the essence of his art, to prove the lie untrue. He remembered what he had seen in his workshop. Air, water, and sesame seeds can pass through a sieve. Air and water can pass through cloth, but sesame seeds can't. Air can pass through leather, but water can't. From a tightly sealed amphora neither air nor water can escape. But he was certain that a thinner air existed, an ether capable of going through fired clay, bronze, and the stone that buried

him, and that his own body could become thin enough to penetrate the stone.

How? *Homo est quod est*, man is what he eats: obese and boorish if he eats lard, strong if he eats bread, placid if he eats oil, weak if he eats only turnips. Now, the food that was served to him through the spyhole was coarse, but he would be able to refine it. He tore off an edge of his cloak and filled it with the dirt that covered the ground; by expertly spreading it in graduated layers, he made a filter, according to a design that only he and Hecate knew. From then on, he filtered the slops, discarding the more solid parts. After some months, or perhaps it was a year, the effects began to be felt. At first it was only a great weakness, but then he noticed, in the light from the little window, that his hand was becoming more and more diaphanous, until he could make out the bones, which were faint as well.

He prepared for the trial. He pointed a finger against the stone and pushed. He felt a tingling sensation, and saw that the finger penetrated. It was a double victory: the confirmation of his vision, and the gateway to freedom. He waited for a moonless night, then pressed his palms as hard as he could. They went in, though with some difficulty; his arms went in, too. He pushed with his forehead: he felt it merge with the stone, as it moved forward very slowly, and at the same time he was overcome with nausea. It was a painful sensation; he was aware of the stone in his brain and of his brain mixed with the stone.

He concentrated his effort in his arms, as if swimming in pitch, through a buzzing that deafened him, and in a darkness broken by inexplicable flashes, until he felt his feet detach from the ground. How thick was the wall? Perhaps an arm’s length: the outer surface could not be far. He soon realized that his right arm had emerged: he felt it move freely in the air, but he struggled to extricate the rest of his body from the viscosity of the stone. He was unable to press against the wall from the outside: his hands got stuck again. He felt like a fly caught in honey, who in order to free one leg entangles two others, but he pushed hard with his legs, and at the first light of dawn emerged into the air like a butterfly from the pupa.

He dropped to the ground from a height of three arm lengths. He wasn’t hurt, but he was saturated with grit, stony, encumbered. He had to hide, quickly. He had trouble walking, but not just because of weakness and the exertion of the passage. Though his body was emaciated, its weight caused the soles of his feet to sink into the ground. He found grass, and things went

better; then the pavement of the city again. He realized that, in spite of his fatigue, he was better off running, so as not to allow time for his feet to get stuck: to run, without ever stopping. Until when? Was this freedom? Was this its price?

He found Hecate. She had waited for him, but she was an old woman. She made him sit down and talk, and to his horror he immediately felt his buttocks merging with the wood of the chair. He found relief only in bed, with his weight evenly distributed on the feather mattress. He explained to the woman that he had to eat, to become thick again, to reestablish boundaries with the world; or would it perhaps be better to wait, in order to defeat his enemies with the evidence of the fact? Matter, including his own, was penetrable, therefore discrete, therefore made up of atoms: no one could contradict it without contradicting himself.

Hunger prevailed. Hecate brought Memnone food as he lay there: shoulder of mutton, beans. The mutton was tough, and impossible for him to chew. Jaw, meat, and mandible stuck to one another, and he feared that his teeth would fall out. Hecate had to help him, using the tip of the knife as a lever. Better milk, eggs, and fresh cheese for now: that worn-out body could not tolerate pressure; yet, after such a long abstinence, it was swelling with desire. Memnone drew the woman into the bed, undressed her, and explored her skin, just as he had explored the stone of the prison a few hours ago. It had remained youthful: he felt it soft and smooth, fragrant. He embraced the woman, joyful at his reawakened vigor. It was an unexpected effect, a marginal but happy result of his thinning, or perhaps a residual stoniness, the hard atoms of rock mixed with the atoms of his flesh and his unvanquished spirit.

Swept up by desire, he forgot about his new condition. He clasped the woman to him, and felt his own boundary melt into hers, their skin merging and dissolving. For a moment or for always? In a twilit awareness he tried to pull away and withdraw, but Hecate’s arms, much stronger than his, clamped shut. He felt again the vertigo that had come over him as he migrated through the stone: no longer nauseating now, but delicious and fatal. He dragged the woman with him into the eternal night of the impossible.

March 2, 1986

The Ant’s Wedding

JOURNALIST: Madam, I see that you’re very busy. I hope I’m not disturbing you: for someone like me, this is a rare occasion.

QUEEN: It’s what you call a scoop, right? Well, to begin with, get out from underfoot. I mean, move your feet. You’re destroying the hill: it will take at least three hundred ant-days just to repair the damage you’ve already done! Our mounds are perfect or else. We’re made that way, especially me. There, good girl. Now go on. Yes, go right ahead and tape. By the way, why no “Majesty”? What do you call your queens?

J: Forgive me, madam . . . er, forgive me, Your Majesty. I thought that—

Q: You thought wrong. Maybe because I’m a widow and I’m laying eggs? Well? That’s exactly why. Can you show me a human queen capable of doing that? Majesty! Of course I’m a majesty. Do you know how many eggs I’ve laid so far? A million and a half. And I’m only fourteen years old, and I only made love once.

J: Can you tell us something about your wedding?

Q: It was a splendid afternoon, full of colors, fragrance, and poetry: one of those moments when the world seems to sing. It had just stopped raining and the sun had come out again right away. And I felt a desire, an irresistible urge, the muscles of my wings so swollen I thought they would burst. Ah, when you’re young . . . My husband, God rest his soul, was very vigorous and appealing: his scent attracted me immediately, and mine him. He pursued me for a good half hour, insistently, and then, you know how we females are, I pretended to be tired and let him catch up with me,

even though I, too, was a splendid flier. Yes, it was unforgettable, go ahead and write that in your newspaper: from above you couldn't even see our anthills anymore, his and mine. And he, poor thing, delivered the packet to me and immediately dropped down, dead as a doornail; there wasn't even time to say goodbye.

J: . . . the packet?

Q: A packet like few others, with more than four million little creatures, all viable. Since then I've kept it in my abdomen. A matter of turning the tap on and off, because we've incorporated them: three or four sperms for every egg, and when I want males all I have to do is shut off the duct. As for your system, believe me, we have never understood it. I mean, the honeymoon is fine, but then what do you need all those repeat performances for? All productive hours frittered away. You'll see, in time you, too, will get to that point, just as you managed to achieve the division of labor: for the working classes fecundity is nothing but waste and demagoguery. You, too, should delegate it, you have kings and queens, or even just presidents; leave it to them, the workers should be working.

And why so many men? That fifty-fifty of yours is obsolete, let me tell you; it's no accident that our regime has existed for a hundred and fifty million years, and yours not even a million. And ours has been tested, it's been stable since the Mesozoic, whereas you change yours every twenty years at best. Look, I don't want to interfere in your affairs, and I realize that anatomy and physiology are difficult to modify over a short period of time, but, even given the way things are with you, one male for every fifty females would be more than enough. Aside from everything else, you would solve the problem of world hunger.

J: And the other forty-nine?

Q: The best thing would be for them not to be born. Otherwise, it remains to be seen: kill them, or castrate them and make them work, or let them kill one another, since they certainly have a tendency to do so. Speak to your editor about it, write an editorial; it could become a bill to introduce in Parliament.

J: I will certainly talk to him about it. But you, Your Majesty, have you never regretted that afternoon, that flight, that instant of love?

Q: It’s hard to say. You see, for us duty comes first. And then, when all is said and done, I’m comfortable in here, in the warmth and darkness, at peace, surrounded by my hundred thousand daughters who lick me all day. There is a time for everything, one of your people said many centuries ago. I think he might even have been urging you to imitate us. For us, this is a strict rule: there is a time for eggs, a time for larvae, and a time for pupae; there is day and night, summer and winter, war and peace, work and fecundity. But above all there is the State, and nothing but the State.

Well, as for regrets, yes, of course. I told you, I was a great flier: perhaps that’s the reason my poor husband chose me in particular among the crowd of princesses swarming at sunset. There were so many of us we obscured the sun; from a distance, it looked like a plume of smoke rising out of the anthill, but it was I who flew higher than all the rest. I had an athlete’s musculature. And he pursued me, he entrusted to me that gift which contains all our tomorrows, and then, suddenly, down he went: I still see him now, he went into a spin and fell like a leaf.

J: And you, Your Majesty?

Q: The packet is a responsibility, and a heavy one: physically as well. I flew down, or, rather, I dropped down: partly from fatigue, partly from emotion. No longer a virgin aviatrix, but a widowed mother, pregnant with millions of children. The first thing to do, when one becomes a mother, is get rid of the wings; they’re frivolous, a vanity, and besides they’re not useful anymore. I immediately tore them off, and dug myself a niche, as we have always done. I was tempted to keep them in my cell as a memento, but then I thought that this, too, was vanity, and I left them there for the wind to carry off.

I felt the eggs maturing in me, dense as hailstones. When this moment comes, the wing muscles become providential in another way. I absorbed them, consumed them, incorporated them, so as to have nourishment to pass on to the eggs, to my future people. I sacrificed my strength and my youth for them, and I’m proud of it. I, I alone. There are species that keep as many as ten or twenty

queens in their nest: it's a disgrace that's never been seen here. Just let one of my workers try and become fertile, she'll find out!

J: I understand. Procreation is a highly demanding commitment. I can see why you claim a monopoly over it. Maternity is sacred, even among us, do you know that? Our news reports are full of horrors, but anyone who harms children is universally abhorred.

Q: Yes, yes. The eggs shouldn't be eaten, it's not a good thing. But there are situations where the sense of the State's requirements must be followed, which is, after all, good sense. If food is scarce and there are too many eggs, moralizing no longer has any place. The eggs are eaten—I'd be the first to—and maybe even the larvae and the pupae. They're nourishing; and if they're left uncared for, because the workers are hungry and can't work anymore, they'll spoil, they'll be good only for worms, and then we, too, will die. *So what?** Without logic there is no government.

April 20, 1986

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* Here and throughout *Stories and Essays*, an asterisk indicates that the word or phrase is in English in the original.



Force Majeure

M was in a hurry because he had an important appointment with the director of a library. He wasn't familiar with that part of the city. He asked for directions from a passerby, who pointed him to a long, narrow alley. It was paved with cobblestones. M entered the alley and when he was halfway down he saw a burly young man in an undershirt coming toward him, perhaps a sailor. He noticed uneasily that there were no widenings or doorways: although M was slim, when their paths crossed he would be forced to endure a distasteful contact. The sailor whistled, M heard a bark behind him, the scraping of claws, then the hot animal's panting: the dog must have been crouching in wait.

Both men moved forward, until they found themselves face-to-face. M hugged the wall to make room, but the other man did not do the same; he stood motionless, hands on his hips, completely blocking the way. His expression was not menacing; he seemed to be waiting calmly, but M heard a deep growl from the dog: it must be a large animal. He took a step forward, whereupon the other man placed his hands on the walls. There was a pause, then the sailor made a gesture with his palms facing the ground, as if he were caressing someone's back or calming the waters. M did not understand. "Why won't you let me pass?" he asked, but the other responded by repeating the gesture. Maybe he was mute, or deaf, or didn't understand Italian; but still he should have understood, the question wasn't all that complicated.

Without warning the sailor whipped off M's glasses, stuck them in M's pocket, and landed a punch to his stomach. It wasn't very hard, but M, caught by surprise, backed up a few steps. He had never found himself in

such a situation, not even as a boy, but he remembered Martin Eden and his fight with Cheese-Face, he had read *Ettore Fieramosca*, *Orlando Innamorato* and *Orlando Furioso, Gerusalemme* and *Don Quixote*, he recalled the story of Fra Cristoforo, he had seen *The Quiet Man, High Noon*, and a hundred other films, so he knew that sooner or later the time would come for him, too; it comes to us all. He tried to muster his courage, and responded with a direct jab, but he realized to his astonishment that his arm was too short: he hadn't even managed to graze the face of his opponent, who held him off by placing his hands on his shoulders. Then he charged the sailor with his head down. It wasn't just a question of pride and dignity, not just that he needed to get by: at that moment getting through that alley seemed to him a matter of life and death. The young man grabbed M's head between his hands, pushed him back, and repeated the gesture of the two palms, which M glimpsed through a myopic haze.

It occurred to M that he, too, could wager on the element of surprise. He had never done any kind of fighting, yet something from his reading had stayed with him. From a remote past, a phrase read thirty years earlier in a novel about the wild north flashed through his mind: "If your opponent is stronger than you, stoop down, hurl yourself at his legs, and break his knees." He backed up a few steps, curled into a ball, and, with a running start, rolled against the sailor's sturdy legs. The latter lowered a hand, just one, stopped M effortlessly, grabbed him by the arm, and pulled him up with an expression of astonishment. Then he repeated the usual gesture. Meanwhile, the dog had approached, and was sniffing M's pants with a menacing look. M heard a sharp clack of footsteps behind him: it was a gaudily dressed young woman, perhaps a prostitute. She passed the dog, M, and the sailor as if they were invisible, and disappeared at the end of the alley. M, who up until then had lived a normal life, marked by joy, tedium, and sorrow, success and failure, felt a sensation he had never experienced before, of being crushed, of force majeure, of absolute impotence, with no escape and no way out, to which the only reaction can be submission. Or death. But did it make sense to die in order to get through an alley?

All of a sudden the sailor grabbed M by the shoulders and pushed him down: his strength was truly extraordinary, and M was forced to kneel on the cobblestones, but the other continued to press down. M's knees hurt unbearably; he tried to shift part of his weight onto his heels, which meant that he had to bend a little lower and lean back. The sailor took advantage

of this: his vertical thrust became oblique, and M found himself sitting with his arms propped behind him. The position was more stable, but since M was now much lower, the man's pressure on his shoulders had become proportionately more intense. Slowly, with convulsive, ineffective bursts of resistance, M found himself leaning on his elbows, then lying down, but with his knees, at least, bent and raised. They were made of hard, rigid bone, difficult to defeat.

The sailor gave a sigh, like someone who has to call upon every ounce of patience, grabbed M's heels, one at a time, and stretched his legs out flat on the ground, by pressing down on the kneecaps. So this was the meaning of that gesture, M thought: the sailor wanted him laid out flat, subdued; he would not tolerate resistance. The man chased the dog away with a sharp command, took off his sandals, and, holding them in his hand, began to walk along M's body as if it were a balance beam in a gym: slowly, arms outstretched, staring straight ahead. He placed one foot on the right tibia, then the other on the left femur, and on to the liver, the left thorax, the right shoulder, and finally the forehead. Then he put on his sandals and went away, followed by the dog.

M got up, put his glasses back on, and straightened his clothes. He took a quick inventory: were there extra advantages that someone who has been trampled on could derive from the situation? Compassion, sympathy, greater attention, fewer responsibilities? No, because M lived alone. There were none, nor would there be any; or if there were, they would be minimal. The match had not corresponded to its models: it had been unbalanced, unfair, and dirty, and had dirtied him. The models, even the most violent, are chivalrous; life is not. He set out for his appointment, knowing that he would never again be the man he had been before.

July 27, 1986

A “Mystery” in the Lager

In November 1944, we had a Dutch Kapo who as a civilian had played trumpet in a cabaret orchestra in Amsterdam. As a *Musiker,* he played in the camp’s band, and was therefore an anomalous Kapo with dual roles: after the prisoners marched by on the way to work, he had to come down from the platform, put away his trumpet, and run after the formation to take his place. He was a vulgar man but not particularly violent, well fed, foolishly proud of the more or less clean striped pajamas to which his function entitled him, and very partial to his Dutch subjects, of whom there were four or five in our squad of about seventy prisoners.

When New Year’s Day approached, these Dutchmen decided to prepare a celebration for the Kapo, to further ingratiate themselves and, at the same time, thank him. Obviously, food was scarce, but one of them, a graphic artist by profession, found a piece of paper torn from a cement bag, painted it front and back with linseed oil to make it look like parchment, frayed the edges, drew a Greek key pattern around the border using red-lead paint stolen from the worksite, and copied out a little poem of good wishes in beautiful calligraphy. Naturally it was in Dutch, a language I don’t know, but through one of memory’s curious rescue operations I still remember some of the lines. Everyone signed it; even Goldbaum signed it, though he was not Dutch but Austrian. The fact surprised me slightly, then I didn’t think about it again, swept up with the others in the dramatic events that marked the dissolution of the Lager a few days later.

Goldbaum’s name came up again briefly in the course of an encounter that I described in *The Periodic Table*. By some improbable twist of fate, I had found myself, after more than twenty years, in correspondence with a

German chemist, one of my bosses from that time: he was plagued by guilt, and was asking me for something like forgiveness or absolution. To demonstrate that he had had a humane interest in us prisoners, he cited episodes and individuals that he might have found in the many books published on the subject (or in my own *If This Is a Man*); but he also asked me for personal news of Goldbaum, who was certainly not named in any book. It was slim evidence, but concrete. I responded with what little I knew: Goldbaum had died during the terrible march that transferred the prisoners of Auschwitz to Buchenwald.

The name came up again a few months ago. *The Periodic Table* had been published in England, and a certain Z. family, from Bristol but with branches in South Africa and elsewhere, wrote me a complicated letter. An uncle of theirs, Gerhard Goldbaum, had been deported, they did not know where, nor had they had any further news of him. They knew that the probability of an actual coincidence was minimal, since the last name was very common; nevertheless, one of the granddaughters was prepared to come to Turin to speak with me, to find out if by chance my Goldbaum might be their lost relation, whose memory they seemed very fond of.

Before answering, I tried to marshal what I could remember about Goldbaum. It was not much: we were in the same squad, ambitiously called the Chemical Kommando, but he was not a chemist, nor had we been particularly friendly. Nevertheless, I had a vague recollection connecting him to a privileged position similar to mine, I having been recognized as a chemist (in actuality quite late), he in some other technical specialization. His German was fluent; undoubtedly he had been a cultured, well-educated man. I reread the German chemist's letters, and found a fact that I hadn't remembered: the Goldbaum he remembered was a sound physicist; like me he had been tested, and then assigned to an acoustics laboratory.

The circumstance called to mind a coincidence that I had forgotten: in Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*, strange, specialized camps are described, in particular one whose prisoner-engineers are assigned to research a sound analyzer "commissioned" by Stalin's secret police for the purpose of identifying human voices in wiretaps. These Lagers became widespread in the Soviet Union after the war. Now, in April 1945, that is, after the liberation, I had been invited to talk with a very kind Soviet official: he had learned that as a prisoner I had worked in a chemical laboratory, and wanted to know how much food the Germans gave us, how closely they watched

us, if they paid us, how they prevented theft and sabotage. It is therefore quite probable that I modestly contributed to the organization of the so-called Soviet *saraski*, and it's not impossible that Goldbaum's mysterious work was that described by Solzhenitsyn.

I replied to the Z. family that I would be going to London in April—it wasn't necessary for them to travel to Italy, we could see each other in England. Seven of them came to the meeting, representing three generations; they crowded around me, and immediately showed me two photographs of Gerhard, taken around 1939. I was dazzled: at a distance of nearly half a century, the face was his. It corresponded perfectly with the one that I, unknowingly, bore stamped in the pathological memory that I preserve of that period. At times, though only as far as Auschwitz is concerned, I feel like a brother of Ireneo Funes, "the memorious" (*el memorioso*) described by Borges: the man who remembered every leaf of every tree that he had seen, and who said, "I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world."[1]

No further proof was needed. I said so to the granddaughter, the family leader, but the pressure, instead of slackening, intensified. I am not speaking metaphorically: I was supposed to talk to other people as well, but the Z. family had encapsulated me, as leukocytes surround a germ, pressing around me and barraging me with questions and information. Questions I could not answer, except for one: no, Goldbaum must not have suffered much from hunger; the very fact that I had immediately recognized him in the photograph attested to it. The signs of extreme hunger, unmistakable and well-known to me, were absent from my mental image of him; his work must have spared him that suffering at least, until the final days.

The puzzle of Holland was also solved. It was further confirmation: the granddaughter told me that at the time of Austria's annexation Gerhard had fled to Holland, where, having mastered the language, he had worked at Philips until the Nazi invasion. He joined the Dutch resistance; like me, he was arrested as a partisan, and later recognized as a Jew.

The affectionate, tumultuous Z. clan was dispersed with some difficulty by an improvised "duty calls," but before leaving the granddaughter gave me a parcel. It contained a woolen scarf: I will wear it next winter. For now, I've put it in a drawer, feeling like someone who has touched an object fallen from the cosmos, like lunar rocks, or like the vaunted "objects" produced by spiritualists.

August 10, 1986

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1. “Funes, the Memorious” is a story in *Ficciones*, by Jorge Luis Borges (New York: Grove, 1962; translated by Anthony Kerrigan).

Time Checkmated

GRAND DUCHY OF NEUSTRIA
CENTRAL PATENT OFFICE
Patent Application No. 861731
Class 23d, Group 2

Date of application: February 2, 1984

I, Theophil Skoptza, born in Obikon on July 31, 1919 *Anno Lucis*, a rural policeman by profession, hereby submit an application for the issuance of a patent on the invention described below.

THE STATE OF THE ART

It is known from common experience that the passage of time, as it is perceived by any individual, does not coincide with that indicated by so-called objective instruments. According to my measurements, a minute spent in front of a red light is on average eight times as long as a minute spent in conversation with a friend; twenty-two times as long if the friend is of the opposite sex. A TV commercial for this Grand Duchy is perceived as five to ten times as long as its actual time, which is rarely more than a minute. An hour spent in conditions of sensory deprivation acquires erratic values that can vary from a few minutes to 15–18 hours. A night spent in a state of insomnia is longer than a night spent sleeping, though up to now, as far as I know, no quantitative research has been carried out. As everyone knows, subjective time lengthens enormously if clocks or chronometers are consulted frequently.

Just as common is the observation that subjective time seems longer during disagreeable experiences or conditions such as a toothache or a migraine, seasickness or a long wait, and so on. By contrast, because of the malignity inherent in human nature and in the human condition, it seems brief, to the point of vanishing, under conditions of the opposite type.

THE INVENTION

The invention is protected by the registered trademark PARACHRONO, which also covers grammatical derivatives. It presupposes normal physiological conditions on the part of the subject, and consists of injections of extremely low doses of rubidium maleate into the fourth cerebral ventricle. The operation is neither risky nor painful, and harmful side effects have not so far been reported, with the exception of a slight sense of vertigo in the first days following treatment. After a latent period of several days, the patient is able to voluntarily intervene in his own subjective sense of time. Not only can he make it conform to the objective duration; he can actually reverse the phenomenon, that is, extend the time of pleasant experiences at will, and shorten the duration of painful or troublesome ones. In the latter case, it should be noted that muscular activity, memory, attention, and perception remain unexpectedly intact; this distinguishes the method described here from techniques such as narcosis, hypnosis, coma, or induced catalepsy, as well as from time machines, which up to now have been invented only by fiction writers.

EXAMPLES

EXAMPLE 1: H.D., age forty-nine, messenger and driver. He was compelled by his job to spend hours in line at the Registry Office, which in this Grand Duchy is particularly inefficient. After parachronal treatment he reports seeing the line in front of him shorten at a pace that he estimates as three persons per second, so that he has the impression of having to run to reach the window without missing his turn. He has grown taller, his gray hair has gone back to its original color, and he has successfully devoted himself to the study of the Urdu language.

EXAMPLE 2: L.E., age nineteen, student. After undergoing treatment with parachrono, she no longer experiences anxiety about exams, and as a result has been relieved of a particular anguish (caused specifically by the long wait) that rendered her incapable of answering the questions and caused her countless failures, even though she was extremely well prepared and had an IQ of 148.

EXAMPLE 3: T.K., age thirty-five, lathe operator, unemployed, currently in custody awaiting trial. He has served thirty-five months of detention, estimating the time as four days. He reports seeing the day dawn suddenly, and seeing night fall just as suddenly, “after a few seconds.” Nonetheless, he has read the complete works of Ken Follett while in prison, and remembers the contents quite well.

EXAMPLE 4: F.B., worker, age twenty-four. By her own admission, she has a difficult temperament, and reacted angrily when her boyfriend arrived for their dates twenty or thirty minutes late. She underwent parachronia and now she doesn’t notice his lateness; it has become imperceptible, and their relationship has recovered, to their mutual satisfaction.

EXAMPLE 5: T.S., age sixty-four (I myself). After undergoing the treatment, I happened to discover a small porcini mushroom that had just emerged from the undergrowth. I immediately put myself in a state of parachronia, and after waiting three days and three

nights, which to me seemed no longer than half an hour total, picked a mushroom weighing 0.760 kilograms; indeed, I saw the mushroom literally grow before my eyes.

EXAMPLE 6: G.G., age twenty-four, has a degree in Neustrian literature but is temporarily a housepainter. Treated with rubidium maleate on July 25, 1982. During the first, long-desired intimacy with the woman he loved, he was able to instantaneously put himself, at the peak of orgasm, into a state of parachronia, that is, to perform on himself the operation that turned out so badly for Faust. He reports maintaining his excitement for a time that he estimated to be thirty-six hours, though his normal orgasms do not last objectively more than five to seven seconds. He emerged not only rested and lucid but full of positive energies: he is currently preparing for a solitary winter ascent of the south wall of Aconcagua. Moreover, he reports that his partner, though she was not aware of anything at the time, has decided to undergo parachronia in my laboratory as soon as possible.

CLAIMS

1. A method of accelerating, slowing down, or arresting the subjective time of the subject *ad libitum*, characterized by the fact that psychophysiological modification is obtained by introducing the organic salt of an alkaline metal into the organism.

2. A method as described in the preceding claim, characterized by the fact that said introduction occurs by injection into the fluid contained in the fourth cerebral ventricle.

3. A method as described in the preceding claims, characterized by the fact that the injected substance (recognized as the most active among the many that were tested) is rubidium maleate.

4. A method as described in the preceding claims, characterized by the fact that the quantity of active principle used varies between 2 and 12 picograms per kilogram of the subject’s body weight.

September 12, 1986



The Machine Gun Under the Bed

At the time of the Republic of Salò, my sister was twenty-three years old. She was a partisan courier, which involved a variety of assignments, all of them dangerous: the transport and distribution of clandestine publications, arduous bicycle trips to maintain communications, dealing in the black market, and even hosting and caring for wounded partisans or, a frequent occurrence, those who “couldn’t take it anymore.” She was a good courier because she was strongly motivated: both her fiancé and I had been deported, and for all intents and purposes had disappeared from the face of the earth (her fiancé never returned). Her militancy did not arise solely from political motives, but was a retaliation and a revenge.

She had to be constantly on the alert, and changed her residence frequently; in fact, she didn’t have a permanent residence. She lived awhile here and awhile there, sometimes in Turin with friends who were not suspect, who took her in willingly or unwillingly, sometimes in the country with my mother, who was in hiding, and also continually on the move. She was a young woman averse to violence; nevertheless, in June 1945, that is, following the liberation, she had a Beretta submachine gun hidden under the bed. On being asked, she tells me that she no longer remembers where it came from, or which group it was intended for: perhaps it needed repair, then had simply been left there. There were so many other things to think about. . . .

Now it happened that a certain Cravero came to see her. I mentioned the episode in *The Truce*: Cravero was a professional thief whom I had lived with for a few months in Katowice after the arrival of the Russians. He had been the first to attempt repatriation on his own, and he was the bearer of a

letter of mine, which was in itself a good thing (it was the only news of me that reached Italy in the eighteen months of my absence); what was not so good was that he tried to extort money “to go back to Poland to look for me,” and, when he was not successful, he stole my sister’s bicycle at the foot of the stairs. He eyed the carelessly hidden machine gun and made a cautious offer, which my sister wisely refused.

After that strange visit, and after reading my letter, my sister got the idea of going to ask for news of me at the Polish Military Command in Milan. I should explain that this unit was the “Anders Army,” that band of courageous desperadoes whom the Allies had rescued from the Soviet prison camps, then rearmed and reorganized. So there was bad blood between them and the Russians. Perhaps somewhat allergic to the name Levi, they received her with distrust and disbelief. If I were in the hands of the Russians, I would not be in Poland, and if I were in Poland I would not be in the hands of the Russians; besides, they themselves had difficulty communicating with their country. My sister, who doesn’t give up easily, was not satisfied, and two days later she went to the Soviet Military Command. Here she was received a little more cordially, but all the same she was unable to get anywhere. The official on duty told her that if I was in Soviet hands I had nothing to fear, that in the USSR foreigners enjoyed the greatest respect, but that, alas, given the difficulties of communication, it was not possible for them to put her in touch with me, much less concern themselves with my repatriation. She should wait and not lose faith.

As she left the Command, my sister noticed something odd. She was being tailed: the typical Italian policeman disguised as a policeman, who had followed her and then waited in a café across the street. Evidently, the Poles had notified the Italian police of my sister’s movements and “suspicious” contacts, and the police had responded in a timely if amateurish way. In the euphoric and chaotic climate following liberation, it would have been nothing to worry about, if not for the machine gun. But in that same climate, in spite of the Draconian laws, one did not give up a machine gun either easily or willingly; it might still be useful at the right moment, who knew how or where or against whom. Moreover, the Resistance had just ended, and a firearm like that held a certain charisma that rendered it almost sacred. Now, an ancile that unexpectedly falls from heaven is neither sold nor given away nor tossed in the Po. And so the machine gun remained in the house, wrapped in some rags, until, a few

days later, the inexperienced police tail knocked at the door and with great ceremony summoned my sister to an interview. The questioning was confusing: my sister tells me that it mainly concerned Cravero, whom the Poles considered a liar, an agitator, or an outright Soviet spy. Out of a pure sense of duty, or some professional reflex, the policeman did not fail to do a search, though it was limited to a perfunctory glance around the attic where my sister lived at the time. There is no doubt that he saw the mummified machine gun, but he left without batting an eye. Perhaps he was a former partisan; for a brief period some of them were also on the police force.

Around August, not without bureaucratic difficulties, my sister was able to regain possession of our house, which had been seized during the period of the racial laws, and she took the machine gun with her. By then, that instrument of death had become a cross between a passionate symbol of the Resistance, an amulet, a knickknack, and a memorial to itself. My gentle sister oiled it well and hid it in the bookcase, behind the complete works of Balzac, which extended for more or less the same length. In fact, she forgot about it, or nearly. When I, just as gentle, returned from imprisonment in October, I found it by chance, looking for I no longer know what, and asked her about it. “Don’t you see? It’s a Beretta,” my sister replied with unfeigned naturalness.

The machine gun remained behind Balzac until 1947, the year Scelba became minister of the interior. His efficient motorized riot squads began to worry me: if they were to find it, I as head of the family would go to prison. The opportunity to dispose of it came unexpectedly. A partisan appeared out of nowhere, or, rather, a *partigia*, that is, a man from the most unprincipled, nimble-fingered fringes of our fighting comrades. He was a Sicilian and, having tired of peace, had become a separatist. He was looking for weapons—the very thing! I gave him the machine gun, not without a pang of conscience, since I had no sympathy for Sicilian separatism. Neither he, nor his elusive movement, had any money. We agreed to a trade: he, since he would never return to the Alps, gave me a pair of used mountain boots, which I still have. Then the *partigia* went away, but, since it’s a small world, he was spotted months later by a cousin of mine who was then living in Brazil. He had the machine gun with him, who knows for what purpose; it seems that the customs officials, so careful when it comes to chocolate and cartons of cigarettes, are blind to less innocuous items. I would feel reassured if I were to learn that the weapon is in the hands of the

Indians in the Amazon, desperately defending their identity: it would mean that it has remained faithful to its initial calling.

October 24, 1986

ESSAYS

A Valley

There’s a valley that I only know.
You can’t get there easily,
There are big boulders at the entrance,
Thickets, secret fords and rapids,
And the paths are only traces now.
Most of the atlases don’t mention it:
I found the way in on my own.
I spent years
Often getting lost, as happens,
But it wasn’t wasted time.
I don’t know who was there first,
One, a few, no one:
It doesn’t matter.
There are marks on slabs of rock,
Some beautiful but all mysterious,
Clearly some aren’t by a human hand.
At the bottom there are beeches, birches,
Up higher larches and firs,
Ever thinner, troubled by the wind
Which steals their pollen from them in the spring
When the first marmots come to life.
Higher up are seven lakes
With uncontaminated water,
Pure, dark, icy, deep.
At this altitude our plants
Stop growing but almost at the pass

Stands one strong tree,
Flourishing and evergreen
Which no one has yet named:
Maybe it’s the one in Genesis.
It bears flowers and fruit in every season,
Even when the snow weighs down its branches.
There are no others of its kind: it’s self-seeding.
Its trunk bears ancient scars
From which a dark and bitter
Resin drips that brings oblivion.

October 29, 1984 (TRANS. J. GALASSI)

The Commander of Auschwitz

Richard Baer, the SS major whose arrest we've now heard about, succeeded Rudolf Höss in the role of commander of the Auschwitz concentration camp. I was his subject for nearly a year, one of his hundred thousand slaves. Along with ten thousand others, I was in fact "hired out" by him to I.G. Farbenindustrie, the mammoth German chemical trust, which paid from four to eight marks a day for each of us, in wages for our work. It paid, but not to us: just as a horse or an ox is not remunerated, so that money was paid out to our masters, that is, to the SS officers who were in charge of the camp.

So I belonged to him: and yet I would not recognize his face. Unless it coincided with that of the frowning, corpulent individual, his belly bristling with decorations, who used to witness our squad's interminable march, every morning and every evening, in step with the music, to and from work. But they were all identical, those faces, those voices, those postures: all twisted by the same hatred and the same anger, and by the lust for power. As a result, their hierarchy was obscure to us: SS, Gestapo, Labor Service, Party, Factory, the entire enormous machine stood above us, and appeared flat, without perspective: a dark, murky empyrean whose structure we were ignorant of.

Until now, not much was known about Richard Baer. He is cited briefly in the memoirs of his predecessor, Höss, who describes him as confused and uncertain about what to do in the terrible weeks of January 1945; he is at Gross-Rosen, a Lager of between 10,000 and 12,000 prisoners, and is diligently handling the transfer there of the 140,000 Auschwitz inmates whom it is essential to "rescue" in the face of the unexpected Russian

advance. Think about the significance of the ratio between these two figures; then think about the other solution, which good sense, humanity, and prudence all suggested, namely, acknowledge the inevitable, leave the half-dead masses to their destiny, open the doors, and leave. Think about all this, and the figure of the man will emerge adequately defined.

He belongs to the most dangerous human species of this century. If you consider it, without men like him, without the Hösses, the Eichmanns, the Kesselrings, and the thousand other loyal, blind men who carried out orders, the savage beasts, Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, would have been impotent and disarmed. Their names would not figure in history; they would have passed like shadowy meteors through Europe's dark sky. Instead, the opposite occurred: as history has shown us, the seed sown by these dark apostles took deep root in Germany, in all classes, with alarming speed, and led to a proliferation of hatred that continues to poison Europe and the world today.

Resistance was timid and rare, quickly crushed: the National Socialist message precisely echoed the traditional qualities of the Germans, their sense of discipline and national cohesion, their insatiable thirst for supremacy, their propensity for submissive obedience.

This is why men like Baer are dangerous: men who are too loyal, too devoted, too submissive. It shouldn't seem either heresy or blasphemy; in the spirit of the upstanding man of integrity whom modern morality should point to as an example, there will always be a place for love of country and conscientious obedience.

The question instinctively arises: What to say about the German people of today? How to judge them? What to expect of them?

It is difficult to examine the heart of a people. Anyone traveling in Germany today sees the same outward appearances found everywhere.

A growing prosperity, a peaceful people, intrigues large and small, a moderate air of rebellion; newspapers like ours on the newsstands; conversations like ours in the trains and trams; a scandal that ends as all scandals do. Yet something can be felt in the air that is not felt elsewhere. One who questions them about the terrible facts of recent history rarely finds repentance, or even mere critical awareness. More often one encounters an ambiguous reaction, in which a sense of guilt, a desire for revenge, and a deliberate, arrogant ignorance are intertwined.

Hence the strangely slow and circuitous conduct of the German police and courts should not be surprising. The picture is confused and full of contradictions, but a fairly well defined line of conduct seems to emerge: for its past errors, for the slaughter and suffering inflicted upon Europe, Germany intends to respond civilly, so to speak, rather than penally. We know that the German government has proved itself ready to grant monetary compensation to victims of Nazism in all formerly occupied countries (though not in Italy), and a number of German industries that exploited slave labor during the war have done the same, or are doing so. But the police and the courts have proved much less ready to complete the job of purging begun by the Allies. And so we have reached the disconcerting situation of today, in which an Auschwitz commander can live and work undisturbed in Germany for fifteen years, and the executioner of millions of innocents is tracked down not by the German police but "illegally," by victims who escaped his hand.

December 23, 1960

The Moon and Man[1]

They're on their way back and they're fine. How to describe their feat? Even our lexicon is at a loss: to call it a "flight," a "ride," a "voyage" would be to reduce and diminish it, hyperbole in reverse. Now it is up to us, all of us spectators—and, as such, also actors of a sort—to ponder it and draw our conclusions.

It appears that, in just a few days, the collective consciousness has been transformed, as always happens after any qualitative leap: the expense, the effort, the risks, and the sacrifices tend to be forgotten. Undoubtedly these existed, and they were enormous; nevertheless, today few people still question whether it was "money well spent." Today it is clear, then it was less so: the venture was not to be judged on a utilitarian scale, or not mainly on that basis. In the same way, an inquiry into the costs involved in constructing the Parthenon would be out of place. It is man's nature to act in a creative, complex way, perhaps adding up the costs beforehand, but not limiting himself purely to profit, immediate or long term. To set off instead for remote destinations, toward goals that are their own justification: acting to challenge a secret, to expand his limits, to express himself, to measure his worth.

Our world, grim, transient, ailing, and tragic in so many respects, has another face as well: it is a "brave new world," which does not retreat in the face of obstacles and does not rest until it has got around or pushed through or overcome them. It is a new kind of audacity: not that of the pioneer, or the war hero, or the lone sailor, which, even when laudable, is neither very new nor very rare but is found in all countries, in all eras, and is not specific

to humanity. The wolf, the tiger, and the bull are also daring, and so undoubtedly were our distant forebears and the Homeric heroes.

We are at once the same and different. The daring from which the lunar venture sprang is different: it's Copernican, Machiavellian. It defies other obstacles, other dangers, less bloody but weightier and more long-lasting. It confronts other enemies within and around us: common sense, "we've always done it this way," indolence, and lassitude. It fights with other weapons, prodigiously complex and subtle, all—or nearly all—created from nothing in the past ten or twenty years, thanks to intelligence and patience: new technologies, new substances, new energies, and new concepts. It is no longer the audacity of the unforeseen but the audacity of foreseeing everything, a virtue even more valiant than the other.

Faced with this most recent evidence of courage and brilliance, we feel not only admiration and detached solidarity; in some way, not entirely unjustified, each of us feels part of it. Just as every man, even the most innocent, even the victim himself, feels a common responsibility for Hiroshima, for Dallas, and for Vietnam, and is ashamed, so even one who is utterly disconnected from the tremendous labor of the space flights feels a particle of merit fall upon the entire human race, and therefore also upon himself, and comes away from it with new esteem. For better or worse we are one people: the more we realize it, the greater our awareness of it, the less long and hard will be humanity's path to peace and justice.

Man's survival in space is due in large part, though only in part, to the conditioned microenvironment that is carefully maintained inside the capsule: to everyone's astonishment, the astronauts tolerated without harm exposure to extra-human, extraterrestrial agents that are hostile to life and not reproducible (or only imperfectly so) on the surface of the planet.

Man, the naked ape, a terrestrial animal descended from a long line of terrestrial or marine creatures, every one of his organs shaped by the restricted environment that is Earth's lower atmosphere, can be removed from that atmosphere without dying. He can endure exposure to cosmic radiation, even without the domestic air shield. He can be removed from the familiar alternation of day and night. He can tolerate accelerations many times that of gravity. He can eat, sleep, work, and think even in conditions

of zero gravity; this is perhaps the most astonishing revelation, about which there were, rightly, the most serious doubts before Gagarin's mission.

Human matter (or rather animal matter), besides being adaptable in an evolutionary sense—on a scale of millions of years and at the cost of the incalculable sacrifice of less fit variations—is adaptable here and now, on a scale of days and hours: we all saw the astronauts on TV, floating in space like fish in water, learning new equilibriums and new reflexes, never realized, or realizable, on the ground.

Therefore man is strong not only because he became so, from the time, a million years ago, when from among the many weapons nature offered animals he chose the brain: man is strong in and of himself, he is stronger than he thought possible, he is made of a substance that is fragile only in appearance, he was mysteriously designed with enormous, unsuspected margins of safety. We are unique, sturdy, versatile animals, motivated by atavistic impulses, and by reason, and, at the same time, by a "creative force" as a result of which if an undertaking, whether good or bad, can be achieved, it cannot be put aside but must be achieved.

This undertaking, the lunar flight, is a test. Others await us, works of daring and brilliance, demanding in a different way, in that they are essential to our very survival: endeavors to eliminate hunger, poverty, and suffering. These, too, must be considered a challenge to our worth, and these, too, since they can be achieved, must be achieved.

December 27, 1968

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1. Author's note: Published on the occasion of the flight of the three U.S. astronauts Borman, Lowell, and Anders on Apollo 8.

Sic!

The eclipse of the authority principle should be counted among the few positive elements of our times: no one today would think of buttressing his own assertions by resorting to citations drawn from the Greek or Latin classics, as Montaigne did, even though he was an open-minded, critical, sensible spirit. And yet what a subtle pleasure we feel even now when we manage to lay hands on a rare, elegant quotation!

What is the source of this pleasure? Sometimes it's the sincere satisfaction of finding ourselves in such accord with a great author that we can weave one of his threads into our own fabric, without manifesting inflammation at the edges of the transplant or reactions of rejection. But more often it's a less noble pleasure—like saying to the reader, "There, I'm drawing upon sources that you aren't familiar with, I know something that you don't know, so I'm a step above you."

The urge to quote is so strong that some writers do it unconsciously, the way sleepwalkers walk: it's only when they reread what they've written, perhaps at a distance of years, that they come across the special passage that has made its way from the depths to the page without the intervention of the will. Almost complementary is the phenomenon of the invented citation: Rabelais, Borges, Wilcock[1] are masters of citing marvelous aphorisms drawn from nonexistent books by nonexistent (or perhaps existing) authors.

In a polemical situation, we know all too well what base actions can be perpetrated, often with impunity, by citing an adversary's text incompletely or inaccurately. Outrageous effects can be obtained by omitting a sentence or stitching together two separate ones. We reach the culmination, and score

a decisive point, when we manage to insert brackets into the body of the quotation, and to write in them “sic”!

This “sic” is the equivalent of checkmate in chess, or the smash to the net in tennis; like them it is merciless, and like them it assumes an error on the part of the opponent. It can be a venial error, a mistake of grammar or even of spelling, but the “sic,” that hiccup of virtuous, scandalized surprise, magnifies it, illuminates it in an unrelenting light, and brings it to the center of the reader’s attention. “Sic”: the writer whom I cite here, gentlemen, and with whom I obviously disagree, as every well-bred person must, is an ass. He dares to write in our language, but he does not know it, so that he is led to set down absurdities such as this: yes, “sic,” that’s just what it says, go ahead and compare it with the original. How can you rely on him? He put the subject in the accusative; therefore every assertion of his is suspect, and his every opinion should be warily considered.

March 13, 1977

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1. Juan Rodolfo Wilcock (1919–1978), an Argentine writer and poet, was an associate of Jorge Luis Borges.

Our Dreams

The *Galateo* of Monsignor Della Casa recommends not “reciting” one’s dreams. Della Casa had not read Freud, and therefore was not concerned about the greatest risk the dreamer can incur, that of unconsciously divulging his most jealously guarded secrets. But he was a man of good sense and good taste, and had observed what everyone sooner or later observes, namely, that while our dreams can be laden with meaning, or at least with emotion, for us, they are always utter, boring nonsense for the person we tell them to. And so those who “recite” them are no less annoying to their listeners than those who boast of their aristocratic status, for example, or even those who blow their nose loudly.

One cannot help agreeing with Della Casa: other people’s dreams are muddled and boring. If you reread Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, you cannot avoid the comparison between the dreams he has chosen as examples—which, while tangled and illogical, are at the same time scintillating and meaningful—and the dull stupidity of the dreams we have experienced directly: our own or those of others.

It may be that, like everything around us, the world of dreams has also changed in the course of a century; just as Charcot’s *Grande hystérie* vanished, just as the fainting spells that punctuated nineteenth-century novels disappeared, perhaps dreams, too, have changed style. Or perhaps Freud, like all anthologists, selected (consciously or not) dreams that were particularly significant, or peculiarly suited to confirm his theories. However, from what has been published recently on this subject, one might come up with a different interpretation.

From the great hodgepodge of studies of so-called parapsychological phenomena, a single effect seems to emerge as open to methodical experimentation, since, from what is stated, it is vaguely reproducible under controlled circumstances: the direct transmission (without sensory mediation) of images from an experimenter who is awake to a subject who is asleep, and who receives the images in the form of dreams.

These studies are reported by Cavanna in *Aspetti scientifici della parapsicologia* (*Scientific Aspects of Parapsychology*; Turin: Boringhieri, 1973). There is no doubt that, for the moment, they must be accepted with a broad margin of skepticism. Still, as we know, there are many astonishing things between heaven and earth. And, in any case, nothing prevents us from being amused at the thought that, in spite of Freudian orthodoxy, our dreams are not always ours. That their violence, obscenity, and savagery are traces not of monsters buried in our own depths but belong to other people's monsters; that their stupidity is the echo of the background noise caused by the stupidity around us; and that, perhaps through patient training, we can actually reach the point of harnessing the phenomenon, giving "blissful dreams" to the persons dear to us and, conversely, inflicting hideous nightmares on our enemies—all at no cost and no risk.

But is it really necessary to appeal to telepathy? We are besieged by violence and depravity, and their grip is getting tighter and tighter. Those without good defenses are already infected by them, and not only in their dreams.

April 24, 1977

Struggle for Life

In an unforgettable passage in *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930), Bertrand Russell reminds us that the human animal, like other animals, is biologically adapted to a certain amount of struggle for life; that, as a result, those who are rich or powerful enough to satisfy all their desires effortlessly are deprived of a fundamental ingredient of happiness; and that therefore man cannot be happy unless he lacks at least some of the things he desires.

To this paradox one might add the fact that those who have had occasion to verify these statements in their own lives, though not among the happy, are nevertheless to be counted among the fortunate, because if the desires whose satisfaction must be renounced become too numerous, or if they are vital needs, then one can no longer speak of happiness. The unhappiness that comes from an excess of satisfaction, and from the absence of struggle for life, is altogether of a rather rare type, and in fact Russell himself defines it as “Byronic unhappiness,” distinguishing it from other more common, more concrete types, which are its opposite.

Similarly, one might observe that, while it is unpleasant to be judged, and humiliating and debilitating to be continually on trial, it is unnatural and risky to expect that you can avoid all judgment. It is certainly difficult to establish, case by case, which judges are acceptable and which should be “rejected,” but rejecting all judges is not only presumptuous but pointless. Pointless, because every turning point in life, every human encounter, involves a judgment issued or received, and consequently it’s best to become accustomed to receiving and issuing judgments in our youth, when it’s easier to form habits.

If we lack this training—and I don't see why it shouldn't coincide with the school years, and our inoculation by the judgments received in school (whether in the form of grades or in some other way; it's immaterial)—the first negative judgment that we receive in life may be felt as a deep wound, or strike with the virulence of a disease. Now, this negative judgment is inevitable, since in life we are faced with facts, and facts are persistent, pitiless judges.

Though we must be cautious in accepting an external judge, it's still necessary to accept at least one. We cannot do without this one, given the fact that none of us are able to judge ourselves (those who do so, consciously or not, reproduce the external judgments that seem emotionally most correct, whether positive or negative); and given the fact that living without having one's actions judged means giving up precious reactions, and consequently exposing oneself and others to grave risks. It would be like piloting a boat without a compass, or expecting to maintain a constant temperature without consulting a thermometer.

For this reason, while it is right to protest against scholastic ranking based (in fact if not in name) on wealth or social status, and against a scholastic system founded exclusively on ranking, it seems to me wrong to demand a school that does not accustom us to being judged. It would perhaps be an altruistic and charitable institution, but only in the short term: I don't believe that it would produce citizens who are truly free and responsible.

July 3, 1977

From Spears to Shields

Recently a strange little book was published in Italy. It is entitled *Badenheim 1939*, and it was written in 1975 by Aharon Appelfeld, an Israeli writer. It describes a time in an imaginary health resort where the guests, Jews, eat fancy pastries, play tennis, engage in gossip and backbiting, and embark on brief affairs, while an undefined "Sanitation Department" keeps a file on them, fences in the town with barbed wire, and ends up deporting them all to Poland.

The book is chilling, and can be read on several levels. Two of these stand out: as an evocation of the repression and "see no evil" with which the past generation faced the threat of Hitler; and as an allusion to our own obtuseness, to our refusal to acknowledge the current nuclear threat.

We today, like the foolish Jews of Badenheim yesterday, eat pastries and organize music festivals while the Sanitation Department is at work, yet today's situation is different. The threat concerns not just one minority but, rather, the human race. It no longer emanates from a single, perverse center of power but is inherent in the precarious equilibrium in which we are accustomed to living.

Apocalypses and scourges when they seem far off can be discussed easily, perhaps even jokingly, as in the film *Dr. Strangelove*: it was entertaining, but today we would watch it with some uneasiness. When, on the other hand, such events are closer, we behave like the Jews in Badenheim. The fact that the threat is talked about today, that conferences, round tables, and demonstrations are held everywhere, is a moderately positive sign; it means that, rightly or wrongly, we feel that the lots have not yet been cast, that there is still a little time, and that discussion is useful.

Discussions are useful, of course, in international assemblies; but it is also useful to have discussions in living rooms, around a table at the neighborhood bar, among friends and among strangers. It's a chance to reject the infantile rhetoric of cheering and booing, and tackle a concrete problem.

In the first place, I think that we must make an effort to be impartial, to say so and to show that we are, even if it's not easy. When we demonstrate in the streets and shout that we want to impose nuclear disarmament on governments, we must be clear. We want to address all governments and we fear all nuclear warheads. There are not good ones and bad ones; they're all bad.

It's not easy to be impartial because, with respect to "imposing" and "addressing," there is no symmetry between the two halves of the world. To organize a march in Rome or New York, all it takes is agreement among people who see things the same way; to organize one in Moscow requires agreement from Moscow. The day we learn that a spontaneous pacifist march has taken place in Moscow will be a great day for all humanity. That day does not appear to be close at hand, but convincing the Russians that our marches are spontaneous and that our pacifism is impartial could help bring it closer. The East-West border effectively absorbs sounds, but if our voice is loud enough it may be that an echo will be heard there, too, and spur those citizens (who are not all automatons, or all deaf) to demand of their government what we demand of ours.

I believe that a certain dose of optimism is needed: without it nothing can be achieved and life is not worth living. "There's nothing further to be done" is an intrinsically suspect statement that has no practical utility; it's useful only as an exorcism for those who utter it—that is, hardly useful at all. By this I do not mean to say that a nuclear holocaust is impossible: the 40,000 bombs ready for deployment do, unfortunately, exist, almost all warehoused in the United States and the Soviet Union. They are a sword hanging over us, but there is still something that can be done, the sentence has not yet been handed down.

As long as the fate of the world is decided by old men who are astute and cynical, yet cautious, as Brezhnev and Reagan have so far shown themselves to be, the bombs will probably remain in the storehouses. To the humiliation of Marxist and Tolstoyan historiography, it appears that in history today the masses count for little. It makes a difference whether this

man or that sits in the White House or in the Kremlin: these powerful figures decide on their own, and our destinies are woven in a total of less than 3000 grams of cerebral matter.

Still, before deciding, they listen to advice, sniff the air, and weigh internal and external desires and threats. They are not impermeable to pressures from below. Beyond any moral judgment, we would be satisfied if they possessed two qualities: the ability to make decisions rationally, and full control over their subordinates, especially the military; as long as they do, they will not push the button, or allow it to be pushed, because they know that a holocaust will sweep away their power and their lives as well. And they will hold irresponsible allies and emotional individuals at bay, within their own borders and in other countries as well. In this regard, it is incomprehensible, criminal, and suicidal to allow governments (even our own!) to supply potentially deadly materials and technologies to unstable nations.

Finally, I believe that we have to be realistic. To demand everything immediately is ingenuous, and maximalist slogans are stillborn from the start. It's fine to urge that spears be converted into scythes, as, in fact, Isaiah did; but it should be remembered that the makers of "spears" are powerful and experienced. It would be nice to force them all to change their profession, but it couldn't be done in a short time. Continuing the metaphor, I propose that the conversion be gradual: spears into shields, then shields into scythes when prudence permits.

In other words, wouldn't it be possible for the dizzying sums allocated to military budgets to be primarily (and gradually) invested in defensive weapons? In radar networks rather than in nuclear warheads, in anti-tank missiles rather than in tanks, and so on? It would be an unequivocal sign, indicating to the other side that our guard has not been lowered, but our intentions are not aggressive.

America and Russia are in a costly stalemate: for reasons of long-standing distrust, and also barbaric prestige, neither of the two wants to take the first step on the path to disarmament. This would be an acceptable first step, even to those still susceptible to the allure of weapons. If it were implemented, the safety of the world would take a small but unquestionable step forward.

This is nothing more than the proposal of an incompetent. Call it ingenuous, presumptuous, or downright ridiculous, but it is a proposal; it is

not an interjection or a refrain or a disconsolate sigh. Those who deem it absurd must counter it with another proposal; this should be the rule of the game, and it’s a game whose stakes are high.

It appears that global talks are to begin soon in Geneva. We insignificant men find ourselves forced to delegate to the two great men a responsibility weightier than any previous one. We would like them to hear the hum of our voices, and remember that nuclear disarmament is the number one problem of the planet. If it is resolved, all the other problems of the planet will not automatically be resolved; but if it is not resolved, no other problem will ever be resolved.

November 4, 1981

Translating Kafka

The comments that followed my translation of Kafka's *The Trial* led me to have a number of second thoughts, regarding both the approach I took in rendering the text and the reasons that drove me to state plainly that "I don't think I have much affinity with Kafka." If that's the case, why would I have chosen or agreed to translate him? Let's see.

Translating a book is not like marrying or entering into a business partnership. We can be attracted even to those who are very different from us, just because they are different. If this were not so, writers, readers, and translators would be stratified into castes as rigid as those in India. There would be no transverse ties or cross-fertilizations: people would read only those authors who are related to them, the world would be (or would appear to be) less varied, and no new ideas would emerge.

Now, I love and admire Kafka because he writes in a way that is totally closed off to me. In my writing, for better or for worse, knowingly or not, I have always tended toward a transition from obscurity to clarity, rather like a filter pump, sucking in turbid water and turning it out purified, even sterile (I think Pirandello said this, I don't recall where). Kafka takes the opposite approach: he endlessly unravels hallucinations that he draws from incredibly deep layers, and never filters them. The reader feels them teeming with germs and spores; they are full of burning significance, but he is never helped to tear the curtain or go around it to see what it conceals. Kafka never touches down, he never consents to give you the end of Ariadne's thread.

But this love of mine is ambivalent, bordering on fear and rejection. It's similar to the feeling you have for a person dear to you who is suffering and

asks for help that you cannot give him. I don't really believe in the laughter that Brod[1] speaks of: maybe Kafka laughed while telling stories to his friends, sitting around a table in the beer hall, since people are not always consistent, but he certainly didn't laugh when he was writing. His pain is genuine and constant, it assails you and never lets go: you feel like his characters, sentenced by a vile, inscrutable tribunal, whose tentacles invade the city and the world, lurking in squalid garrets but also in the dark solemnity of the cathedral; or transformed into an awkward, ungainly insect, reviled by everyone, desperately alone, dull-witted, incapable of communicating or of thinking, capable only of suffering.

Kafka understands the world (his own, and ours today even better) with an astounding clairvoyance, which assaults you like a light that's too bright. Often we are tempted to interpose a shield, to take refuge; at other times we give in to the temptation to stare at it, and then are left dazzled. As when we look at the sun's disc, and then continue to see it for a long time, superimposed on the objects around us, so, too, reading *The Trial*, we suddenly realize that we are surrounded, besieged by senseless, unjust, and often deadly trials.

The trial of the diligent, petty bank clerk Josef K. ends in fact with a death sentence, never pronounced, never written, and the execution takes place in the most sordid, unadorned surroundings, without fanfare or outrage, at the hands of two puppet executioners who, with bureaucratic meticulousness, fulfill their duty mechanically, hardly uttering a word, exchanging foolish courtesies. It's a page that takes your breath away. I, a survivor of Auschwitz, would never have written it, or never like that: because of an incapable and deficient imagination, of course, but also because of a shame in the face of death that Kafka didn't know or, if he did, denied; or perhaps for lack of courage.

The famous, much analyzed phrase that seals the book like a tombstone (". . . it was as if the shame of it should outlive him")[2] does not seem at all enigmatic to me. What should Josef K. be ashamed of, that man who had decided to fight to the death, and who at every turn in the book proclaims that he is innocent? He is ashamed of many contradictory things, because he is not consistent, and his nature (like that of most of us) consists in being inconsistent: not the same over the course of time, unstable, erratic, divided even at the same moment, split into two or more personalities that cannot exist together.

He is ashamed of having quarreled with the tribunal of the cathedral and, at the same time, of not having stood up to the tribunal of the garrets with sufficient force. Of having wasted his life in petty office jealousies, in false love affairs, in morbid timidity, in static and obsessive accomplishments. Of existing when, by now, he should no longer exist: of not having found the strength to kill himself by his own hand when all was lost, before the two inept death-bearers visited him. But I sense, in this shame, an element that I am familiar with: Josef K., at the end of his anguished journey, feels ashamed that this secret, corrupt tribunal exists, pervading everything around it; even the prison chaplain and the precociously dissolute girls who importune the painter Titorelli belong to it. In the end it is a human, not a divine, tribunal: it is made of men and by men, and Josef, with the knife already planted in his heart, is ashamed of being a man.

June 5, 1983

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1. Max Brod was Kafka's friend and first biographer.
2. David Wyllie's 2007 translation from the German.

Rhyme on the Counterattack

Anyone who has been in touch with the world of the printed page knows how great the supply of poetry is today (though not only today), and how scarce, by comparison, is the demand. It follows that, as with any product, poetry is undervalued. The contenders for the very numerous prizes number in the hundreds, even when the prize itself is purely symbolic: perhaps only a medal or a certificate.

There are various reasons for this oversupply. In the first place—and this is fundamental—the need to compose poetry is common to all countries and all eras. Poetry resides within us, like music and song. No civilization is without it; and it is undoubtedly older than prose, if by poetry is meant any account, oral or written, in which the voice rises in tone, the expressive tension is elevated, and attention to the sign and its density are equally elevated. To achieve this result, every "poetics" has developed its own code. The codes are different from one another, but they all have in common a system of signals intended to put the reader on notice: "Watch out, I'm not just talking; my words, though modest, are meant to be heard and remembered."

Incidentally, it is significant that the codes are almost always formulated after the fact; that is, when a particular poetics has already borne fruit. For that matter, the same thing is true of all codes, even those in the strict sense of the word, which, engraved in bronze or in stone, are meant to ratify rules and regulations that already existed. We do not know who the inventor of *ottava rima* or the sonnet was; we do know who codified them. The legislator of poetry is not the poet but the grammarian. Indeed, the poet tends to break the rules: at times he transgresses owing to incompetence; at

other times because he feels the rules are restrictive; at still others out of a conscious will to violate them. He therefore retraces the path that the poetics of the moment traveled, introducing violations into plain language. Since poetry is intrinsically violence done to everyday language, it's understandable that every true poet feels the urge to become a violator, that is, an innovator, in his own right: to invent a poetics of his own, which stands in relation to the current one as the latter stands to prose.

This is why poetry writing is not taught in school, for the same reasons that talking and walking are not taught. They are all activities that we are genetically predisposed to, and that we learn to carry out with ease and pleasure, even if not spontaneously. It's not necessary to study; what's necessary (and sufficient) is the model. Starting from that, each of us develops that personal style which informs his words, his stride, and his verse. Just as we all talk and walk, we are all poets, at least potentially. To compose poetry is to innovate, and innovation cannot be taught.

Another reason for the oversupply of poetry lies in the upheaval that poetic technique has undergone since the beginning of this century, that is, since people began talking about the crisis of civilization and the decline of the West. Not coincidentally, parallel earthquakes shook music, psychology, physics, linguistics, economics, and, in short, our entire way of life. In appearance (though only in appearance) European poetry of our century is free of every constraint. Classical metrics and prosody, after centuries of almost undisputed authority, have faded. No one has officially dismissed them, but there is no doubt that they are generally felt to be outmoded, or actually afflicted by a negative mark. Anyone who today writes a sonnet that conforms to the prescribed rules would be judged an incompetent, or a relic of the past, or a parodist.

This apparent freedom has opened the doors to the legion of born poets: and, as I said, we are all such. From these two sources—the need for song and enchantment that we all have, and the decline of formal constraints—comes the flood of poetic texts. It's a harmful phenomenon, because it threatens to distract attention from the authentic new voices that surely exist, scattered among the crowd.

For this reason, though it's not the only one, I'm hoping for a spontaneous return (it's not a paradox) of rules, and, in particular, rhyme. Indeed, I predict that it's close at hand, since in all human affairs there are reactions that correct the deviations. Rhyme is a fairly late invention but a

“likely” one: that is to say, it’s one of those inventions which are in the air, and then materialize in various places. In fact, it is found in poetic traditions that are quite distant from one another in time and space. Its present-day eclipse in Western poetry seems inexplicable to me, and is surely temporary.

Rhyme has too many virtues, it’s much too beautiful to disappear. It discreetly marks the end of a line or stanza. It reestablishes the ancient relationship between poetry and music, both daughters of our need for rhythm: there are some who maintain that we acquire it before birth, listening to the beating of our mother’s heart, so that we must all be poets from the womb. Rhyme underscores the key words, those which the reader’s attention should be drawn to. But I would like to emphasize two other advantages of rhyme, one for those who read verse, the other for those who write it.

Anyone who reads good poetry wants to carry it with him, to remember it, to possess it. Often he does not even need to study a poem: it all happens as if the memorizing had occurred spontaneously, naturally, painlessly (whereas memorizing texts whose beauty we do not perceive is painful, or at least laborious). Now, rhyme is of fundamental assistance in committing lines to memory: one line pulls along another, or others, the forgotten line can be reconstructed, at least approximately. The effect is so strong that, in the mysterious but limited storehouse of our memory, poetry without rhyme often yields its place to rhymed poetry, even if the latter is less noble. A pragmatic consequence follows: poets who wish to be remembered (*ricordati*, “carried in the heart”; in many languages to learn “by memory” is rendered to learn “by heart”) should not overlook this virtue of rhyme.

The other virtue is more subtle. Anyone who intends to compose in rhyme imposes on himself a constraint, though one that is rewarding. He commits himself to ending a line not with the word dictated by logical discourse but with another, more unusual one, drawn from the few that end “the right way.” He is thus forced to deviate, to stray from the path that is predictable and therefore easy. Now, reading what is predictable bores us and doesn’t tell us anything. The constraint of rhyme obliges the unexpected on the poet’s part: it forces him to invent, to “discover”; to enrich his vocabulary with uncommon terms; to twist his syntax—in a word, to innovate. His situation is similar to that of the bricklayer who agrees to use irregular, polyhedral, or prismatic bricks mixed in with the

common ones; his structure will be less smooth, less functional, perhaps even less solid, but it will say more to the imagination of the one who looks at it, and will bear the mark of the one who built it.

Rhyme and rules in general therefore acquire the further function of revealing the personality of the writer; and in fact it can be seen that the differences among poets are greater than those among prose writers. The attribution of a poem is easier than that of a prose work. Faced with the obstacle of meter, the author is forced (or forces himself) to a height that is acrobatic, and whose style is strictly his own: he signs every line, whether he wants to or not, whether he knows it or not.

March 26, 1985

Dear Horace

Dear Horace,

I've decided to write to you now, a few years before the bimillennium of your death, so as to get in before my more authoritative competitors, or, rather, the accredited experts, as they say today; besides, choral celebrations, on a fixed date, surely didn't appeal to you, either. In any case, the idea came (or came back) to me while rereading—with great effort but also with enjoyment—one of your satires: the one in which you encounter a tiresome bore on the Via Sacra who is angling for recommendations. You try in vain to get rid of him, until a timely accident comes to your rescue.

I congratulate you: as you predicted, you didn't die completely. Your poems, as you can see, are still studied and remembered; some have actually become proverbial, and even those who have never studied Latin cite them. Indeed, by now we speak a very corrupt Latin, and if we want to understand the Latin of your times, which we call "the Golden Age," we have to study it. Nevertheless, your *carpe diem*, for example, has never been as fashionable as it is today. And Signor Fumagalli, a praiseworthy contemporary of ours, a retired librarian who has devoted his life to collecting famous maxims, assigns you second place among the minters of quotations, after a certain Dante Alighieri, whom I'll tell you about some other time. In a word, that monument "more lasting than bronze" which you patiently constructed is still standing,[1] even if it is a little eroded by time and by our pollution, and if few tourist guides point it out.

With great effort, I was saying. And I'm ashamed, because I studied Latin for a good eight years, diligently, with fine teachers and decent marks. I'm sure that you will have less difficulty reading this letter of mine than I

have deciphering your poems. As you can see from my writing, we neo-Latins have taken many liberties. We've massacred the declensions and the cases, all of us except the Romanians, I mean the Dacians, who have preserved some traces of them. Odd, isn't it? But they always were an odd people. And then we are Latins, true, but meanwhile people of all races have got underfoot, and have also left their marks, not only on the language.

In any case, it seemed proper to avoid in this letter of mine certain words (*parabolae*, *paràule*: in short, the *verba*) that might be difficult for you. The articles, no, I could not avoid them, even if your Latin did not "require" them. Please forgive me, I am writing not only to you and for you but also for my readers of today, and I would not want to excessively distort our language, which is not without merit.

But let's leave matters of language aside for the moment. I cannot conceal from you the fact that many things have happened in the intervening time. The Roman Empire grew out of all proportion and then collapsed. A Jew, born a few years after your death, preached important things and swept away the gods of Olympus, who for that matter I don't think were of great concern to you. Now a single God is worshipped throughout almost the entire world, but morals have not improved as a result. We have abolished slavery, at least theoretically. Germans, Huns, and Arabs came from the Alps and from the sea; they brought carnage and wars, but also new laws, and they curbed our arrogance.

There have been a great many wars: in every century and every region, and, since we have become ingenious, we have invented weapons that are increasingly ingenious. The most recent ones, I mention to you in passing, would have startled Lucretius. If instead of leaving atoms whole as in the nature of things, you split them or fuse them in a certain way, you can blow up the world, and every single person can be killed a hundred times over. At this very moment we are trying to disinvent this invention from hell. But it's nothing new; I seem to think that it happened before, in your time. The most artful inventors are those who construct war machines, and war is what inspires the most artful inventions.

The world is round, this you already suspected. But it so happened that we went to see if it was true, it was, and along the pathways of the sea we encountered a new land, larger than Europe and Africa put together. We named it America, quickly massacred the inhabitants, who went naked, and made it a colony. But now the colonists have become so rich and powerful

that they are colonizing us in turn. Their language is all the rage, and you're in trouble if you don't understand it. It seems to me that something of the sort happened with Greece in your time, right?

Other things have occurred as well. We have a way to manufacture ships that sail without wind or oars, craft that fly with hundreds and hundreds of passengers inside, chariots that operate without horses. Indeed, if you could see present-day Rome, you would find it invaded: these vehicles are swift, but they make noise, give off fumes, clog the streets, and from time to time run over a pedestrian. In short, it's a very different city. That Via Sacra from your satire is still there, amid the ruins of the Forums, but it's a good three meters (a meter, pardon me, is three feet) below street level. In fact, what with shards, rubble, and asphalt, the streets in all of our cities rise a few centimeters every century. For the moment, the vehicles I was telling you about are forbidden to travel on the Via Sacra: only idle people go there, whom we call tourists, along with some scholars. They come from far away, from America, Britain, Scandia, and even from certain islands east of the Seres, whose very existence was unknown in your time. They carry with them a little gadget that portrays images as a painter might, but smaller and more quickly.

We have other *mirabilia.* We sail beneath the sea. There is no mountain that we haven't climbed. We know how to trigger lightning and harness it to our wheels. We can see atoms, the frontiers of the universe, the inside of our abdomen. We have sent explorers to the Moon. We know how to *futuere* (today we use a slightly different word, but if I were to write it here in plain language the newspaper might not accept the piece) without impregnating. We know how to cure old diseases, although we have unleashed new ones. We have the newest poisons, which produce ecstasy.

But you will be pleased to know that tiresome bores and recommendation seekers are still numerous, and that your Venosa[2] still exists, although it's overrun by the above-mentioned vehicles, and the majority of the Venosini today live in America. Recently we even rediscovered your Sabine villa (in a somewhat sorry state, as it happens), the one that was in your Elegies: come now! it's not as modest as you describe it. Today we would call it a second home, and would make you pay taxes that you would have trouble earning from royalties or obtaining from Maecenas. You could, of course, have a telephone installed (you know Greek, an explanation of the term would be superfluous) and perhaps speak

every evening with your friends in Rome and Mantua. But you would be disturbed by the railroad, which passes close by, and by the motocross races (moto + cross: here indeed an explanation is needed, but it would take much too long) held by the young people in the neighborhood. For us silence has become a rare and costly commodity.

The succession of the seasons has not changed. Spring still gladdens us, chasing away the snow and restoring grass to the meadows, as you once said with your customary elegance;[3] the approach of autumn and then winter still wrenches our hearts, reminding us each year of the final winter that each of us faces. Our lives are longer than yours, yet neither happier nor more secure, nor do we have any certainty that the gods will grant a tomorrow to our yesterdays. We, too, will join our father Aeneas, and Tullius, and Ancus, and you, in the shadow realm. We, too, arrogant, overconfident, will return to dust and shadow.

April 14, 1985

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1. The reference is to Horace's Ode 3:30 ("I have created a monument more lasting than bronze").
2. When Horace was born there, the town was known as Venusia.
3. The reference is to Horace's Ode 4:7.

Bacteria Roulette

A reading of the autobiography of Salvador Luria, the Turin-born winner of the 1969 Nobel Prize in Medicine, so absorbed me that I am induced to overcome the reserve stemming from my incompetence. Luria is a geneticist, that is, an expert on those long strings of eloquent molecules on which our identity (and, in large part, our destiny) is written. My now distant past as an organic chemist led me to spend time with other long molecules, those of synthetic polymers, which, however, being hopelessly monotonous, were mute and brutish. They have practical virtues, but they don't "say" anything, or, rather, they repeat the same message endlessly. The first are to the second as a novel would be to a hypothetical volume that from the first page to the last repeated the same syllable over and over.

This autobiography, recently published by Boringhieri as *Storie di geni e di me* (literally, *Stories of Geniuses and Me*), has a different title in the American original: *A Slot Machine, a Broken Test Tube: An Autobiography*.[1] It seems more meaningful than the Italian title because it refers to two of the fundamental themes of the book, and, more generally, to two classic lines of scientific research.

Contrary to current opinion, which favors teamwork and the aid of computers, the commitment and the intuition of the individual have a determining influence on the end result, today as in the past. Besides, if this were not so, what sense would there be in continuing the Nobel Prizes? On this point, Luria has no doubts or false modesties, and in relating his triumphs he does not hesitate to say "I."

Beyond the imposing scientific and technological institutes, or perhaps in spite of them, the brain of the lone scientist, the "adventurer," isolated in

his study or laboratory, remains the instrument of choice, without which the work is merely routine. True innovation is not a group effort; it is the product of reason, and this is individual. Nonetheless, research does not lie entirely within the bounds of pure rationality: the latter is necessary, but vastly insufficient. Reason requires external nourishment, stimuli, which can come from the least expected sources. This is the allusion contained in the slot machine of the original title.

Luria tells how by chance he observed (he is not a gambler!) a colleague who was playing one of these machines, in which a coin is inserted, and then, not really by chance (because they are shrewdly programmed to ensure that the machine wins), the player sometimes gets back a little more than what he put in, often nothing at all, very rarely a sizable sum. This, for Luria, was the unexpected stimulus: “What struck me was that the pattern of slot-machine returns had a lesson to teach me about bacteria.”

I confess that to the uninitiated, like me, the text that followed did not clarify the analogy or, if you like, the symbol; still, the moral is clear. To the researcher (and who is not a researcher?), the world appears as an immense jumble of symbols: it is up to him to find their interpretation. Often a moment’s intuition is enough to untangle a centuries-old knot, over which powerful minds have exhausted themselves. For Luria, the episode yielded an understanding of the mechanism by which bacteria resist (or do not resist) the action of the bacteriophage. From this, the genetics of bacteria got its start, which led, in turn, to the fusion of biochemistry with genetics —namely, molecular biology.

The author himself states, in another context, that examples like this illustrate how necessary it is to be flexible in scientific research, that is, one must be ready to transfer procedures and concepts between distant and apparently unrelated fields. The story of Newton’s apple might be something more than a childish legend.

The other half of the title contains a complementary allusion. The “broken test tube” was an important test tube: it contained a bacterial culture that was the product of long hard labor; it had been carefully selected and was intended for a crucial experiment. Luria, at work, is always rushing around: elsewhere he describes himself as frenzied, and the many colleagues whom the book portrays are frenzied, possessed. As one who loves “unplowed fields,” he has no intention of wasting time reproducing the culture, and asks a colleague for another one, of completely

different bacteria. The experiment succeeds just the same, in fact, even too well, and from it arises the discovery of an unsuspected phenomenon: in essence, the fact that a virus grown on a particular bacterial strain encounters resistance to its normal development, while it multiplies quite well on bacteria belonging to other species.

The phenomenon, Luria says, opened the way to the technology of recombinant DNA, that is, modern genetic engineering, which is full of promise (and, he assures us, devoid of danger). He adds: “My finding was completely serendipitous. . . . The discovery itself . . . was there for the asking. If I had not discovered it, someone else would soon have done so. My fluctuation-test work, on the other hand, was essentially unique.” Luria’s justified and differentiated pride recalls Machiavelli’s saying: that victory belongs to the strong, aided by fortune.

What is striking, in this bold and at times epic account of research and of a life, is an opinion that is rarely found in the history of science (a subject that, strangely, Luria asserts holds little interest for him, although he contributes to it generously with this very book). The life of the scientist, the author states, may indeed be contentious, filled with battles, defeats, and victories, but the adversary is always merely the unknown, the problem to be solved, the mystery to be clarified. It is never a civil war; scientists, even if they have diverse opinions or diverse political tendencies, argue among themselves, compete, but do not fight. They are bound by a strong alliance, by a common faith “in the correctness of Maxwell’s or Boltzmann’s equations,” and by a common acceptance of Darwinism and the molecular structure of DNA.

The scientist-counterfeiter does not exist, and he cannot exist, because fraud doesn’t pay: like the inveterate gambler, he goes to his own certain ruin. “Seldom do scientists race with each other in hostile secrecy”; the sessions of Luria’s group, at MIT, “are truly moments of grace,” in which the scientists enjoy as a community “the human aspect of science,” with the happiness of a thirsty man who has found a fountain. These declarations astonish and, at the same time, cheer us. Perhaps they are not true in every time, place, or academic setting, but they are, or were, true for Salvador Luria, whose life they embellished; and therefore they can be, or become, true again, at least for someone.

June 6, 1985

1. All quotations in this essay are from the American edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

Among Manhattan's Skyscrapers

It is easy to verify that written English is the most concise among the European languages: you can see it, for example, in the multilingual instruction manuals for household appliances. I do not know if some quantitative linguist has measured the concision of spoken languages, but, after my first visit to the United States, I would have no doubt about the result: an American says twelve or fifteen things in the time it takes an Italian to say ten. Whether he makes himself understood equally well remains to be seen. It seems to me that, on average, an American should admit that he is deaf at a younger age than an Italian, since he becomes incapable of grasping certain very slight (only for us?) aspirations, certain evanescent vowel shadings, earlier than an Italian. "Do you know English?" is a question without a precise meaning: one can profitably read an English text, even from the eighteenth century, and still find oneself deaf and dumb before the customs officer.

Despite the distance between the two languages, a rudimentary hybrid has developed among Italian immigrants in America: they say that a house is "*senza stima*" (literally, without esteem) when they mean without *steam*, that is, unheated; they call the greengrocer's shop the *fruttistoro*, the truck *tracca*, the gearshift *ghiro*, and the clutch *claccia*. A friend who, like me, collects linguistic monstrosities assures me that he once heard someone say, "Your husband will be *becco* soon" ("will be back"—"cuckolded"—"soon"). Purists shudder; yet perhaps, in some distant future, a true Esperanto will evolve from these deformed seeds.

Sunday runners can be found in our country, too, but in Central Park it's a mass phenomenon. The fat ones run to lose weight, the thin ones to stay in shape, the sick to get well, the healthy to show that they are healthy. They run with a radio headset, with the dog (not very enthusiastic) on a leash. A young father runs pushing a stroller with a sleeping child; an elegant, coffee-colored young woman runs to do the shopping, and returns half an hour later, running, with plastic bags dangling crazily from her forearms. Even those who don't run wear running shoes. I tried them: they're wonderful, light, airy, quiet, but attractive? No. About beauty New Yorkers, men and women, care little; they dress any old way, "casually."

By contrast they care a lot about calories: that's why they run so much, though in three years everything could change. The press is powerful; another two or three heart attacks among joggers and contemplative walking, or even the sedentary life, might become trendy. We might also be at a turning point in the matter of calories: newspapers praise the Mediterranean diet, and coffee is served with a little box full of small white and pink envelopes. In the white ones there is sugar; the label reads "Only sixteen calories," but they are still calories, and will make you fat. In the pink envelopes there is an unpleasant mixture of sweeteners, and a warning coldly informs us that it has sometimes caused cancer in test animals. For believers, there is no choice: either obesity or cancer, or, of course, bitter coffee.

If I may venture to set myself up as a judge of customs—and with the permission of my most kind hosts—a single party is more harmful to one's health than two hundred little white or pink envelopes. At a party you stand for one or two hours, with a cracker in one hand and a glass in the other, so that there is no hand free for gesturing or for shaking hands with those to whom you are pointlessly introduced.

You are assailed from behind and on both sides by garrulous and querulous people, while the serious people whom you would like to speak to are inaccessible, surrounded in turn by the garrulous. Everyone is speaking, and everyone is speaking English; to make yourself heard, you must raise your voice, but since everyone is raising his voice, the result is futile and the acoustic effort escalates. It's an effort that I had never before

experienced. In such a situation, expressive paralysis develops: you are reduced to pretending to understand and can respond only by making faces and nodding your head, and, instead of talking, you make do with uttering indistinct sounds; the result doesn't change in any case.

From end to end, Manhattan is proud and gigantic. The most recent skyscrapers are extraordinarily beautiful: it's an insolent, lyrical, and cynical beauty. They defy the sky and, at the same time, on clear days, reflect it from the thousands of windows that form the surface of the façade. At night, the towers shine like Dolomites of light. Their verticality is the fruit of speculation, but it expresses something else as well: it's work of ingenuity and audacity, and harbors within it the upward thrust that in Europe six hundred years ago produced the Gothic cathedrals. Religion, in America, is something serious and vigorous; it has little to do with asceticism. Here all religions have undergone a transformation toward action and efficiency, and efficiency itself is a religion: the skyscrapers are its temples. From the top of the twin towers of the World Trade Center the view is as breathtaking as from an alpine summit: the walls drop straight down for four hundred meters, and at the bottom vehicles and pedestrians can be seen swarming like frantic insects. In the splendid bay, a maze of islands, channels, and isthmuses, the Statue of Liberty is a dwarf, but the pamphlet that describes the twin towers exaggerates: "You will never be so close to the stars!" All you have to do is go to Lanzo. . . .[1]

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On the ground, on the sidewalks between the crystal giants, a well-assorted sampling of the human race wanders around: no subspecies is missing, but, inescapably, the unacceptable, poor devils, stand out conspicuously. Men and women, white and black (the blacks are in the majority, however), in rags or properly dressed, sit on the ground or lean against the walls. They don't ask for anything; they gaze into space. They smoke or chew gum in silence; some sleep among the feet of passersby, under a roof of corrugated cardboard, others rummage through garbage cans.

They do not rummage in vain: they find half-eaten sandwiches, half-drunk Coca-Colas, shoes, clothes, books, magazines; the culture of consumption is prodigal. If it's windy or raining, they wrap themselves in plastic bags, which the wind itself scatters abundantly everywhere. They are, for the most part, former inmates of psychiatric hospitals: if they are not dangerous, they are discharged and abandoned to their own devices.

At the opposite extreme, at the apex of Western civilization, are the fonts of culture: museums, libraries, schools, theaters. The cultural offerings are *terrific**: that's what people say, and the term is positive. It's terrific in its quality and its quantity, and inspires reverence. My American friend gives me a simplified explanation, which doesn't satisfy me: for the wealthy, establishing a cultural institution is worth it; they can deduct the cost from their tax return.

I don't believe it's only this. There is a thirst for culture and a respect for culture; in the long term, culture is considered a good investment. They deserve praise, those uncultured Texan and Californian billionaires who invest their dollars in culture. But for now, in the short term, the results seem meager. American culture has some very high peaks, it produces excellent specialists, but on average it's lower than Europe's. Like the humus of the underbrush, culture requires centuries; quick, *instant** surrogates do not exist.

June 23, 1985

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1. A massif in the Italian Alps.

A Bottle of Sunshine

The question of how to define a human being is not an idle one. If we limit ourselves to the creatures who exist on Earth today, there are no ambiguities. But doubts arise and become magnified as discoveries of "fossil men" accumulate: starting when, from which genetic or cultural rung, do they merit the label *Homo*? Since our ancestors walked upright? from the time they began speaking (though here, unfortunately, material evidence is and always will be lacking)? since they learned to make fire? since they made tools? since they began burying their dead? since they instituted "marriage, courts of law, and altars"?[1] As you can see, the choice is broad, and largely arbitrary, and so I would venture to propose a further alternative: man is a constructor of containers. A species that does not construct containers is by definition not human. It seems to me, in other words, that making containers is indicative of two qualities that, for better or worse, are exquisitely human.

The first is the ability to think about tomorrow. Certainly there are animals "not imprudent concerning the future": ants, bees, squirrels, certain birds. And some of them do, in fact, construct containers: bees in particular, with admirable skill and economy of material. But their small hexagonal cell is only singular, and their art, though it is at least hundreds of millions of years old, has remained what it was, while ours, in a few millennia, has given rise to a myriad of objects. The second specifically human quality is the ability to predict the behavior of materials. With regard to containers, we can predict what the container and its contents "will do," and how they will react with each other, at the moment of contact and over time.

From these two requirements a boundless forest of ideas has emerged, each endowed with its own particular development. The result is an assortment of containers (casks, jugs, vials, handbags, suitcases, baskets, sacks, buckets, inkpots, jars, wineskins, oxygen tanks, boxes, bowls, chests, lead capsules for radioactive elements, cages, snuff boxes, garbage cans, horns for gunpowder, cans for preserves, mailboxes, velvet jewel cases, sheaths for swords, pyxes for the Host, needlecases, inner tubes, carryalls and carry-ons, gas tanks as big as cathedrals, cradles, urns, coffins) so varied as to make you want to develop a system of classification, as we have done for animals, plants, and minerals.

Some containers, such as amphoras and bottles, quickly achieved a perfect shape, and have not substantially changed. Given the problem (to contain a liquid without imparting foreign odors or flavors to it; to be able to stand on a support; and to allow pouring without dripping down the sides), there was only one solution, and such it has remained. Now, by contrast, think about the series of new problems that accompanied the start of industrial civilization: on the one hand, the appearance of substances with new, more valuable, and more aggressive properties; on the other hand, and complementary, construction materials that are more resistant, or more lightweight, or more economical.

Even the kitchen, that most ancient of workshops and also the most conservative, has not resisted the thrust of technological innovation. The copper pots described by Nievo, the pride of the kitchen in Fratta,[2] have nearly disappeared, driven off by aluminum, which costs less, and by stainless steel, which lasts longer and doesn’t dent. We find the copper ones displayed at antique dealers and secondhand shops, but no one wants them anymore, not even as decoration, much less as a symbol of social status. In place of them, we find today in even the most modest kitchens at least a hundred containers classifiable into no less than twenty different types.

If we limit ourselves to those which chemists call “processing containers” (that is, those in which foods are cooked or fried, and not simply stored), the relationship between the surface area and the height seems essential for a first rough taxonomy: frying pans when you want volatile products to evaporate; pots or casseroles when you do not want too much liquid to be “consumed”; and finally airtight pressure cookers, from which nothing escapes, not even aromas. As for “serving containers,” the

fable of the fox and the stork remains relevant. Aesop was an ingenious man.

The shape of these domestic objects is for the most part logical, dictated by long experience; but upon a more careful examination we can sometimes see stylized elements that are not logical, or are no longer so. The small spout on a pot, in its customary shape, of a narrow, upside-down semi-cone, serves no purpose: it idealizes a channel for a flow that in fact never occurs, either with water or with thicker liquids (much less with granular solids, like peas).

Years ago, a talented, versatile friend of mine managed a factory in which, among other things, coffeepots were produced. He diligently studied the problem of coffee's flow lines, and came up with an elaborate, hunchbacked profile for the small spout, very different from the traditional one. After making a prototype and verifying that the coffee poured better, more quickly and with greater precision, he did not hesitate to modify the molds and begin production. But the outcome was disastrous. Consumers rejected the new shape: the small spout must be a small spout, as its name says, and as it was in Mycenaean pitchers.

Besides its shape, a container is characterized by the material that its walls are made of. Naturally it must be impermeable to the liquid or gas that is expected to be stored in it, but this is not enough. It must, for example, hold the wine but let the light pass through, and here the glass of bottles comes to our aid. Or it must keep heat in or out, hence the felt placed around canteens, or the more elegant (though more fragile) double-walled, silver-coated vacuum bottle created by Professor Dewar. He designed it to hold liquid helium, but today it is remarkably useful for picnics as well. Or the container has to hold solids and let fluids pass through, and here we have countless progeny, ranging from the semipermeable membranes of reverse-osmosis desalinators to the microporous candles used to sterilize water, to paper or cloth filters, sieves, mosquito netting, fishing nets, and the barbed wire of battlefields and prison camps.

With regard to selective walls, the very windows of our houses contain a small but refined arsenal. Normal glass panes allow images to come through but act as a barrier to air and to the external temperature; louvered shutters, by contrast, let in air but not light; roll-down shutters let in neither air nor light; curtains let in light and some air but not images; frosted glass lets in light but neither images nor air; the iron grilles on the ground floor

let in air, light, images, and even cats and outstretched hands, but not entire human bodies.

It is stimulating to think that our energy future, or, rather, simply our future, depends exclusively on the solution to a problem of containers. A machine for extracting energy from nothing (or almost nothing: from the hydrogen in water) already exists, not only on paper, and has shown itself to be tremendously efficient in hydrogen bombs. What's still lacking, and it's the "only" thing, is the bottle whose walls are resistant to the formidable temperatures the machine requires in order to function the way the Sun does. As for the gnomes in the United States, the Soviet Union, and Frascati, too, who are pondering this bottle, which will surely be incorporeal (a magnetic field), we wish them good luck, in our own best interest, and hope that their ideas will be successful but not too audacious. We don't know what might happen if their bottle were to break, nor do we know if they know.

It appears that this will be the seal of our century. As makers of containers, we hold the key to the greatest boon and the greatest abuse: two doors side by side, two locks, but only one key.

July 28, 1985

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1. From "Dei sepolcri" ("Of the Sepulchres"), by Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827).
2. The kitchen of the Castello di Fratta is described in Ippolito Nievo's 1867 novel, *Le confessioni d'un italiano* (*Confessions of an Italian*).

The Wine of the Borgias

Among the many wishes of the daily newspaper reader there is one that might seem to be fairly inexpensive to satisfy. It would be nice if the reporter assigned to cover accidents or, better yet, disasters were to use an appropriate, precise language, as do his colleagues who report on the theater, sports, finance, etc. I have in mind two recent cases, as you may already have guessed: the Val di Fiemme disaster and the scandal of the Austrian wines.[1]

It would be foolish to expect the relevant stories to have been entrusted immediately to a geologist and an enologist respectively. It would be utopian to demand a reporter capable of rushing to the Val di Fiemme and promptly unmasking the lies told there, whether in good or bad faith, and resisting the pressure of local interests, which (as always in such cases) are enormous. Nevertheless, it would not have been difficult, even for a "generalist," to question the local people, and to find out and describe how the two purification basins were built, how large they were, how long they had been there, what condition the embankment walls were in. We saw, in the days that followed, a photograph of the installation as it appeared before the disaster. Though not too clear, it was appalling: so the two banks on the valley side were extremely steep, almost sheer? And were they of packed earth, as was said? A local land surveyor, or a student, should not have had any difficulty giving us a quick description of it.

It's not a request dictated solely by curiosity: the reader should not and does not want to be satisfied by interviews and by reports from the experts; he should and wants to judge for himself, and has to have the essential information to do so. If there is culpability, he has the right to be indignant,

but he wants to be in a position to independently choose the quality and quantity of his indignation and (above all) at whom it should be directed. He distrusts, or should distrust, the barbaric institution of the scapegoat. He knows that the sentence will come, if it comes, at a distance of months or years, and that it will be written in a cross between the abstruse language of the judges and the equally abstruse language of the technicians. Therefore he wants to have the opportunity to shape his own opinion, even if it cannot take a legal form or have any legal effect.

He wants to understand, which is his right, and he also wants to have a say: it's a meager satisfaction that shouldn't be taken away from him. He will have his say in any case, but if he has been informed in a clear, accurate way, his opinion will acquire the weight conferred by at least a minimum of expertise.

The newspaper must strive to supply him with such expertise, as soon as possible. That way, it will avoid hasty acquittals or convictions; indifference, fatalism, or witch hunts; dangerous complacency or unjustified fears. It is just that those who are responsible be punished. But for such events not to be repeated, wide-ranging expertise must exist, which probably did not exist among the hundreds of people who, at all levels, had a hand in those embankments; and there are things that can be seen more clearly from below than from above.

The matter of the Austrian wine, for the time being at least, smacks more of fraud than of tragedy. There is word of only a single death, and, furthermore, its relation to the wine that was drunk is quite doubtful. It's clear that, in this case, the Italian reporter had no choice but to repeat, as best he could, the news reported by his foreign colleague; but this colleague was hasty and inexact, more inclined to provoke scandal than to provide concrete facts.

To say that diethylenic glycol, or diethylene glycol (not "glycol diethylene," which chemically makes no sense), is used as antifreeze for the water that circulates in car radiators is inaccurate: ethylene glycol, its younger brother, is normally used for this purpose. It costs less and, in equal concentration, has a better return. It is also more toxic, but it does not appear to have been found in the wines.

However, the fact that one or the other product may be used as antifreeze has no legal relevance: to insist on it, as all the European newspapers have, serves only to confuse people's ideas. The reader

wonders, rightly, what could have led those people to use a substance for such an unusual purpose, as if someone were to tie a salami with wire, or sweep the streets with a spade. If the adulterator had been a single individual, one might think of insanity, but there were many. . . .

What does have legal relevance, on the other hand, is the toxicity of diethylene glycol. It's not very high; and besides, obviously no producer in his right mind would put a powerful poison in his own wine. Nevertheless, according to toxicology texts, it is approximately five times as toxic as ethyl alcohol, which is not so insignificant. In America in 1937, its imprudent use in a drug caused the deaths of sixty individuals who had ingested about ten grams a day for several consecutive days.

You can see that we're on the edge of danger if it's true that some Austrian wines contained sixteen grams per liter or even more. Besides, it's always difficult to predict what effect two poisons will have (in this case, alcohol and glycol) when ingested simultaneously: they can strengthen each other or, vice versa, one can inhibit the other—all questions that these producers do not seem to have been concerned with.

The reason that glycol was used can be easily explained. In many countries, sweetening wines with sugar or glucose is prohibited. Glycol has a cloying taste that to me is decidedly unpleasant but that appears to simulate that of some esteemed wines. From the standpoint of a winemaker inclined to fraud, it has a considerable advantage: it's a modest, not very conspicuous substance, whose presence does not leap out at either the chemical analyst or the consumer.

Now, the chemist is required to check if a product is in compliance with established regulations; he cannot be asked to ascertain that the product does *not* contain unexpected foreign substances, since there are millions of known chemical compounds. Apparently, a very shrewd but professionally rather dishonest Austrian enologist gave his many clients fraudulent advice. Do you want to sweeten your wines that are too "dry"? The law prohibits you from using sugars, which, besides, would not escape analysis. So add glycol, which is a little less innocuous and adds a little less sweetness, but which no chemist will think of looking for.

And, indeed, for who knows how many years, no chemist found it; in fact, the chemist finds the compound that he's looking for (when it's there; sometimes, if he's not very experienced, even when it's not), but to find

what he is not looking for he has to be extremely capable or outrageously fortunate.

It’s less easy to explain why, in certain wines, such a low percentage was found that it had no effect, either positive (sweetening) or negative (harming the drinker). But wine passes through several hands: it can’t be ruled out that unlawfully sweetened wine was mixed with authentic wine by some producer, perhaps unaware of the fraud. That is no reason that he should be held less responsible, nor will it, at this point, be easy for him to prove his innocence.

August 9, 1985

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1. On July 19, 1985, a dam in the Val di Fiemme in Trentino collapsed, causing the deaths of 268 people. That summer, it was also discovered that hundreds of thousands of gallons of Austrian wine were apparently doctored with antifreeze (diethylene glycol).

Reproducing Miracles

I happened to read two books in succession (not very recent ones; when it comes to books it's better to let them season a little) that dealt with more or less the same subject, while taking opposite positions. One is *Viaggio nel mondo del paranormale* (*Journey into the Paranormal World*), by Piero Angela, the learned gentleman whom all television-watching Italians are familiar with. The other is *The Roots of Coincidence*, by Arthur Koestler, the author who died a few years ago, and on whose novels a generation of Europeans were brought up.

The first book makes a clean sweep: paranormal phenomena do not exist. Telepathy, precognition, spiritism, astrology, psychokinesis, etc. are the product of skillful tricks or self-delusion. The backing that these phenomena have often received from illustrious physicists in the past hundred years does not prove anything: physicists are accustomed to the "good faith" of the facts that they observe, they themselves act in good faith, subtle when interpreting experimental data, ingenuous when it comes to the cleverness of charlatans. Uri Geller, the spoon bender, is a very skillful charlatan; Kirlian, the Soviet who photographs the "aura" that surrounds leaves, seeds, insects, and human hands, is a fanatical ignoramus.

There is no phenomenon on the lengthy list that a skilled illusionist is not able to reproduce. If he is honest, he will declare himself for what he is, namely, a professional trickster; if he is dishonest, he claims to possess superhuman powers. The best exegetes of the paranormal are not scientists but, precisely, illusionists, especially those who have reached the end of their career; but even they (and on this point Angela's book is in dubious

taste), out of professional solidarity toward their younger colleagues, refuse to reveal the key to their most amazing acts.

After the books that made him famous throughout the world, Koestler set out on a path that surprised many: waging war against the positions taken by official science. Though not a biologist or a physicist, he had always possessed an enviable polemical vitality. Thanks to his fame, he had access to sources (including personal ones) denied to most people and was a man of admirable culture. His thesis, in the book I've cited, is deliberately shocking: paranormal phenomena exist, we live surrounded by them, but, being one-eyed and, what's more, confounded by established science, we do not realize it.

The case of Galileo is recurrent: we don't want to look through the telescope; those who do look don't want to see and therefore do not see; the neo-Aristotelians do all they can to gag or excommunicate clairvoyants. And yet modern physics is so strange that its strangeness should make us less incredulous. If we believe in the uncertainty principle, in the wave/corpuscle duality of particles, in the curvature of space, in the relativity of time, we cannot reject the equally strange facts that pour down on us from the world of the paranormal. If physicists are credulous, they do well to be so; skepticism is more an impediment than a filter.

I would declare Angela the winner of the competition, but just barely. Though he is right to help us clear our horizon of foolishness and shenanigans, it is imprudent to be so drastic. An often cited pronouncement by Prince Hamlet comes to mind, and a more recent one by Arthur C. Clarke, according to which, if an eminent scientist asserts that an endeavor is possible, he should be believed; but if he asserts that an endeavor is impossible, it is wiser to distrust him. For example: Angela denies that dowsers have any power; but an authoritative Swiss daily some years ago published the news that Roche (yes, the well-known drug company) pays a regular salary to two dowsers, and sends them all over the world to look for water for its new factories. The Swiss are people with their feet on the ground, and they do not like to waste francs; before hiring the water diviners they subjected them to serious examination, ascertaining that in certain conditions, which are easy to reproduce, dowsers unerringly find water.

That is precisely the point, the reproducibility. Koestler makes use of an expedient that rhetoricians have known for centuries: he accumulates an

avalanche of facts, some well documented, others not so well, still others known only by hearsay. That is, he counts on a mass effect, but his "coincidences" are never reproducible. It would take just *one single* clairvoyant individual with proven skills to bankrupt the Lottery, Monte Carlo, and all the bookmakers in the world. Koestler's line of reasoning on the strangeness of physics can impress only those who are naïve: the phenomena observed or triggered by today's physicists are strange, yes, but reproducible. Any physicist who describes an experience that cannot be reproduced, in Europe or America or China, becomes a laughingstock.

And yet . . . and yet there are phenomena that are not reproducible: each of us has experienced them. The physicist rightly disregards them, because, just as science is not based on the individual, neither is it based on occasional and erratic facts. He does not forget them, however. He tries to purge them of every emotional ingredient and free himself of hallucinations and fallacious memories; he avoids wasting time explaining phenomena whose existence is doubtful, but year after year he constructs his own private mental museum in which, for future recollection, there are a number of indubitable facts that his science cannot explain. I have never been a physicist, but I have not forgotten thirty years of activity in lesser chemistry, and my private museum is not mental but material. It contains at least three objects that I will describe, and that await (so far in vain) someone who will explain their origin.

The first is fifteen years old and is not very pretty: it is a lump of semi-fused synthetic resin, hard as wood. It comes from a desiccator into which air at 65°C was introduced. The procedure had been carried out thousands of times with no ill effect: the resin exsiccated routinely at that temperature. Only twice in twenty years did the resin in just one corner of the desiccator spontaneously heat up to the point of fusion; once it actually became incandescent.

The second object is eighteen years old, and it's a piece of enameled copper wire. The enamel, of a very common type, is blackish and does not adhere to the metal. So far, there is nothing strange about it, since the specimen comes from a continuous furnace in the shutdown phase, during which the progress of the wire is arrested, and it is left to burn safely in place. The strange thing is that only twice in my career as a wire coater did the enamel come off not in fragments but, rather, in the shape of a helix,

with at least a hundred spirals, of a regular gauge, as if it had been made with a die.

The third object is very charming. Nearly forty years old (alas!), it is, or, rather, was, a small steel sphere approximately twelve millimeters in diameter. It was part of the load of a ball mill, that is, a large drum in which the components of a paint and special “balls” of pig iron, ceramic, or steel are randomly placed; the mill turns slowly, and the friction between the balls disperses the pigment in the paint. It was the postwar period, and for lack of anything better that particular load was made with ball bearings, perhaps discarded upon inspection. As usual, when the mill began grinding laboriously, the balls were taken out and replaced with new ones. Well, most of them were no longer spherical, but presented twelve quite regular pentagonal faces; they were, in other words, pentagonal dodecahedrons with rounded corners. I’ve asked many of my colleagues, and it appears that this has never occurred in other mills or other factories. Why did it happen, and why just that one time?

If the three pieces of physical evidence—improbable but certainly not paranormal—were not there to prove by their obstinate presence that they exist, I would think that my recollection of the three events from which they came had been corrupted or exaggerated with the years, like the recollection of premonitory dreams.

September 15, 1985

The Hidden Player

I didn’t want any games: I can cite reliable witnesses. I’ve had a word processor for a year now: it has become almost a part of my body, the way shoes, glasses, or dentures do. It is indispensable for me for writing and filing; but I didn’t want it to take over and so I didn’t want to bring frivolous programs into the house. The computer was to be used for work and that’s all. Instead, the unpredictable (or predictable?) happened: I received a chess program as a gift and gave in to the seduction.

Of course, chess is not a frivolous activity for professional chess players, or in general for those who devote themselves to the game seriously and with passion; but for me it is. I play quite badly: I lack the fundamental aptitude, the ability to concentrate, the power of logic, the specific mentality and culture, the grit. But I play just the same, in a frivolous, reckless way, at long, irregular intervals, without bothering to learn the classical openings and endgame strategies. Whenever I get the chance (it happens more and more infrequently) I play an opponent of the right type, that is, one who plays more or less like me, in the same distracted, holiday spirit, and at a level not too different from mine; otherwise, if he’s too good, he crushes me like an ant, and if he’s too weak, my victory seems insipid or feels like bullying.

It’s the only game that I’ve accepted and have remained faithful to: others bore me, I’m pained if I lose, but I’m not happy if I win. I accepted this one for remote dynastic reasons: in some obscure way, the old household chessboard contains our Lares; it’s perhaps the only object that was materially transmitted from father to son. For countless generations every ancestor of mine has taught the rules to his son, beat him for a few

years, then tacitly admitted his superiority. I don’t mean to say that the level improves from generation to generation; it’s that skill at chess reaches its peak around twenty and then decreases with age, a sad but natural fact.

Now the electronic player has erupted onto this traditional scene. With due homage to the confraternity of fine minds that programmed it, comparison is obligatory: which opponent is the more desirable? Man or machine? The response can only be vague, indeed, evanescent; comparisons should be made between comparable terms, and these two are not. All the same, we can try.

The machine is always there, at any time of day or night. You do not have to invite it over or go to its house, it is always at your disposal; it does not get tired, it does not get rattled, it does not try to rattle you (as human chess players notoriously do, especially if they are experienced). You can assign it various levels: that is, you can choose an opponent of equal skill.

This, however, comes at a certain price, at least with my program: the more skillful your antagonist is, the longer he makes you wait for his move. Now, a five-minute wait before a human opponent is tolerable; you watch his face while his eyes are fixed on the chessboard, trying to read his intentions or at least his state of mind. The machine, on the other hand, is inscrutable; it, too, “thinks” for the entire time you have allowed it, but its rapid examination of possible decisions produces only an illegible swarm of figures on the screen, next to the chessboard: a succession of hypotheses too fast (five or ten per second!) for the eye to follow. The machine’s five minutes are extremely long.

As I said, you can choose a counterpart that plays well, moderately well, or poorly; in every case, it plays with a style that is not human. Man has flashes of illumination (not just in regard to chess!) in which he surpasses himself, and these can be translated into brilliant moves, which in customary notation are marked by one or even two exclamation points. But he also has moments of distraction (these, on the other hand, have a question mark), whose frequency gradually increases toward the end of the game and the end of his chess career. The machine is flat: it does not make exclamatory moves, but it’s never distracted, and it doesn’t grow old.

This doesn’t mean that it never makes mistakes; it makes mistakes, certainly, and it always makes the same mistakes. I have noticed, for example, that it is impetuously greedy: if there is a piece of yours to be taken, it swoops down to capture it, even if its own downfall lies in waiting

on the other side of the chessboard. These are evidently lapses in the program; if you spot them, and learn to take advantage of them, the match is won, but the pleasure of the game is lost.

An exciting menu of so-called accessory services is offered. The game can be recorded: if it's a good one, you can replay it and relive the emotions. You can interrupt it at any time and resume it when you want. If you are doubtful about what to do, you can ask the machine for advice, and it will answer you, in the fairest, most chivalrous manner. If, like me, you are weak in the openings (which chess players worthy of the name know by heart), you can ask the machine to eliminate them from its assortment, in order to even out your handicap. At each move, a score appears on the screen, describing the situation on the basis of complicated parameters. If it's positive, it indicates that things are going badly for you: if it exceeds 500, you would do better to bow out; if it exceeds 1000, catastrophe is looming.

Correspondingly, a negative score indicates that you are winning, owing to material advantage or to position. Of course, if this mute commentator annoys or bothers you, you can get rid of it. You can even ask the machine to play against itself, and there is something hallucinatory about the spectacle, since the game that is played out in silence, before your eyes, is never the same. The inspired minds that created the program introduced into it a margin of uncertainty, a little "free will," as a result of which the machine does not always act in the identical way in an identical situation.

The hidden mechanical player (whose nearly human intelligence is enclosed in a diskette that weighs just a few grams) is therefore a great seducer: he is always there waiting for you, always ready and always new, mannerly, and ruthless. He calls to you, distracts you from your work and also from your reading, but he is not human. You can admire his skill, as one admires the dancing Lipizzaner horses or the seals in the circus; you can even feel a curious compassion for him—illicitly, since in the end he is merely a diskette—when you see him droning before an intricate situation. But a flesh-and-blood opponent is qualitatively different.

He's your blood relation, even if you've known him for only a few hours. You can see him face-to-face, you can test your skill against him, you know that he is as capable as you are of happy inspirations and gross blunders. At the end of a game, as at the end of a life, you can speak to him with the intimacy resulting from the match, comment on his mistakes and

yours, judge him and hear yourself judged. He learns ("sadly learns")[1] from you and you from him, while the machine already knows everything and learns nothing. Still, there is something that you can learn from it, even if it is only patience and attention, and (why not?) endgame theory.

October 19, 1985

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1. A reference to *Purgatory* VI:3.

Man in Flight

About the competition announced by *Tuttoscienze* regarding experiments to be carried out in the absence of gravity: unfortunately, I am no longer of an age to participate, but the experiment that I would most willingly attempt would be that of finding myself released from the weight of my body, if only for a few minutes. Not that my weight is excessive (it fluctuates within a more than reasonable range); nevertheless I feel an intense envy for the weightless astronauts whom we are permitted to see on our television screens for a few grudging moments. They seem at ease, like fish in water: moving elegantly in their cabin, which is by now quite spacious, they propel themselves with the aid of unseen handholds, navigating smoothly through the air and landing safely at their workstations.

At other times, we've seen them talking naturally with each other, one "head up" and one "head down" (though it's clear that in orbit there is no longer an up or a down), or taking turns playing childish pranks: one shot a piece of candy with his thumbnail and it flew very slowly, in a straight line, to land in his colleague's open mouth. At other times we've seen an astronaut squeezing water into the air from a plastic container: the water did not fall or disperse, but settled into a rounded mass, which, obeying the surface tension, despite its weakness, lazily assumed the shape of a sphere. What could they have done with it afterward? It could not have been easy to get rid of it without damaging the delicate instruments that crowd the walls.

I wonder what they're waiting for—why not produce a documentary by splicing together these images, miraculously transmitted by satellites in lightning-quick flight over our heads and above our atmosphere? Such a film, drawn from American and Soviet sources, and accompanied by an

intelligent commentary, would teach us all a lot. It would certainly be more successful than the countless inanities that are fed to us, not to mention porn films.

I've often wondered, too, what the point is of the experiments and simulation courses that aspiring astronauts are subjected to—and which journalists speak of without batting an eye—and how they are carried out. Apparently, the only conceivable technique would be to shut the candidates up in a vehicle in free fall: an airplane, or an elevator like the one Einstein postulated for the conceptual experiment meant to illustrate restricted relativity.

But an airplane, even in a vertical fall, is restrained by air resistance, and an elevator (or rather a descender) is restrained by friction against the guide rails. In neither case would weightlessness (the *abaria* for intransigent Hellenists) be complete. And even in the most favorable scenario, the rather terrifying one of an airplane falling straight down from a height of ten or twenty kilometers—perhaps helped by the engines in the last stretch—it would not last more than about ten seconds on balance, too little time for training and for measuring physiological data. And then you'd still have to brake. . . .

And yet, nearly all of us have done a "simulation" of this definitely non-earthly condition. We did it in a childhood dream: in the most typical version, the dreamer realizes with joyous wonder that flying is as easy as walking or swimming. How could he have been so stupid as not to have thought of it before? All you have to do is row with the palms of your hands, and there you are, you take off from the ground, move forward effortlessly, turn around, avoid obstacles, go through doors and windows with precision, hover outside in the open air: not with the frenetic fluttering of sparrows' wings, not with the voracious, strident haste of swallows, but with the silent majesty of eagles and clouds. Where do we get it, this anticipation of a reality that today has been fulfilled? Perhaps it is a memory of the species, inherited from our aquatic reptilian ancestors. Or perhaps this dream is instead the prelude to an undefined future in which the umbilical tug of Mother Earth's call will be gratuitous and self-evident, and a much nobler means of locomotion will prevail than that of our complicated, erratic legs, full of internal frictions and, at the same time, requiring the external friction of feet against the ground.

An illustrious poetic version of this endlessly yearned-for *abaria* comes to mind, the episode of Geryon in Canto XVII of the *Inferno*. The “brute animal,” reconstructed by Dante based on classical models but also on tales found in medieval bestiaries, is at once imaginary and splendidly real. He eludes weight. Waiting for the two strange passengers, only one of whom is subject to gravity, he rests his body on the shore, but his deadly tail floats freely “in the void,” like the stern of a Zeppelin secured to the mooring. At the beginning, Dante says that he is afraid of him, but then that magical descent over the Malebolgias claims the full attention of the poet-scientist, who is paradoxically intent on a naturalistic study of his fictitious creature, describing his monstrous and symbolic epidermis with precision.

The brief report is singularly accurate, down to the detail confirmed by pilots of modern hang gliders: since it is a silent, gliding flight, the perception of speed on the part of the traveler depends neither on the rhythm of the wings nor on the noise but only on the sensation of the air on his face and the wind below him: “I feel only / the wind upon my face and the wind rising.”[1] Perhaps Dante, too, unconsciously, reproduced here the universal dream of weightless flight, to which the psychoanalysts attribute dubious and disgraceful meanings.

The ease with which man adapts to weightlessness is a fascinating mystery. When you think that for many people traveling by sea, or even only by car, gives rise to troublesome complaints, you can’t help but remain puzzled. The astronauts, during the months of their stay in space, complained merely of short-lived discomforts, and the doctors who examined them after the event found only a slight calcium loss in the bones and a temporary atrophy of the muscles and the heart; the same effects, in short, of a hospital stay. Yet nothing in our long evolutionary history could have prepared us for a condition as unnatural as non-gravity.

We therefore possess vast and unexpected margins of safety. The visionary plan (one of many) put forth by Freeman Dyson in *Disturbing the Universe*, of a humanity migrating among the stars on vessels with gigantic sails driven free of charge by stellar light, might have other limitations, but not that of *abaria*: our poor body, so defenseless against swords, guns, and viruses, is space-proof.

December 24, 1985

1. *Inferno* XVII:116–17.

Peroxide Blonde

While looking for something else, I opened at random the “Concise” version of the Oxford Dictionary, and the word “peroxide”* happened to jump out at me. As an emeritus chemist, I felt a slight visceral response, and I paused over the text. It gives the technical definition of the term, saying that in common language it refers exclusively to peroxide of hydrogen, that is, to hydrogen peroxide. Then it reads: “Peroxide blonde (usually in a pejorative sense): a woman whose hair is bleached that way.” Incidentally, I deplore here the chauvinism of the definition; there are, and always have been, men whose hair is also “bleached that way.”

In effect, even the Italian equivalent of peroxide blonde, *bionda ossigenata* (“oxygenated blonde”), contains a negative connotation. It refers to a non-blonde who pretends to be a blonde, though her hair is probably gray by now; it’s a person who wants to be noticed, since peroxide blond is flashy and not likely to be confused with natural blond, but who hasn’t reckoned on the fact that bleached hair is yellowish, lackluster, and brittle.

In all other contexts, on the contrary, the terms “oxygenated” and “oxygen” are decidedly positive. We say that mountain air is (beneficially) oxygenated, which isn’t true; it’s beneficial for other, valid reasons, but it contains less oxygen per liter than the air of the plain. Oxygen is considered to be a vital element. It is, and in fact it is administered, with all due caution, to the dying, but if it’s breathed in its pure state it has a harmful effect within a few hours; if it comes in contact with sawdust, shavings, or metallic dust, it can cause huge problems.

This emotional ambivalence is a widespread phenomenon. Our innate tendency to simplify has given rise to countless cases in which a substance

or a quality is “good” in a particular place, time, or context, and “bad” in others. A salesman will tell you, with the same professional enthusiasm, that a paint is good because it is synthetic, and that a fiber or a drug is good because it is natural. I don’t believe that there exists a more double-edged adjective than “synthetic.” For literary critics it is laudatory, equivalent to terse and concise. For impromptu ecologists it is synonymous with proscribed, injurious, fraudulent; yet I don’t think that they refuse aspirin, perhaps because this hopelessly synthetic medicine has been around for more than eighty years, and is therefore viewed as natural, or at least naturalized. Curiously, the chemists who stood godfather to it had taken care to indicate its synthetic nature in the name itself. A-spirin meant “without *Spiraea*”: in fact, before it was synthesized commercially, the salicylic acid that it contains was extracted from a shrub, *Spiraea ulmaria*.

And are the extremely natural snake venoms, strychnine, strophanthus, and curare, good? Are synthetic dyes and pigments better, or, rather, “more good,” than natural ones? Take the word of someone who has tested them: try comparing the old Prussian blue, overall still natural enough, or the prehistoric lapis lazuli, with phthalocyanine blue, and you’ll see.

“Plastic” is considered bad, and I regret this, because I know how much talent produced it. The original adjective has become a noun, and the plural (“plastics”) an absurd singular; in fact, there are several hundred plastics by now, as different from one another as are metals or mammals, and they are the object of a loathing whose global reach itself suggests mania. There are some good ones, solid, economical, and nonpolluting, and, vice versa, some bad ones. The good ones can become bad if used for the wrong purpose, as if one were to make a plowshare out of lead or a telephone cable out of iron. The pejorative expression “It’s only plastic” is a twin of “He’s only a health service doctor,” and is part of the reductive universe of those whom Julian Huxley has fittingly termed “nothing-else-but-ists.”

This dualism without nuance is especially vigorous in everything that concerns health. A recent example is the case of a bottled water that, until some decades ago, bore an ostentatious label: “The most radioactive in the world.” The slogan (which I think was true) was based on the vague connection radio = energy = health. Radioactivity, in short, was good. At that time, in fact, ideas about the harmful effects of prolonged exposure to ionizing radiation were still somewhat vague. Fortunately, the radioactivity in that water, though relatively high, was insufficient in absolute terms to

cause any effect, either good or bad. Clearly the water was only diuretic, like all waters, radioactive or not, mineral, sparkling, still, thermal, or tap. When the dangers of radiation were recognized, the slogan, reduced to a tiny type size, was moved to the bottom of the label. Finally, a few years ago, it disappeared entirely. The water has not changed its name but, prudently, it is drawn from a different spring, whose radioactivity is negligible.

Something similar happened in France with a fabric made of synthetic fibers. People noticed that in contact with the human body it gave rise to sparks from static electricity (as wool and silk have always done). Right away, posters appeared in which a man dressed in “synthetics” skipped happily on a bundle of flashing threads: static electricity was “good for you.” Then someone launched the (equally absurd) theory that car trouble was caused specifically by the accumulation on the vehicle of static electricity due to the friction of the tires on asphalt; and so those funny grounding strips that you still see dangling from some bumpers came into being. Static charges had become bad, and had to be grounded. Human credulity has no limits. Or, better yet, advertisers’ confidence in human credulity has no limits.

There are chemical elements that are permanently bad: of all of them sulfur takes the lead, beautiful in appearance, like Lucifer, but foul-smelling and corrosive. It burns in the air almost as if it wanted to mimic coal, but it generates a caustic smoke that destroys the lungs. Other elements have had various fates, and among them the case of cobalt is noteworthy. Until the advent of artificial radioisotopes, only the sky was “cobalt,” for literary types of little imagination; anyway, it indicated an exceedingly beautiful blue, a super-blue. Now, after the use of cobalt 60 in treating tumors, this metal has acquired a sinister resonance: “Poor thing, they’re giving him cobalt.” And yet, from what I’ve heard, it has restored health or life to many.

January 28, 1986

Gossip

I read with interest that the publisher Alfred A. Knopf, of New York, has published a book by Patricia Meyer Spacks entitled *Gossip*. I immediately ordered it and am eagerly awaiting its arrival. At the same time I feel vaguely frustrated, since for some time I have been flirting with the idea of writing something on this subject. Apparently Spacks's book is nothing less than a historical and sociological treatise, while I would settle for doing a kind of taxonomy of gossip, that is, a classification, of the kind that has always been done for plants and animals.

In the hope of not falling involuntarily into plagiarism—given the fact that I have not yet read Spacks's book—I will describe here the annotated table of contents of the book that I have not written and probably never will write. Incidentally, writing just a general table of contents, or an index, or a foreword or afterword, or, better yet, putative reviews, for books that you have in mind would be an educational exercise, besides being extremely economical for the reader, or, rather, the non-reader. Rodolfo Wilcock practiced it for a long time, honestly and successfully.

In the Introduction, I would not settle for the standard Zingarelli dictionary definition, "indiscreet and malicious talk about someone." It seems to me essential to point out that the malice must be confined to a low level: in common parlance, attributing to someone a murder or a rape is not gossip. In short, a well-defined boundary exists between gossip and slander, and between slander and calumny (or accusation, if the crime exists). Moreover, it seems to me that in the concept of gossip an element of secrecy is implicit. Gossip occurs tête-à-tête or, at most, in a situation with just a few people; between close friends, in other words. It would not seem

appropriate to speak of gossip published in the press or broadcast on TV. Gossip is a liqueur to be poured in small doses into a single ear, or maybe more than one, but not too many, otherwise its name changes. That said, I would announce the following chapters:

1. Why we gossip. I know something that you don't know; I take comfort in transmitting it to you, because I have the agreeable impression of moving up a rung. I have become a teacher, an instructor, even if just for a few minutes and in only a minor subject. Naturally, you the recipient have every right (and feel compelled) to become a teacher in turn, by retransmitting my message or any other one, consoling yourself for your troubles with this small pleasure.

2. Plain gossip. This consists in simply reporting the message to the recipient without imposing any restrictions or limitations on the person. It is the most widespread type. Since there is more than one recipient, this gossip spreads in a branching pattern, and so, in essence, exponentially; that is, it tends to invade the inhabited world, the way chain letters do. Generally speaking, it does not amount to much, in the first place because it competes with other more recent, and therefore more appealing, messages, and even tends to die out; in the second place, because the news is degraded with each transmission, becoming vaguer and, at the same time, richer in spurious or suspect details. From news, it becomes rumor, hearsay, perhaps even rising to the status of legend. Rarely does gossip, like calumny, actually go from being a "gentle breeze" to a "cannon blast."

3. Restricted gossip: "I'm telling only you; don't say a word to anyone." In chapter 11 of *The Betrothed*, Manzoni, referring to the unkept secret of Lucia's refuge in the monastery of Monza, observes: "If this condition were to be strictly observed, it would immediately cut off the flow

of comfort. But general practice has dictated only that the secret not be confided except to another equally trusted friend and under the same conditions. And so, from trusted friend to trusted friend, the secret travels up and down that immense chain until it reaches the ear of the very person or persons who were never supposed to hear it."

4. The exclusion of the *de quo*, aimed precisely at avoiding such an outcome. "Tell anyone you want, but not *X*," where *X* is generally the subject of the gossip, or is in any case implicated in it. This variation is acknowledged by the popular saying that "the (betrayed) husband is the last to know." It can be observed experimentally that in general this is exactly how things go, perhaps because gossip is spiritually akin to the unfaithful spouse (she, too, in fact, is committing an illicit act: yet sympathy for the unfaithful spouse is common to all cultures and literatures, regardless of laws and morality); or because, if the fact were revealed to the natural recipient, it would bring the game to an end much too soon; or, on the other hand, because we fear the consequences of the revelation, as in the case of Macbeth's brutal assault on the messenger who brings him the news of Birnam Wood climbing toward the fortress of Dunsinane. If things go smoothly—that is, if the gossip's subject does not find out about it—the graph of this type assumes a characteristic form: a dense tangle of nerves that surrounds a small blank area without penetrating it.

5. Denying the source: "Go ahead and tell, but don't say I told you"; or a variation, "Don't say who told you." This denotes extreme pusillanimity on the part of the gossiper. If it turns up in the gossip chain even a single time, it interrupts it irremediably, frustrating any attempt at repair, or refutation, or even reprisal, on the part of the injured party.

I would devote the Conclusion to the relationship between the credibility of the message and its circulation. The two are not proportional, nor do they increase at the same rate; indeed, the vitality of absurd news may be readily observed. It is part of the extraordinary vitality intrinsic to the phenomenon itself. Gossip flourishes on idle ground, whether forced or voluntary: in prisons, in institutions, in barracks, on "Saturdays in the village";[1] and similarly on vacations, on cruises, and in drawing rooms. It is irrepressible, a force of human nature. A person who has obeyed nature by transmitting gossip feels the explosive relief that accompanies the satisfaction of a primal need. The final tercet, ingeniously ambivalent, of a sonnet by Belli comes to mind, explicitly entitled "Na ssciacquata de bbocca" ("Gossip"):

> *Well, they may be two "good" girls.*
> *I'm not saying this to gossip: I mean to say*
> *that they are two piggish sluts.*

June 24, 1986

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1. A reference to Giacomo Leopardi's 1829 poem "Il sabato del villaggio" ("Saturday in the Village").

“Fair as a Flower”

A friend of mine, in a paradoxical vein, perhaps recalling the division into three parts of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, once proposed dividing the inhabited world into only three regions: Terronia, which would extend south from the Po as far as Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope, and east as far as the Ganges; Plufonia (from *Plufer*, which in Piedmontese means “German”), defined as the area south of the Pyrenees, the Alps, and the Himalayas, west of the Atlantic, north of the polar ice pack, and east of the Pacific; and Piedmont, connected to the British Isles by means of a long isthmus of uncertain contours, that in any case would leave out Paris. The placement of the United States remained undefined, probably a mixed zone, or one including a point with three boundaries.

The close association between the Piedmontese and the British was based on historical and anthropological data. The traditional friendship between the Savoyard and British monarchies. A common spirit of enterprise. Military efficiency. Love for a job well done, and for law and order. A rejection of display, of the abstract, of the monumental, of rhetoric, and of show. A limited taste for music, particularly bel canto. Respect for human rights. The persistence of the class struggle.

Out of love for my birthplace, I will refrain from examining how many of these qualities survive and how many have been swept away by time and vast internal migrations. Owing to a lack of expertise, I will likewise refrain from entering into the curious controversy surrounding the Mass in Piedmontese. I will simply note that liturgical language is highly specific, and that, for the same reason, writing an anatomy treatise in dialect would seem to be a hopelessly absurd endeavor. I would rather see, in my

Piedmontese, a text on the cultivation of peppers or a manual on the thermal treatment of metals.

"My Piedmontese," I said. Indeed, I love this dialect, even though it does not contain the verb "to love." It pains me to see it decline. I admire those who still use it naturally and elegantly, but I am so unsure of my pronunciation, and of my vocabulary, which is full of Italianisms, that I don't dare speak it in public, especially after my disgraceful failure at La Famija Turineisa, the cultural association where dialect is required. I know very well that it is neither more nor less noble than the other Italian dialects, all of which are destined for rapid extinction in the face of television's colorless Italian. But it is mine, the dialect of my childhood, the language that my father used with my mother and that my mother spoke with the shopkeepers; even my virginal elementary schoolteacher, who died a few years ago at the age of a hundred, spoke it, in defiance of Fascist educational programs.

Before it's too late, I would like to sing its praises and recall some of its peculiarities, which in fact connect it to the much more illustrious English language. Of course, others have already done so, and with greater expertise; but few people have ever held a Piedmontese grammar in their hands, while this newspaper is read by many.

We have never accepted the baroque ending *-issimo* (-est) of the Latin and Italian superlative. We don't need it; we have so little need of it that we don't even have a strict equivalent of the Italian *molto*, "very" (true, we have *mutubín*, but it's awkward and obsolete). When we really can't do without it, we resort to comparisons, some clichés, others coined on the spot. We cannot and do not want to say that a girl is the fairest: we say that she is as fair as a flower, that an old man is as old as Methuselah, and that a medicine is as bitter as poison. Speaking of flowers: I don't know if any grammarian has noticed that this noun, along with a few others, changes from masculine to feminine in the few cases where emphasis is needed. We say *il fiore* (masculine) for a peach blossom, but "fair as *una fiore*" (feminine); the heat of the furnace is masculine (*il caldo*), but boiling hot is feminine (*una caldo da morire*); cold spring water is masculine (*freddo*), but a bitter, gallows cold is feminine (*una freddo della forca*).

Nor do we like the rounded adverbial ending *-mente* (-ly), that to proper Italians seems as indispensable as the air they breathe. We do without it quite well, replacing it with graceful hyperboles or periphrasis: try

translating “I love you passionately” into Piedmontese, and you will get a phrase more or less equivalent to “I’m crazy about you.” Perhaps it’s a latent aversion to endings and inflections, the same aversion that is so noticeable in English, and that emerges in the prevalence of compound word forms compared with simple ones. Our loathing for the historic or “remote” past tense, which nonetheless existed some centuries ago, is well-known. It’s easy to foresee that the future tense won’t have a long life, either (provided the dialect does not die before it). In Piedmont today people already prefer to say *andiamo poi*, “we go later,” rather than *andremo*, “we will go”; “tomorrow it rains” instead of “tomorrow it will rain.”

Like the English, we tend toward simplification. We have accepted a plural indicator for the majority of feminine nouns, but we don’t feel it’s needed for the masculine ones (with the sole exception, if I am not mistaken, of those which end in “l,” like *bindel*, “tape”). The French, of course, do the same, though they have hypocritically preserved the ending -*s* in the written language. It’s a good thing that, in past centuries, Piedmontese was written so infrequently, otherwise who knows how many useless linguistic fossils would be preserved in its official spelling. In effect, the plural indicator is only one of the many mysterious redundancies that we inherited from the Indo-Europeans: the Italian phrase “*i brutti cani rognosi abbaiano*” (“the mean mangy dogs are barking”) repeats five times the information that there is more than one dog. If you can translate it into Piedmontese (or English), you’ll see that the repetitions are reduced to two.

Speaking of concision, I would like to express my gratitude to Piedmontese for the term *madamín*. Besides being graceful, it is economical: as we know, it means “a wife whose mother-in-law is living.” Now, to condense six words into one is a commendable feat. My personal “fair-haired Maria” of Val Sangone, then five years old, condensed three into one. “*Sgnacàla*,” “I’ve crushed it,” she said to me with the ethereal smile of a fledgling angel, pointing to a dark streak on the dirt floor of the cellar that a few moments before had been a “filthy louse,” a harmless sow bug. And here I ask the reader to notice the agglutination of the enclitic personal pronoun with the past participle: among the hundred neo-Latin dialects, I think that ours is the only one that allows (indeed, prescribes) this deft peculiarity, along with the elision of the auxiliary verb. Incidentally, unlike Giosuè Carducci, I have no regrets.[1] I did well not to marry that girl,

as I ardently wished to at the time; I saw her thirty years later, already gray and bitter, perched behind the counter of her tiny notions shop.

July 13, 1986

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1. A reference to Carducci's "Idillio Maremmano" ("An Idyll of the Maremma").

Hatching the Cobra

"Let no one praise Perillus, who was crueler than the tyrant Phalaris, for whom he constructed a brazen bull, promising that when a man was enclosed therein and a fire lit underneath, the man would roar like a bull, and who was the first to experience this torture himself as the fruit of a cruelty more just than his own. To such lengths had he distorted a most noble art, intended to represent gods and men, that his numerous workers had toiled only to construct an instrument of torture! Consequently, his works are preserved for one single reason: so that anyone who sees them may despise the hands that made them" (Pliny, *Natural History*, xxxiv, 19).

Better translations than mine surely exist, but I have a deep personal bond with Pliny the Elder, and I felt that by translating him I was paying him homage. The episode is semilegendary: Pindar, Ovid, and Orosius refer to it, and, following in their footsteps, Dante, in Canto XXVII of the *Inferno*. Phalaris was the tyrant of Agrigento toward the mid-sixth century *bc*. Pliny's phrase "anyone who sees them" seems to indicate that the bull, carried off by the Carthaginians in 403 *bc*, had been brought back to Agrigentum after the destruction of Carthage, and must have still been there in his time. Nothing is known about the reasons that led Phalaris to burn Perillus in his own bull.

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The story, whether true or false, has a curiously modern flavor. For the purposes of a posthumous trial against the tyrant and the artisan, it would be essential to establish with which of the two the initiative and the idea for the

horrendous machine originated. If the work was invented by Perillus, and proposed to Phalaris, there is no doubt that Perillus, already famous at the time, deserved to be punished (though not necessarily in that way, and not by Phalaris, who by accepting the object had become the inventor's accomplice). He had indeed, as Pliny points out, prostituted his art and himself. He must truly have been perverse: it could not have been easy to make the air ducts of the simulacrum the right size such that the victim's groans would issue from the bronze mouth amplified and modified in their harmonics so as to reproduce the roaring of a bull.

If, on the other hand, Phalaris commissioned the work, the punishment of retaliation that he adopted seems excessive and illegitimate. Still, he was a professional tyrant, and while his actions outrage us, they do not surprise us. All tyrants are capricious. In this hypothesis, Perillus does not come out absolved, but some attenuating circumstances can be conceded; perhaps he had been coerced, or flattered, or threatened, or blackmailed. We don't know. But his figure as an inventor closely foreshadows modern events and personalities.

The figure of the scientist who is asked to lend his services for the defense of his country, or maybe for the offense against a neighboring country, is a current one. Everyone knows at least something about that prodigious assembly of brains that during the Second World War gave birth to the atomic bomb and, at the same time, to nuclear energy for peaceful use. Some of these scientists went along more or less willingly, more or less convinced; others, after Hiroshima, withdrew to private life; still others, like Pontecorvo,[1] changed sides for ideological reasons, or perhaps because they thought that nuclear weapons would be less dangerous if shared between the two superpowers.

Happily current today is the figure of the scientist who, after having served power, repents. We read a few days ago that Peter Hagelstein, a student of the bellicose Teller, the young "father" of the space shield, and candidate for the Nobel Prize in Physics, left a laboratory financed by the United States Department of Defense and moved to MIT, where he will deal exclusively with research into the medical applications of the laser. It seems to me that there is nothing to be said in response to this type of conscientious objection: if all the scientists in the world were to imitate Hagelstein, the manufacturers of new weapons would remain empty-handed and universal peace would be closer than it now appears.

The position taken by Martin Ryle leaves me less convinced. Ryle, born in 1918 in England, was one of the greatest radar experts during the war, and made decisive contributions to the measures adopted by the British to "confuse" the German radar. After the war, sickened by the horrors of combat itself, he decided to continue his brilliant career as a physicist in a field that lent itself less to military applications, namely, radio astronomy. He was awarded the Nobel in 1974; but he must have realized soon enough that not even his astronomer colleagues had perfectly clean hands. For example, measuring the intensity of the gravitational field around the Earth with precision is unquestionably of theoretical interest, but it also serves to better guide intercontinental ballistic missiles. According to Ryle's data, 40 percent of Britain's engineers and physicists are engaged in research involving instruments of destruction.

Shortly before his death, in 1984, Ryle formulated a drastic proposal: "Stop science now"—let's cease all scientific research immediately, even that which is called "basic." Since we are incapable of predicting how any discovery might be distorted and exploited, let's just stop: no more discoveries.

While I understand the spiritual torment from which this appeal sprang, it seems to me to be extremist and utopian at the same time. We are what we are: every one of us, even the farmer, even the most humble craftsman, is a researcher, and always has been. We can and we must defend ourselves in other ways from the danger undeniably inherent in any new scientific knowledge. It is quite true, as Ryle says (and I quote), that "our cleverness has grown prodigiously—but not our wisdom"; but I wonder how much time, in all the schools, in every country, is devoted to increasing wisdom, that is, to moral issues?

I would like to see (and it doesn't seem either impossible or ridiculous) all scientific faculties emphasize this point to the utmost: that whatever you do when you practice your profession can be useful for mankind, or neutral, or harmful. Don't become enamored of dubious problems. Within the limits allowed, try to learn the purpose for which your work is intended. We all know that the world is not made up solely of black and white, and your decision may be probabilistic and difficult; but you will agree to research a new medicine, and you will refuse to devise a nerve gas.

Whether you are a believer or not, whether you are a "patriot" or not, if given a choice, don't let yourself be seduced by material or intellectual

interests but choose from among those which can render the journey of your contemporaries and of your descendants less painful and less dangerous. Don’t hide behind the hypocrisy of neutral science: you know enough to be able to assess whether a dove or a cobra or a chimera or perhaps nothing at all will emerge from the egg that you are hatching. As for basic research, it can and must continue; if we were to abandon it, we would betray our nature and our nobility as “thinking reeds,”[2] and the human species would no longer have any reason to exist.

September 21, 1986

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1. Bruno Pontecorvo (1913–1993) was an Italian nuclear physicist who worked in Canada during the war and then became a British citizen. In 1950, he defected to the Soviet Union.
2. Pascal, *Pensées*.

Translator's Afterword

I came to Levi's *Stories and Essays* having read only his more sobering works. So when I read the *Stories* it was like meeting an old friend after a long time and being surprised by aspects of him that I hadn't noticed. What struck me as most refreshing was the playfulness and whimsy I found in some of the pieces I worked on—so very different from the Lager encounters—along with a touching humility. The fanciful tale of the girl who grows wings ("The Great Mutation") and the interview of the ant queen by the journalist ("The Ant's Wedding") seem like lighthearted flights of the imagination.

There are darker notes, to be sure. Along with the touches of irony and humor, echoes of the Lager experience are not absent among the pieces that make up the collection. In "The Commander of Auschwitz" we get a glimpse of man's monstrous nature: the blindly loyal lackeys who slavishly carried out orders, without whom brutal savages like Hitler would have been impotent. In "That Quiet Town of Auschwitz" Levi refers to those flunkeys as "the lords of evil." Mertens, who is at once Levi's opposite and twin, a doppelgänger turned upside down, an "almost-me," is one of them.

Signs of the man of science are also prominent in the stories, and not just in lexical choices like "parachrono" or "rubidium maleate" or "pipette." In "Hatching the Cobra" Levi makes a case for individual responsibility. Noting that science is not always neutral, and that the results of scientific research are just as likely to be injurious to mankind as they are to be beneficial, he urges conscientious engagement. The scientist should know whether he is developing a new medicine or formulating a nerve gas; he should be able to assess whether a dove or a cobra will emerge from the egg he's hatching.

In "An Erector Set Made with Love" we see a tender side: an eleven-year-old Levi in love with nine-year-old Lidia, whose magical rapport with a German shepherd, aggressively intimidating to everyone else, enchanted

him. He might have been Dante catching his first glimpse of the girl Beatrice when he was nine and she was eight.

Humility may be the feature that most consistently marks *Stories and Essays*. Stylistically, the unassuming nature expresses itself in the conversational, sometimes almost chatty, spirit of the narration. It is also expressly articulated in the Foreword. From the outset Levi invites tolerance for the variety of subjects addressed in the pieces, asking the reader to indulge his latitude. An equally clear note of modesty is sounded in Levi's request not to look for messages in the stories, not to assign him a role that he felt didn't fit him. Levi did not want to wear the clothes of a visionary or a prophet: I sensed that he considered himself an ordinary man, maybe only a survivor.

—ANNE MILANO APPEL

The Drowned and the Saved

Translated by Michael F. Moore

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till my ghastly tale is told
This heart within me burns.

S. T. COLERIDGE
THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER
LL. 582–85

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TRANSLATOR’S AFTERWORD



Preface

The first reports of the Nazi death camps began to circulate in the crucial year of 1942. Vague yet concordant, they described a massacre of such vast proportions, such deliberate cruelty, and such tangled motivations that the public was inclined to reject them because of their very enormity. It is telling that this rejection had been predicted well in advance by the perpetrators themselves. Many survivors (including Simon Wiesenthal, in the last pages of *The Murderers Among Us*) recall that the SS soldiers used to enjoy taunting the prisoners with a cynical warning: No matter how this war ends, we have won the war against you. No one will be left to testify, but even if one of you does survive, the world will not believe you. There might be suspicions, discussions, historical research, but there will be no certainty, because we will destroy both you and the evidence. And even if some evidence should remain and some of you do manage to survive, people will say the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will call them exaggerations of Allied propaganda, and they will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We are the ones who will dictate the history of the concentration camps.

Curiously, this same thought (“Even if we told, no one would believe us”) emerged from the despair of the prisoners in the form of nocturnal dreams. Almost all the survivors, orally or in written memoirs, remember a recurrent dream from the nights of imprisonment, varying in its details but in substance the same: they had returned home and were relating their past sufferings to a loved one with passion and a feeling of relief, and they were not believed, not even listened to. In the most typical (and cruelest) form, the other person turned and walked away in silence. This is a theme to

which we shall return, but from the outset it is important to emphasize that both sides, victims and oppressors, had a vivid awareness of the enormity and thus the unbelievability of what had happened in the camps: and not only in the camps, we now know, but also in the ghettos, behind the lines of the Eastern front, at police stations, and in the asylums for the mentally disabled.

Fortunately, things did not go as the victims feared and the Nazis hoped. Even the most perfect organization has its flaws, and the machinery of Hitler's Germany was far from perfect, especially in the months leading up to its collapse. Much of the material evidence of the mass exterminations was destroyed or attempts were made to destroy it, with varying success. In the fall of 1944, the Nazis blew up the gas chambers and crematoriums at Auschwitz, but the ruins are still there, and, despite the contorted explanations of the epigones, it is hard to justify their purpose by resorting to wild hypotheses. After the famous uprising in the spring of 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto was razed, but the superhuman efforts of a few historian-combatants (historians of themselves!) ensured that other historians would recover the testimony—buried beneath huge piles of rubble or smuggled outside the walls—of how, day after day, the ghetto lived and died. All the records of the Lagers were burned in the final days of the war, a loss so great and so truly irreparable that the debate continues today over whether there were four or six or eight million victims: the figure is always in the millions, however. Before the Nazis started using the gigantic multiple crematoriums, the countless bodies of the victims—who had been deliberately killed or had succumbed to deprivation and disease—might have been evidence and had to be somehow disposed of. The first solution, so macabre one hesitates to describe it, was simply to stack the bodies, hundreds of thousands of them, in large common graves. This was done chiefly in Treblinka, in other smaller camps, and behind the lines in Russia. It was a temporary solution, adopted with brutal nonchalance at a time when the German armies were triumphant on every front and the final victory seemed certain: they could decide what to do about them *later*, since, in any case, to the victor goes possession of the truth, which he can manipulate as he pleases. Some way could be found to justify the common graves, make them disappear, or blame the Soviets (who had shown at Katyn that they weren't much better anyway). But after the Battle of Stalingrad, the turning point of the war, there were second thoughts: better

to get rid of everything immediately. The prisoners themselves were forced to dig up the pitiful remains and burn them on open fires, as if an operation of such proportions, and so out of the ordinary, could completely escape notice.

The SS commanders and the security services went to great lengths to make sure that not a single witness would survive. This is the meaning (it is hard to imagine another) behind the deadly, and seemingly insane, transfers that brought the story of the Nazi camps to a close, in the early months of 1945: the survivors of Majdanek were transferred to Auschwitz, those of Buchenwald to Bergen-Belsen, and the women of Ravensbrück to Schwerin. The point was that all of them had to be removed from the liberation and redeported toward the heart of a Germany under invasion from east and west. It didn't matter whether the prisoners died on the way; what mattered was that they not tell the story. In fact, after operating as centers of political terror, then as death factories, and subsequently (and simultaneously) as bottomless pools of ever-replenished slave labor, the Lagers had become dangerous for a dying Germany, because they contained the secret of the Lagers themselves, the greatest crime in the history of humankind. The army of skeletons rotting away there were *Geheimnisträger*, bearers of secrets, who had to be got rid of. After the destruction of the extermination compounds, eloquent in themselves, the decision was made to transfer the prisoners to the interior, in the absurd hope that they could still be locked up in Lagers that were less vulnerable to the advancing armies, and that their final capacity for work could be exploited. The other, less absurd hope was that the torments of those Biblical marches would reduce their numbers. And, indeed, the numbers were shockingly reduced, but still some people had the good fortune and the strength to survive, and they have remained to bear witness.

The fact that there were also many bearers of secrets on the other side, that of the oppressors, is less known and has been less studied, although many knew only a little and few knew everything. No one will ever be able to establish precisely how many in the Nazi apparatus *could not have not known* about the dreadful atrocities being committed; how many knew something but were able to pretend that they didn't know; and how many more might have known everything but chose the more prudent path of keeping their eyes, ears, and, especially, their mouths shut. Whatever the case may be, since one cannot assume that the majority of Germans

accepted the massacre lightheartedly, the failure to spread the truth about the Lagers is clearly one of the greatest collective faults of the German people and the most explicit demonstration of the cowardice to which they had been reduced by Hitler's reign of terror: a cowardice that penetrated their behavior, and so deeply, that it kept husbands from telling their wives, and parents from telling their children. Without this cowardice, the worst excesses would not have happened, and Europe and the world would be a different place today.

Those who knew the horrible truth because of their own past or present responsibilities undoubtedly had good reasons to be silent, but as keepers of the secret they had no guarantee of safety even if they stayed silent. Take the case of Franz Stangl and the other butchers of Treblinka, who, after the uprising at the camp and its dismantling, were transferred to one of the most dangerous areas of partisan activity.

Willful ignorance and fear also determined the silence of many potential "civilian" witnesses of the infamies of the Lagers. During the last years of the war in particular, the Lagers constituted a system that was widespread, complex, and deeply ingrained in the daily life of the country. This system has been described, correctly, as the "*univers concentrationnaire*," but it was not a closed universe.[1] Large and small industrial firms, farms, and weapons factories took advantage of the almost costless workforce provided by the camps. Some companies exploited the prisoners ruthlessly, adopting the inhuman (and stupid) SS principle that one prisoner had the same value as another and anyone who died of exhaustion could be immediately replaced. A handful of other companies made cautious efforts to alleviate the prisoners' suffering. Still others, or even the same ones, made a profit by providing supplies to the Lagers: lumber, construction materials, fabric for the prisoners' striped uniforms, dehydrated vegetables for soup, and so forth. The multiple cremation ovens were designed, built, assembled, and tested by a German firm, Topf, of Wiesbaden (which was still in business in 1975, building crematoriums for civilian use, and saw no need to change the company name). It is hard to believe that the people who worked at these companies did not appreciate the significance of the quality or quantity of the items and systems that were being ordered by the SS. The same can be said about the supply of poison used in the gas chambers at Auschwitz: the product, basically hydrogen cyanide, had already been used for years to fumigate the holds of ships, but the sudden increase in orders

starting in 1942 cannot have gone unnoticed. This must have raised questions, and indeed it did, but they were suffocated by fear, by the desire to make money, by the blindness and willful stupidity we have described, and, in some (probably not many) cases, by fanatical Nazi obedience.

Of course, the most substantial material for reconstructing the truth about the camps is the survivors' memories. Regardless of the pity and indignation they arouse, they should be read with a critical eye. The concentration camps themselves were not always the best vantage point for knowing the camps: the prisoners, subjected to inhuman conditions, were rarely afforded a comprehensive view of their universe. In some cases, especially among those who did not understand German, they did not even know the exact location in Europe of their Lager, where they had arrived after a grueling and tortuous journey in sealed boxcars. They did not know that there were other Lagers, sometimes only a few kilometers away. They did not know for whom they were working. They did not understand the meaning of the mass transfers and of certain sudden changes in conditions. With death all around, the deportee was often unable to judge the extent of the massacre taking place before his eyes. The comrade who worked by his side one day was no longer there the next: he might be in the barrack next door, or erased from the world; there was no way to know. He felt dominated, in other words, by a huge edifice of violence and menace, but he could not construct a representation of it, because his eyes were glued to the ground by the needs of every minute.

This limitation has influenced the testimony, oral and written, of the "ordinary" prisoners, the non-privileged ones, those, in short, who constituted the backbone of the camps and escaped death only through a combination of unlikely events. A majority in the Lager, they were a small minority of the survivors, and among them most enjoyed some privileges. Today, many years later, we can safely say that the story of the Lagers has been written almost exclusively by people who, like me, did not plumb the depths. The ones who did never returned, or if they did their capacity for observation was paralyzed by pain and incomprehension.

On the other hand, the vantage point of the "privileged" witnesses was certainly better, if only because it was situated higher and therefore looked out over a broader horizon; but it, too, was falsified, to a greater or lesser extent, by privilege itself. Privilege is a delicate subject (and not only in the Lager), and I will explore it later in this book as objectively as possible: for

now I will say only that the largest category of privileged persons par excellence—namely, the ones who earned privileges through subservience to the camp authority—did not bear witness at all, for obvious reasons, or their testimony was erratic, distorted, or completely false. Therefore, the best historians of the Lagers came from the ranks of the very few who had the ability and the good fortune to attain a privileged vantage point without stooping to compromise, and the ability to relate what they had seen, suffered, and done with the humility of a good chronicler, mindful of the complexity of the Lager phenomenon and the variety of human destinies that played out in the camps. It is in the logic of things that these historians were almost all political prisoners. This is because the Lagers were a political phenomenon, and because the politicals—to a far greater extent than the Jews and the common criminals (the three main categories of prisoners, as we know)—were equipped with an educational background that enabled them to interpret the events they witnessed; because, being former combatants, or continuing to be anti-Fascist combatants, they realized that bearing witness was an act of war against fascism; because they had easier access to statistical data; and, finally, because often, in addition to occupying important posts in the Lagers, they were members of secret defense organizations. In the last years, at least, their living conditions were tolerable enough to permit them, for example, to write notes and to save them, which was unthinkable for the Jews and of no interest to the common criminals.

For all these reasons, the truth about the concentration camps came to light by a long road and through a narrow gate, and many aspects of the *univers concentrationnaire* have not yet been studied in depth. More than forty years have gone by since the liberation of the Nazi Lagers; this respectable interval has led, in the attempts at clarification, to contradictory results that I will try to list.

First came sedimentation, a normal and desirable process through which historical events gain perspective and nuance, but not until a few decades after their conclusion. At the end of the Second World War, we had not yet acquired quantitative data on the deportations and the Nazi massacres in the concentration camps and elsewhere, nor was it easy to understand their

magnitude and specificity. Only recently have we begun to realize that the Nazi slaughter was tremendously “exemplary,” and that, unless something worse happens in the next few years, it will be remembered as the central event of, the stain on, the twentieth century.

On the other hand, the passage of time is affecting history in other negative ways. Most of the witnesses for the defense and the prosecution have died by now, and those who remain, and who still agree to bear witness (overcoming their remorse or their wounds, respectively), have memories that are increasingly faded and stylized, and are often influenced unconsciously by things learned later, by readings, or by the accounts of other people. In some cases, of course, forgetfulness is feigned, but it has become credible, even at trial, because of the many years gone by: the “I don’t knows” or “I didn’t knows” uttered by many Germans today no longer scandalize us, but they did scandalize us, or should have, when the events were still recent.

Another stylization is the fault of us survivors, or, to be more exact, of those of us who have agreed to live our condition as survivors in the simplest and least critical way. It is not that the ceremonies and celebrations, the monuments and flags, should be deplored always and everywhere. A certain dose of rhetoric can be indispensable in assuring that a memory lasts. It was true in the time of Ugo Foscolo and it is true today that funerary monuments, “the tombs of great men,” inspire souls to heroic deeds, or at least preserve the memory of their achievement; but we must beware of oversimplification.[2] Every victim should be mourned, and every survivor should receive assistance and compassion, but not all their behavior can be held up as an example. Inside, the camps were a tangled and multilayered microcosm. There was nothing subtle about the “gray zone,” which I shall discuss further on, the zone of prisoners who, to some extent, maybe for worthy purposes, had collaborated with the authorities; indeed, it represented a phenomenon of fundamental importance to the historian, the psychologist, and the sociologist. There is no prisoner who does not remember it, who does not remember the shock he felt when the first threats, the first insults, the first blows came not from the SS soldiers but from other prisoners, “colleagues,” mysterious characters who were wearing the same black-and-white striped pajamas that they, the new arrivals, had just put on.

This book seeks to help clarify aspects of the concentration-camp phenomenon that still appear obscure. It also has a more ambitious goal. It would like to answer the most urgent question, the question that distresses everyone who has had the opportunity to read our stories: How much of the concentration-camp world is gone and will never return, like slavery and the duel? How much has returned or is returning? In a world teeming with threats, what can each of us do to make sure that at least this threat will be neutralized?

It was not my intention, nor would I be able, to write a historical work that thoroughly examines the sources. I have limited myself almost exclusively to the National Socialist camps, because they are the only ones I have direct experience of. I also have abundant indirect experience, through the books I have read, stories I have heard, and encounters I have had with the readers of my first two books. Moreover, up to the moment at which I am writing, despite the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the shamefulness of the Gulags, the useless and bloody Vietnam War, the Cambodian autogenocide, the *desaparecidos* of Argentina, and the many stupid and atrocious wars we have subsequently witnessed, the Nazi concentration-camp system remains unique in both magnitude and quality. In no other time and place have we witnessed such an unexpected and complex phenomenon: never have so many human lives been extinguished in such a short time, and with such a shining combination of technological ingenuity, fanaticism, and cruelty. No one would absolve the Spanish conquistadores of the massacres they perpetrated in the Americas throughout the sixteenth century. They apparently caused the deaths of at least sixty million Indios. But they were acting independently, either without or in violation of their government's instructions; their criminal acts, which were in fact "unpremeditated," were spread over a hundred-year period; and they were aided by the epidemics that they inadvertently brought with them. And did we not, ultimately, try to wash our hands of such things, by ruling that they belonged to times gone by?

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1. *L'Univers concentrationnaire* is the title of one of the first memoirs of the Lagers. Translated as *The Other Kingdom*, bibliographic information for this book by David Rousset and other books mentioned in *The Drowned and the Saved* can be found on page 2569.

2. Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) wrote the long poem titled “Dei sepolcri” (“Of the Sepulchres”), inspired by the tombs of eminent Italians in the Santa Croce church in Florence. Here Levi quotes directly and indirectly one of the most famous verses, “*A egregie cose il forte animo accendono / l’urne de’ forti*” (ll. 151–52).

1

The Memory of the Offense

Human memory is a wonderful but fallible instrument. This hackneyed truth is known not only to psychologists but also to anyone who has paid attention to his own behavior or that of the people around him. The memories residing within us are not engraved in stone. Not only do they tend to fade over the years; they often change or even grow to incorporate extraneous features. Prosecutors are quite familiar with this phenomenon: two eyewitnesses to the same deed almost never describe it in the same way and in the same words, even if the deed is recent and neither of them has a personal interest in distorting it. The limited reliability of our memories will be explained satisfactorily only once we know in what language and in what alphabet they are written, on what material and with what type of pen; this goal is still distant today. There are some mechanisms we know that falsify memory in particular conditions: trauma, and not only to the brain; the interference of other, “competing” memories; abnormal states of consciousness; suppression; repression. Even in normal conditions, however, a slow decay is at work, a blurring of outlines, a physiological oblivion, so to speak, that few memories can withstand. Here we can probably recognize one of the great forces of nature, the same force that reduces order to disorder, youth to old age, and extinguishes life in death. Exercise (in this case, frequent recollection) definitely keeps a memory fresh and alive, the way a frequently exercised muscle stays in working order. But a memory that is recollected too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to harden into a stereotype, a tried-and-true formula,

crystallized, perfected, adorned, that installs itself in the place of the raw memory and grows at its expense.

In this chapter I wish to examine memories of extreme experiences, of offenses suffered or inflicted. In such cases all or almost all the factors that can obliterate or distort mnemonic recall come into play: the memory of a trauma, suffered or inflicted, is itself traumatic, because it is disturbing, if not painful, to recall. People who have been hurt tend to repress the memory to avoid renewing the pain; people who have done the hurting push the memory into the depths to be rid of it, to alleviate their sense of guilt.

As with other phenomena, we are dealing here with a paradoxical analogy between victim and oppressor, and it's important to be clear: both are in the same trap, but it is the oppressor, and he alone, who laid the trap and sprang it, and if he suffers it is only fair; and it is unfair that the victim should suffer, as instead he suffers, even after decades have passed. Once again, we have to recognize, sadly, that the offense is irreparable: it is protracted in time, and the Furies, in whom we are forced to believe, not only harass the tormentor (if they do harass him, with or without the aid of human punishment) but also perpetuate his work by denying peace to the tormented. It is impossible to read without a shudder the words left behind by Jean Améry, the Austrian philosopher tortured by the Gestapo for his activity in the Belgian resistance, and later deported to Auschwitz as a Jew:

> Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. . . . Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained.

Torture was for Améry an endless death. I will speak of him again in chapter 6; he took his life in 1978.

Let us not indulge in confusion, armchair psychoanalysis, morbidity, or leniency. The oppressor continues to be what he is, as does the victim: the two are not interchangeable. The oppressor should be punished and abhorred (but also understood, if possible); the oppressed should be pitied and helped. But, given the indecency of the deed that was irrevocably committed, both are in need of shelter and defense, and they search for it instinctively. Not all of them, but most; and often for their whole life.

Today we have at our disposal numerous confessions, depositions, and admissions by the oppressors (I speak not only of the German National Socialists but of all those who commit multiple horrendous crimes out of

obedience to a regime): some were made at trial, others in interviews, still others are contained in books or memoirs. In my opinion, they are extremely important documents. The descriptions of things seen or acts performed are generally of little interest: they coincide roughly with the victims' accounts, are rarely disputed, and have been adjudicated and consigned to history. They are often cited in footnotes. Far more important are the motivations and justifications: Why did you do it? Did you realize you were committing a crime?

The answers to these two questions, and others along the same lines, are very similar, regardless of the personality of the individual who is questioned, whether an intelligent, ambitious professional like Albert Speer, an icy fanatic like Adolf Eichmann, a shortsighted functionary like Franz Stangl, at Treblinka, or Rudolf Höss, at Auschwitz, or an obtuse brute like Wilhelm Boger and Oswald Kaduk, inventors of new forms of torture.[3] Using different formulations, and with greater or less insolence, depending on their mental and educational level, they all end up saying basically the same thing: I did it because I was ordered to; other people, my superiors, committed deeds that were worse than mine; considering the upbringing I had and the environment I lived in, I could not have behaved otherwise; if I hadn't done these things, someone else would have, and more brutally. The first impulse of anyone who reads these justifications is revulsion: they're lying, they can't think anyone would believe them, they can't not see the disproportion between their excuses and the vast suffering and death they caused. They lie knowing that they're lying: they do so in bad faith.

Anyone with sufficient experience of human affairs knows that the distinction (which a linguist would call the opposition) between good and bad faith is optimistic and enlightened, especially, and more justifiably, when applied to men like the ones I have just mentioned. The distinction presumes a clarity that few people have, and which even those few lose immediately when, for any reason, past or present reality makes them feel anxious or ill at ease. In such conditions, there are, in fact, people who lie consciously, coldly falsifying reality itself, but they are outnumbered by those who weigh anchor, distance themselves from genuine memories, temporarily or permanently, and fabricate a convenient reality. For them the past is a burden; they feel revulsion at what they did or what was done to them, and tend to replace it with something different. The replacement may begin consciously, with a scenario that is invented, mendacious, and re-

created, but less painful than the real memory. As this account is repeated to others but also to oneself, the distinction between true and false gradually loses its contours, and the person ends up fully believing the tale he has told so often and continues to tell, occasionally polishing and touching up the less plausible details, or the ones that are less consistent with one another or incompatible with the picture of "established" events: what started out as bad faith has turned into good faith. The silent transition from lie to self-deception is useful: he who lies in good faith lies better, plays his part better, and is more readily believed by the judge, the historian, the reader, the wife, the children.

The more distant the events become, the greater and more perfect the construction of a convenient truth. This mental process is the only way to interpret, for example, the statements made to *L'Express* in 1978 by Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, commissioner for Jewish affairs in the Vichy government in 1942, and as such personally responsible for the deportation of seventy thousand Jews. Darquier denies everything: the photographs of piled-up corpses are doctored; the statistics about millions of dead are fabricated by the Jews, who are always greedy for publicity, pity, and restitution; the deportations may well have taken place (he could hardly deny them, considering the appearance of his signature at the bottom of so many letters containing orders for deportation, even of children), but he didn't know where the deportees were being sent or what end they would meet; at Auschwitz there were indeed gas chambers, but they were used only for killing lice, and anyway (notice his consistency!) they were built after the war, for propaganda purposes. I have no wish to justify this loathsome and foolish man, and I am offended to learn that he lived in Spain undisturbed for many years, but in him I think I can identify the typical case of someone so used to lying in public that he ends up lying in private—and to himself—and fabricating a convenient truth that allows him to live in peace. It is not easy to maintain the distinction between good and bad faith: it requires profound honesty with oneself, and demands a constant intellectual and moral effort. How can one expect such an effort from men like Darquier?

If you read the statements made by Eichmann during his trial in Jerusalem, and by Höss (the next-to-last commander of Auschwitz, and the inventor of the hydrogen-cyanide gas chamber) in his memoirs, you can detect a more subtle process of elaborating the past than the one I am

describing. These two men basically defended themselves in the classic manner of the Nazi underlings, or rather of underlings everywhere: we were trained to be absolutely obedient, to respect hierarchy and nationalism; we were brainwashed with slogans, intoxicated by ceremonies and rallies; they taught us that the only justice was the justice that was good for our people, the only truth the words of the Führer. What do you want from us? Now that what's done is done, what makes you think that we or all those like us could have behaved any differently? We were diligent executors, and for our diligence we were praised and promoted. We did not make the decisions, because the regime in which we grew up did not allow us to make independent decisions; others decided for us, and it could not have been otherwise, since our ability to decide had been amputated. Not only were we forbidden to make decisions; we had become incapable of making them. Therefore we are not responsible and should not be punished.

Even if this argument is projected against the background of the Birkenau chimneys, it cannot be interpreted as the product of sheer impudence. The pressure that a modern totalitarian state can exert on the individual is terrifying. It has three basic weapons: straight propaganda or propaganda masquerading as culture, schooling, or folklore; a ban on a pluralistic press; and terror. It is unacceptable to concede, however, that this pressure could not be resisted, especially in the twelve short years of the Third Reich: the exaggeration is blatant in the statements and excuses of the men with the heaviest responsibilities, such as Höss and Eichmann, and even more in the manipulation of their memories. Both were born and grew up long before the Reich became truly "totalitarian," and they joined it by choice, a choice dictated more by opportunism than by enthusiasm. Their rewriting of the past was a retrospective operation, slow and (probably) not methodical. It is naïve to ask whether they acted in good or bad faith. When fate placed them before the judges and the death they deserved, even they, who had been so harsh in the face of the suffering of others, fabricated a convenient past for themselves and ended up believing it: particularly Höss, who was not a subtle man. His writings show him to be so little disposed to self-control and introspection that he doesn't realize he is confirming his coarse anti-Semitism in the very act of recanting and denying it. Nor does he notice how unctuous he appears in his self-portrait as a good functionary, father, and husband.

In commenting on these reconstructions of the past (although this observation applies to all memories), I have to point out that the distortion of events is often limited by the objective fact of the events themselves, about which there is the testimony of third parties, documents, “material evidence,” and historically established contexts. It is generally difficult to deny having committed a given act, or to deny that an act was committed. On the other hand, it is very easy to alter the motivations that led us to commit an act, and the passions within us that accompanied the act. This is extremely fluid matter that can be distorted even by very weak forces. There are no reliable answers to the questions “Why did you do it?” and “What were you thinking while you were doing it?” because states of mind are ephemeral by nature, and the memory of them is even more so.

Suppression is an extreme case of distorting the memory of a wrong committed. Here, too, the border between good and bad faith can be vague. Sometimes the “I don’t knows” and “I don’t remembers” that are heard in court conceal a specific intention to lie, but sometimes the lie is fossilized, hardened into a formula. The person who remembers wanted to become the person who forgets and has succeeded: by persistently denying its existence, he has expelled the harmful memory as one expels an excretion or a parasite. Defense lawyers are well aware that the memory lapses or putative truths they suggest to their clients tend to become actual lapses or truths. There is no need to stray into mental pathologies to find human specimens whose statements leave us perplexed: they are certainly false, but we cannot tell whether the speaker realizes he is lying or not. Absurd though it may seem, let us suppose that the liar becomes truthful for an instant: he himself would not know how to respond to the dilemma. In the act of lying he is an actor completely at one with his character; he can no longer be distinguished from it. A glaring example of this, at the time I am writing, is the courtroom behavior of Ali Agca, who attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II.

The best defense against the invasion of oppressive memories is to bar their entry, to draw a quarantine line along the border. It’s easier to forbid entry to a memory than to be rid of it once it has been registered. This was the basic purpose of many of the stratagems contrived by the Nazi command to protect the consciences of the men assigned to the dirty work and to secure their services, which even the most hardened thugs found repugnant. The Einsatzkommandos, who behind the lines of the Russian

front machine-gunned civilians on the edges of common graves that the victims themselves had been forced to dig, were given unlimited rations of vodka so that the massacre was clouded by drunkenness. The well-known euphemisms (“final solution,” “special treatment,” even “Einsatzkommando,” which literally means “Ready Deployment Unit” but which disguised an atrocious reality) served not only to deceive the victims and prevent them from defending themselves; they also served, within the realm of the possible, to prevent public opinion, and even the divisions of the armed forces not directly involved, from finding out what was happening throughout the territories occupied by the Third Reich.

For that matter, the whole history of the brief “Thousand Year Reich” could be reinterpreted as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, a falsification of reality, a denial of reality, ending in the final flight from reality itself. Hitler’s biographers, who disagree on how to interpret the life of this elusive man, all agree that his last years were characterized by a flight from reality, particularly after the catastrophe of the first Russian winter. He had forbidden and denied his subjects access to the truth, debasing their morals and their memories; but by degrees, culminating in the paranoia of the Bunker, he had closed off the road of truth to himself as well. Like all gamblers, he had constructed a scenario spun from superstitious lies that he ended up believing with the same fanatical faith he demanded from every German. His downfall was not only a deliverance for the human race but a demonstration of the price to be paid when you falsify the truth.

The drifting of memory can also be observed among the much larger ranks of the victims, where it is obviously unintentional. Those who suffer an injustice or an offense have no need to concoct lies to absolve themselves of a guilt they do not feel (although they may feel shame, because of a paradoxical mechanism that I will discuss later); but this does not mean that their memories have not been altered as well. It has been remarked, for example, that many survivors of wars or other complex and traumatic experiences tend to filter their memories unconsciously: when they recollect them to one another or relate them to other people, they prefer to dwell on the truces, the moments of reprieve, on the grotesque, odd, or relaxing

interludes, and skip the more painful episodes. Such moments are not willingly retrieved from the reservoirs of memory, so they tend to become dim with time and lose their contours. In the *Inferno*, Count Ugolino is psychologically credible when he expresses his reluctance to describe his ghastly death to Dante, and is led to do so not out of a desire to please but out of a will for posthumous revenge against his eternal enemy.[4] We are being rash when we say "I will never forget" regarding an event that hurt us deeply but left no material trace or permanent absence in or around us; even in "civilian" life we are only too happy to forget the details of a serious illness from which we have recovered or a surgery that has been successful.

For the purpose of self-defense, reality can be distorted not only in memory but also at the very moment it takes place. During the entire year of my imprisonment in Auschwitz, I had a close friend, Alberto D., who was like a brother. He was a healthy and courageous youth, more perceptive than the average prisoner, and thus quite critical of the many who consoled themselves by fabricating illusions and feeding them to one another. ("The war will end in two weeks"; "There will be no more selections"; "The English have landed in Greece"; "The Polish partisans are about to liberate the camp"; and so on. Such rumors circulated almost every day, and were promptly disproved by reality.) Alberto had been deported together with his forty-five-year-old father. As the great selection of October 1944 approached, Alberto and I remarked on it with horror, impotent rage, rebelliousness, and resignation, but without seeking solace in convenient truths. The selection came, Alberto's "elderly" father was chosen for the gas chamber, and in the space of a few hours Alberto was a changed man. He heard rumors that sounded reliable to him: the Russians were near; the Germans wouldn't dare persist with the massacres; this last selection wasn't like the others—it wasn't for the gas chamber but for prisoners who were debilitated but would recover, just like his father, who was exhausted but not sick. As a matter of fact, he even knew where they would be sent, to Jaworzno, not far away, to a special camp for convalescents who could do only light work.

Of course, his father was never seen again, and Alberto himself died during the march by which the camp was evacuated, in January 1945. Oddly, without knowing about Alberto's behavior, his relatives who had remained in hiding in Italy, and escaped capture, acted just like him, rejecting an unbearable truth and constructing for themselves another. As

soon as I returned home, I felt it was my duty to go immediately to Alberto's city, to tell his mother and his brother what I knew. I was welcomed with polite affection, but no sooner had I started to tell my story than his mother asked me to stop: she already knew everything, at least about Alberto, and there was no sense in my repeating the usual horror stories. She *knew* that her son, and he alone, had managed to escape from the column without being shot by the SS, had hidden in the woods, and was safe in Russian hands. He wasn't able to send news yet, but he would as soon as he was able, she was sure, and now could I please change the subject and tell her how I myself had survived. A year later I found myself passing through that city by chance, and I visited the family again. The truth had changed slightly: Alberto was in a Soviet clinic: he was fine, but he had lost his memory, he couldn't even remember his name. But he was improving and would return home soon, she had it from a reliable source.

Alberto never returned. More than forty years have gone by; I didn't have the courage to present myself again and compare my painful truth to the consolatory "truth" that Alberto's relatives had fabricated to help one another out.

An apology is in order. This book, too, is steeped in memory, and in fact a distant memory. So it draws on a questionable source and has to be protected from itself. Consequently, it contains more reflections than memories; it dwells more readily on the state of things today than on a retrospective account. Moreover, the data it contains are heavily substantiated by the vast literature that has developed on the theme of the drowned (or "saved") man, to which the guilty parties of those years have contributed, intentionally or not. In this body of literature there is abundant agreement and negligible disagreement. As for my own personal memories and the handful of unpublished anecdotes I have mentioned or will mention, I have diligently sifted them all: time has discolored them slightly, but they concur by and large with this background, and to me they seem untainted by the drifting I have described.

3. Both Wilhelm Boger and Oswald Kaduk were SS guards at Auschwitz. Boger developed the "Boger swing," an iron bar hung from the ceiling, from which prisoners were suspended and tortured. Kaduk broke the rib cages of prisoners late for evening roll call by stomping on them.
4. Dante places Count Ugolino della Gherardesca in the ninth circle of hell, among the traitors, next to his archenemy, Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini. In Cantos XXXII and XXXIII of the *Inferno*, he depicts him devouring his own children, with whom he had been locked up without food by the archbishop.

2

The Gray Zone

Have we survivors succeeded in understanding and making other people understand our experience? What we commonly mean by the verb “to understand” coincides with “to simplify”: without a profound simplification, the world around us would be an endless and undefined tangle that defies our ability to find our bearings and decide our actions. So we are forced to reduce the knowable to an outline: this is the purpose of language and conceptual thought, the wonderful tools that we have built over the course of evolution and which are specific to the human species.

We tend to simplify history, too, although we cannot always agree on the outline within which to organize facts, and consequently different historians may understand and construct history in incompatible ways. But our need to divide the field between “us” and “them” is so strong—perhaps for reasons rooted in our origins as social animals—that this one scheme, the friend-enemy dichotomy, prevails over all others. Popular history, and even history as it is traditionally taught in schools, reflects this Manichean tendency to shun nuance and complexity, and to reduce the river of human events to conflicts, and conflicts to duels, us and them, the Athenians and the Spartans, the Romans and the Carthaginians. This is surely the reason for the huge popularity of spectator sports, such as soccer, baseball, and boxing, in which the contenders are two teams or two individuals, distinct and identifiable, and at the end of the game there is a loser and a winner. If the result is a tie, the spectator feels cheated and disappointed; at a more or less unconscious level, he wanted a winner and a loser, identified respectively with the good guys and the bad guys, since the good guys are

the ones who should win, otherwise the world would be turned upside down.

The *desire* for simplification is justified; simplification itself is not always. It is a working hypothesis that is useful as long as it is recognized for what it is, and not confused with reality. Most historical and natural phenomena are not simple, or, rather, not simple in the way we would like. The network of human relationships inside the concentration camps was not simple: it could not be reduced to two blocs, victims and persecutors. People who read (or write) the history of the camps nowadays have a tendency, indeed a need, to separate evil from good, to take sides, to reenact the gesture of Christ on Judgment Day: over here go the righteous, over there the wicked. Young people in particular demand clarity and sharp distinctions. Since their experience of the world is limited, they are not fond of ambiguity. Their expectations, for that matter, reproduce exactly the expectations of the new arrivals in the camps, young and old. Everyone, with the exception of those who had already lived through similar experiences, expected to find a world that was terrible but decipherable, resembling the simple model that we carry within ourselves atavistically, "us" on the inside and the enemy on the outside, separated by a sharp geographic border.

What made the entry into the camps such a shock was, instead, the surprise that came with it. The world into which you felt you had fallen was indeed harrowing, but it was also indecipherable. It did not resemble any model. The enemy was outside but also inside. There was no clearly defined "us." There were more than two contenders, and, rather than one border, there were many blurred borders, perhaps countless, one between every person and every other. You entered hoping for at least the solidarity of your fellows in misfortune, but, except in special cases, the hoped-for allies were nowhere to be found. Instead there were a thousand impenetrable monads and, among them, a desperate, covert, and constant struggle. This rude revelation came in the first hours of imprisonment, often in the immediate form of concentric aggression at the hands of the very persons in whom you had hoped to find future allies. It was so brutal that it immediately crushed the ability to resist. For many, it was fatal, indirectly or directly: it is hard to defend yourself against an unexpected blow.

Various aspects of this aggression can be identified. Remember that the main purpose of the concentration-camp system, from the start (coinciding

with the rise of Nazism in Germany), was to break the resistance of its adversaries. For the camp leadership, the new arrival was by definition an adversary—regardless of the label attached to him—and had to be destroyed immediately, so that he would not become an example or a germ of organized resistance. On this point, the SS had clear ideas, providing us with a key to interpreting the whole sinister ritual—differing from camp to camp but uniform in substance—that accompanied entry: the immediate kicks and punches, often to the face; the riot of orders shouted with real or simulated rage; complete denuding; the shaving of the head; the ragged clothing. It is hard to say whether all these particulars were fine-tuned by an expert or perfected methodically on the basis of experience, but certainly they were deliberate and not accidental: there was a master plan, and it was obvious.

At the same time, the other inhabitants of the concentration-camp world—both the ordinary prisoners and the privileged ones—contributed more or less knowingly to the entry ritual and to the moral collapse it brought about. Rarely was the newcomer welcomed not I would say as a friend but even as a fellow in misfortune. In most cases, the old-timers (and you became an old-timer in three or four months; the rotation was fast) expressed annoyance or even hostility. They envied the "newcomer" (*Zugang*: the German is an abstract, bureaucratic term meaning "entrance") because he still seemed to be wearing on his person the scent of home: an absurd envy, since you actually suffered far more in the first few days of imprisonment than later on, when habituation and experience enabled you to construct a shelter for yourself. The newcomer was derided and subjected to cruel jokes, as is the case in every community with "conscripts" and "novices," as well as in the initiation ceremonies of primitive peoples. There is no doubt that life in the camps involved a regression, a return to behavior that was indeed primitive.

The basic motivation for hostility toward the *Zugang* was probably the same as for every other form of intolerance. It was an unconscious attempt to consolidate the "us" at the expense of the "others," to create a solidarity among the oppressed without which their suffering would be worse, even if it was not openly perceived. The desire for prestige, which seems to be an irrepressible need in our civilization, also came into play: the despised masses of the old-timers tended to treat the newcomers as scapegoats for their own humiliation, to use them as a form of reparation, to view them as

underlings upon whom to displace the burden of offenses they had received from above.

The question of the privileged prisoners is both more complex and more important: I consider it fundamental. It is disingenuous, absurd, and historically false to argue that a hellish system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims. It does not. It degrades and assimilates them, especially those who are more willing, more neutral, and without political or moral backbone. Many signs indicate that the time has come to explore the space that separates the victims from the tormentors (and not only in the Nazi Lagers), and to do so with a lighter touch and a less troubled spirit than has been the case, for example, in certain movies. It would be schematic and rhetorical to claim that this space is empty: it never is. It is populated by figures who are contemptible or pathetic (or sometimes both), and whom it is indispensable to know if we wish to understand the human species, if we wish to know how to defend our souls should a similar ordeal ever occur, or even if we simply wish to understand what happens in a large industrial compound.

The privileged prisoners were a small minority of the camp population, but they represent a large majority of the survivors. In fact, even without taking into account the hard labor, the beatings, the cold, and the diseases, we should remember that the food rations were decidedly insufficient for even the most abstemious prisoner. Since the body's physiological reserves were exhausted after two or three months, death from starvation or from starvation-related illnesses was the normal fate of a prisoner. The only way to avoid it was an extra food ration, and, to obtain that, a privilege, large or small, was needed: in other words, a means—granted or hard won, cunning or violent, licit or illicit—to raise yourself above the norm.

Let us not forget how most of the survivors' memories, oral or written, begin: the impact with the concentration-camp reality coincides with an act of aggression, neither expected nor understood, on the part of a strange new enemy, the inmate-functionary, who, rather than take you by the hand, reassure you, and teach you the ropes, comes rushing at you, shouting in a language you don't know, and punches you in the face. He wants to subdue you, to extinguish the spark of dignity that you may still preserve and that he has lost. But woe to you if your dignity impels you to react. There is an unwritten but ironclad rule: *zurückschlagen*, to answer a blow with a blow, is an intolerable transgression that only a "newcomer" might consider.

Anyone who strikes back must be made an example of: other functionaries rush to the defense of the threatened order and the perpetrator is beaten furiously and methodically until he is subdued or dead. Privilege, by definition, defends and protects privilege. I am reminded that the local term to indicate the privilege, in Yiddish and Polish, was *protekcja*, pronounced "protekzia," and is of clear Italian and Latin origin. I heard the story of an Italian newcomer, a partisan, who was labeled a political prisoner and thrown into a labor camp while he was still at the peak of his strength. During the distribution of the soup, he was roughed up by the inmate-functionary ladling out the soup and he dared to shove him back. The functionary's colleagues came running and made an example out of the offender, drowning him by holding his head down in the vat of soup.

The rise of the privileged—not only in the camps but in all human society—is a disturbing but inevitable phenomenon. The only places where you don't find them are utopias. It is the duty of the righteous man to wage war on every undeserved privilege, but it is a war without end. Wherever power is exercised by the few, or by one man alone, against the many, privilege is born and proliferates, even against the will of power. But power normally tolerates and encourages it. Take a look at the Lager, which—in its Soviet version as well—can serve as a "laboratory": the hybrid category of inmate-functionaries is both its framework and its most disturbing feature. This category is a gray zone, with undefined contours, which both separates and connects the two opposing camps of masters and servants. It has an incredibly complicated internal structure, and harbors just enough to confound our need to judge.

The gray zone of *protekcja* and collaboration has multiple roots. In the first place, the smaller the area of power the greater the need for outside assistance. Nazism, in the final years, could not manage without it, determined to maintain its grip on a subjugated Europe and fuel the war fronts that had been bled dry by the growing military resistance of its adversaries. It was indispensable to procure from the occupied countries not only labor but also policemen, and representatives and administrators of German power, which by then was deployed to the breaking point in other places. This latter category includes, with nuances varying in quality and weight, Vidkun Quisling, of Norway; the Vichy regime, in France; the Judenrat of Warsaw; and the Republic of Salò, along with the Ukrainian and Baltic mercenaries employed everywhere for the dirtiest jobs (never for

combat) and the Sonderkommandos, whom we'll discuss. But collaborators from the opposing camp, the former enemies, are treacherous by nature: they have betrayed once and they may do so again. It is not enough to relegate them to marginal tasks: the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible. A bond of complicity is thus forged between them and their masters, and there is no turning back. This type of behavior is known to criminal associations in every time and place, has always been practiced by the Mafia, and is the only explanation for the otherwise indecipherable excesses of Italian terrorism in the 1970s.

In the second place, and contrary to hagiographic and rhetorical conventions, the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness to collaborate with power. This willingness varies according to endless nuances and motivations: terror, ideological recruitment, slavish imitation of the victor, a shortsighted desire for power (even power that is ridiculously circumscribed in space and time), cowardice, and a clearheaded calculation aimed at evading orders and the imposed order. All these motives, alone or in combination, played an active part in creating this gray area, whose denizens were united by the desire to preserve and consolidate their privilege, against the unprivileged.

Before discussing one by one the motives that drove some prisoners to collaborate, to varying degrees, with the camp authorities, however, we should forcefully assert the imprudence of rushing to moral judgment in human cases such as these. It should be clear that the greatest fault lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state. The criminal complicity of individual collaborators, great and small (never friendly, never transparent!), is always difficult to evaluate. We would prefer to entrust that judgment only to people who have been in similar circumstances and experienced for themselves what it means to act under coercion. Manzoni understood this condition all too well: "The troublemakers, the oppressors, all those who do harm of any sort to others, are guilty not only of the evil they do but also of the perversion of their victims' minds."[5] The condition of victimhood does not exclude guilt, which is often objectively serious, but I do not know a human court that could be delegated to take its measure.

If it were up to me, if I had to judge, I would freely absolve anyone whose complicity in the crime was minimal and whose coercion was

maximal. We, ordinary prisoners, were surrounded by swarms of low-level functionaries. They formed a picturesque menagerie of sweepers, vat washers, night watchmen, bed smoothers (who exploited to their minuscule advantage the German obsession with beds made up flat and square), lice and scabies inspectors, messengers, interpreters, and assistants to assistants. They were generally poor devils like us, who worked the same long hours as everyone else, but who for an extra half-liter of soup would take on these and other "service" functions that were innocuous, sometimes useful, and often invented out of thin air. They were rarely violent, but they tended to develop a typically corporate mentality, and to defend their "job" energetically against anyone, above or below, who tried to steal it from them. Their privilege, which involved additional discomfort and toil, brought them little benefit and did not exempt them from the discipline and suffering inflicted on the others. Their life expectancy was basically the same as that of the non-privileged. They were rough and rude, but they were not perceived as enemies.

A more subtle and varied judgment is required for those who held senior positions: the heads—Kapos—of the work squads, the barrack chiefs, the bookkeepers, and the world of inmates who performed various, often sensitive tasks (which I did not even suspect at the time) in the camps' administrative offices, the Political Department (a de facto branch of the Gestapo), the Work Office, and the punishment cells. (The German term *Kapo* derives directly from the Italian *capo*; the oxytonical pronunciation, introduced by French prisoners, did not circulate until many years later, when it was popularized by the film of the same name by Gillo Pontecorvo, and it was preferred in Italy precisely because of its differential value.) Some of them, thanks to their ability or to luck, had access to top-secret information in their respective Lagers, and, like Hermann Langbein at Auschwitz, Eugen Kogon at Buchenwald, and Hans Marsalek at Mauthausen, became historians of the camps. It's hard to know what to admire more, their courage or their cunning, which enabled them to help their comrades in many concrete ways by carefully observing the individual SS officers with whom they were in contact and intuiting who among them could be corrupted, who dissuaded from the cruelest decisions, who blackmailed, who deceived, and who frightened by the possibility of a *redde rationem*, a reckoning, at war's end. Some, like the three men named, were members of secret defense organizations, so the power invested in

them by their posts was offset by the extreme danger they ran as “resisters” and keepers of secrets.

The functionaries I am describing here were not collaborators in the least, or were so only in appearance. In fact, they were opponents in disguise. Not so most of the others in positions of command, who proved to be human specimens ranging from mediocre to terrible. Rather than grind a person down, power corrupts. Their power, which was of a unique nature, corrupted even more intensely.

Power exists in every variety of human social organization. To different degrees it is controlled, usurped, conferred from above or recognized from below, and assigned by merit, corporate solidarity, blood, or wealth. A certain measure of man’s domination of man is probably inscribed in our genetic heritage as herd animals. The notion that power is intrinsically harmful to the community is unproved. But the power held by the functionaries I’m talking about, even the low-ranking ones, such as the work-squad Kapos, was basically unlimited. In other words, a lower limit was set on their violence—in the sense that they were punished or dismissed if they were not harsh enough—but not an upper limit. That is to say, they were free to inflict the worst atrocities on their subordinates as punishment for any transgression, or even for no reason at all. Until the end of 1943, it was not rare for a Kapo to beat a prisoner to death without any fear of repercussion. Limits were not introduced until later, when the demand for labor became more acute. The Kapos were not supposed to mistreat prisoners in a way that would permanently diminish their capacity for work; but by then the evil practice had been established, and the new rules were not always respected.

In this way the camps replicated, on a smaller scale but with amplified characteristics, the hierarchical structure of the totalitarian state, in which all power is invested from above, and any check on it from below is almost impossible. But this “almost” is important: there has never been a state that was truly “totalitarian” in this respect. Some form of rearguard action, a corrective to total abuse, has never been absent, not even in the Third Reich or in Stalin’s Soviet Union. In both regimes, a deterrent was provided, to varying degrees, by public opinion, the judiciary, the foreign press, the churches, and the sense of humanity and justice that ten or twenty years of tyranny cannot eradicate. Only within the concentration camps was any check from below nonexistent, and the power of petty despots absolute. It is

understandable that such broad power would be overwhelmingly attractive to the type of person who is greedy for power; that individuals with moderate instincts also aspired to it, drawn to the many material advantages of the post; and that the power at their disposal proved to be fatally intoxicating.

What kind of person became a Kapo? Once again, we need to make a distinction. In the first place, those who were offered the opportunity, individuals in whom the camp commander or his deputies (who were often good psychologists) glimpsed a potential collaborator: common criminals taken from the prisons, for whom a career as a torturer offered an excellent alternative to detention; political prisoners sapped by five or ten years of suffering, or at any rate morally debilitated; later, even Jews, who saw the crumb of authority offered to them as the only way to escape the "final solution." But, as I said before, there were also many who aspired to power spontaneously. There were the sadists, who were few but greatly feared, since for them the position of privilege coincided with the opportunity to inflict suffering and humiliation on the people below them. There were the frustrated, another feature of the microcosm of the Lager that replicates the macrocosm of totalitarian society; in both worlds, power is conceded generously, independent of ability and merit, to those who are willing to defer to hierarchical authority and thereby win an otherwise unattainable social promotion. Finally, there were many among the oppressed who were contaminated by the oppressors and tended to unconsciously identify with them.

There has been much discussion of this mimesis, the identification, imitation, or trading of roles between oppressor and victim. This is not virgin territory: assertions of all kinds have been made, true and invented, disturbing and banal, insightful and stupid. On the contrary, it is a field that has been clumsily plowed, trampled, and ravaged. When the film director Liliana Cavani was asked to explain briefly the meaning of a fine but mendacious film of hers, *The Night Porter* (1973), she stated, "We are all victims or murderers and we accept these roles voluntarily. Only Sade and Dostoyevsky really understood this."[6] She added that she believed that "in every environment, in every relationship, there is a victim-tormentor dynamic more or less clearly expressed and generally experienced on an unconscious level."

I am no expert on the unconscious or the inner depths, but I do know that there are few experts, and that those few are more cautious. I do not know, nor am I particularly interested in knowing, whether a murderer is lurking deep within me, but I do know that I was an innocent victim and not a murderer. I know that murderers existed, and not just in Germany, and that they still exist, retired or on active duty, and that confusing them with their victims is a moral disease, an aesthetic license, or a sinister sign of complicity. Above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentional or not) to the deniers of the truth. I know that anything can happen in the camps, and on the human stage in general, and that the single example therefore proves very little. Having said this clearly, and reaffirmed that confusing the two roles signifies a desire to mystify the very basis of our need for justice, I still have a few observations to make.

The truth remains that, in the concentration camps and outside them, there are people who are gray, ambiguous, and quick to compromise. The extreme tension of the camp tends to augment their numbers. They bear their own share of guilt (increasing in proportion to their freedom of choice), in addition to which there are the vectors and instruments of the system's guilt. The truth remains that most of the oppressors, during or (more often) after their actions, realized the evil they were doing or had done, and may have had misgivings, felt uneasy, or even been punished, but their suffering is not enough for them to be counted among the victims. By the same token, the mistakes and capitulations of the prisoners are not enough to align them with their jailers: the inmates of the camps—hundreds of thousands of people from every social class and almost every country in Europe—represented an average, unselected sampling of humanity. Even if we leave aside the infernal environment into which they had been abruptly plunged, it is illogical to expect from them—and rhetorical and false to claim that everyone always practiced—the behavior we expect of saints and Stoic philosophers. In reality, in the overwhelming majority of cases, their behavior was coerced with an iron fist. Within a few weeks or months, the deprivations to which they were subjected brought them to a condition of sheer survival, a daily battle against hunger, cold, exhaustion, and beatings, in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to nothing. Very few of them survived the ordeal, and it was through a combination of many improbable events. In other words, they were saved

by luck, and it makes little sense to look for something in common among their fates, apart, perhaps, from initial good health.

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The Sonderkommandos of Auschwitz and the other death camps represent an extreme case of collaboration. I would hesitate to speak of privilege here: the members of the squads were privileged (but at what cost!) only in the sense that for a few months they got enough to eat, not because their situation was enviable. The SS used the duly vague title "Sonderkommando," or Special Squad, to indicate the group of inmates assigned to operate the crematoriums. Their duties were to maintain order among the new arrivals (often unaware of the fate awaiting them) who were to be herded into the gas chambers; remove the corpses from the chambers; extract gold teeth from their jaws; shear off the women's hair; sort and classify clothing, shoes, and the contents of the baggage; transport the bodies to the crematoriums; supervise the operation of the ovens; and remove and dispose of the ashes. The Sonderkommando at Auschwitz numbered between seven hundred and one thousand units, depending on the period.

The Sonderkommandos did not escape the common fate. On the contrary, the SS was extremely diligent in making sure that none of them would live to tell. At Auschwitz there was a succession of twelve squads. Each one operated for a few months, then was slaughtered, each time with a different ruse to prevent possible resistance, and the next squad, for its initiation, would cremate the corpses of its predecessors. In October 1944, the last squad rebelled against the SS, blew up one of the crematoriums, and was exterminated in the unequal fight that I will describe below. Consequently, there were very few Sonderkommando survivors, and those few escaped death by some unpredictable twist of fate. None of them spoke willingly after liberation, and none speak willingly now, about their horrifying situation. The information we do have about the Sonderkommandos derives from various sources: the spare depositions of those who survived; the admissions of their "bosses" during trials before various courts; allusions contained in depositions by German or Polish "civilians" who had chance encounters with the squads; and, finally, the

pages of diaries that some of them scribbled furiously for future memory and buried with extreme care in the vicinity of the Auschwitz crematoriums. While all of these sources concur, it is difficult, almost impossible, for us to construct a picture of how the men lived day to day, how they saw themselves, and how they accepted their condition.

At first, they were selected by the SS from among the prisoners already registered, and according to testimony the selection was based not only on their physical strength but also on a thorough examination of their physiognomy. In rare cases, a prisoner was inducted as punishment. At a later stage, the preferred method was to take the candidates directly from the station platform, the moment the trains arrived. The SS "psychologists" realized that it would be easier to recruit from among these desperate and disoriented people, exhausted by the journey and drained of resistance, at the crucial moment of stepping off the train, when every new arrival truly felt that he was on the threshold of a dark, terrifying, and unearthly place.

The Sonderkommandos were for the most part made up of Jews. In one sense, there is nothing surprising about this, since the main purpose of the Lagers was to destroy the Jews, and, from 1943 on, the population of Auschwitz was 90 to 95 percent Jewish. In another sense, this paroxysm of perfidy and hatred is astonishing: it had to be Jews who put Jews in the ovens, in order to prove that Jews, the subrace, the subhumans, would submit to any humiliation, even their own destruction. At the same time, there has been testimony that not every SS officer willingly accepted mass murder as a daily chore; assigning part of the work—the dirtiest part, to be exact—to the victims themselves was supposed to help relieve some consciences (and probably did).

Of course, it would be unjust to attribute this acquiescence to a specifically Jewish characteristic: the ranks of the Sonderkommandos also included non-Jewish prisoners, Germans and Poles, but with "more dignified" assignments as Kapos; and Russian prisoners of war, whom the Nazis considered only one rung above the Jews. There were not many, because at Auschwitz there were not many Russians (for the most part, they were exterminated immediately after capture, machine-gunned on the edge of enormous common graves), but they did not behave differently from the Jews.

The Sonderkommandos, as bearers of a horrendous secret, were kept strictly separate from the other prisoners and from the outside world.

Nevertheless, as anyone who has been through similar experiences knows, there are always cracks in barriers. News, no matter how incomplete and distorted it may be, has an enormous power of penetration, and some piece of it always trickles through. Vague and incomplete rumors about the squads were already circulating among us during our imprisonment, and they were later confirmed by the sources mentioned above. The intrinsic horror of this human condition, however, has imposed a kind of restraint on all testimony. So it is still difficult today to construct an image of what it meant to be forced to do this job for months. Some people have testified that a great deal of alcohol was made available to those poor wretches, and that they were in a permanent state of total brutishness and prostration. One of them asserted, “To do this job, either you go crazy on the first day or you get used to it.” Another, instead, “Of course, I could have killed myself or let myself be killed, but I wanted to live, to avenge myself and to bear witness. You mustn’t think we’re monsters: we’re like you, only much more unhappy.”

These statements, and the countless others that they must have made or shared with one another but that have not come down to us, cannot be taken literally. From men who have known this extreme destitution one cannot expect a deposition in the legal sense of the term but, rather, something between a complaint, a curse, atonement, and the impulse to justify, to rehabilitate oneself. What should be expected is a liberating outburst rather than truth with the face of Medusa.

Envisioning and organizing the squads was National Socialism’s most diabolical crime. Behind the pragmatic considerations (economizing on able-bodied men, forcing others to do the most atrocious jobs), more subtle ones can be detected. Through this institution, the attempt was made to shift the burden of guilt to others, that is, to the victims, so that not even the awareness that they were innocent was left to bring them relief. It is neither easy nor pleasant to plumb the depths of this evil, but I think it has to be done, because what was perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, and could involve us or our children. There is a temptation to turn away and to distract the mind: it is a temptation that must be resisted. In fact, the existence of the Sonderkommandos had a meaning and contained a message: “We, the Lord’s people, are your destroyers, but you are no better than us; if we want to, and we do, we are capable of destroying

not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed our own."

Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian doctor, was one of the few survivors of the last Sonderkommando at Auschwitz. He was a well-known anatomical pathologist, an expert on autopsies. The chief physician of the SS at Birkenau, the same Josef Mengele who died not many years ago, escaping justice, procured his services, giving him favorable treatment and considering him almost a colleague. Nyiszli was supposed to dedicate himself specifically to the study of twins: in fact, Birkenau was the only place in the world where it was possible to examine the corpses of twins who had been killed simultaneously. In addition to this special assignment, which, incidentally, he does not appear to have opposed very resolutely, Nyiszli was the physician for the Sonderkommando, with which he lived in close contact. He relates an episode that I find telling.

The SS, as I have said, chose the candidates for the squads carefully from the Lagers and the arriving trains, and did not hesitate to slaughter on the spot anyone who refused or who proved to be unfit for the assignment. They behaved in the same contemptuous and detached way toward the new recruits as they did toward all the inmates, especially the Jews. It had been inculcated in them that the Jews were despicable creatures who were enemies of Germany and therefore did not deserve to live; in the best case, they could be forced to work until they died from exhaustion. The behavior of the SS toward the veterans of the Squad was different: they tended to see them almost as colleagues, by now as inhuman as they were, yoked to the same wagon, bound by the same foul chain of forced complicity. Nyiszli tells the story of having witnessed, during a break in his "work," a soccer match between a team of SS crematorium guards and a team from the Sonderkommando. The spectators were other SS officers and the rest of the Squad, taking sides, making bets, applauding, cheering the players on, as if the game were being played on a village field rather than at the gates of hell.

Nothing of this kind ever took place, nor would it have been conceivable, with other categories of prisoners; but with them, the "crematorium crows," the SS soldiers could take the field as equals, or almost. Behind this armistice one can see a Satanic smile: it has been consummated, we have succeeded, you are no longer the other race, the anti-race, the primary enemy of the Thousand Year Reich; you are no longer

the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. Now you are like us, you who are so proud: smeared with the blood of your people, like us. Like us and like Cain, you have murdered your brother. Come, now we can play together.

Nyiszli relates another episode that should give us pause. The travelers on a newly arrived train have been crammed into the gas chamber and killed, and the Squad is performing its ghoulish daily chores, sorting the pile of bodies, washing them down with hoses, and transporting them to the crematorium, when on the floor they find a young girl who is still alive. The event is exceptional, unique. Maybe the human bodies formed a barrier around her and sequestered a pocket of air that remained breathable. The men are in a quandary. Death is their job around the clock, a habit, since "either you go crazy the first day or you get used to it." But the girl is alive. They hide her, warm her, bring her beef broth, ask her questions. She is sixteen years old. She has lost her sense of time and space. She doesn't know where she is, and she endured without understanding the procedure of the sealed boxcar, the brutal preliminary selection, the stripping of clothes, and entrance into the chamber from which no one had ever come out alive. She did not understand, but she did see, so she has to die, and the men of the Squad know this, just as they know that they, too, will have to die, and for the same reason. But these slaves, brutalized by alcohol and daily slaughter, are transformed. Before them is not the anonymous mass, the river of frightened, stunned people getting off the trains: before them is a person.

This episode is reminiscent of the scene in Manzoni's *The Betrothed* when even the "vile gravedigger" shows "unusual respect" and hesitation before a singular case, the refusal by the mother of Cecilia, a little girl who has died of the plague, to allow her daughter's body to be thrown into the wagon and jumbled up with the other corpses. Such events astonish us because they contradict the image we harbor of man in harmony with himself, coherent, monolithic; and they should not astonish us, because man is not like that. Against all logic, compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual at the same time; anyway, compassion is not logical. There is no proportionality between the compassion we feel and the dimensions of the sorrow that gives rise to compassion. A single Anne Frank arouses more emotion than the myriad others who suffered like her but whose images have remained in the shadows. Maybe things are this way

out of necessity; if we had to and could suffer the suffering of everybody, we would be unable to live. Maybe saints are the only ones who have been granted the terrible gift of compassion toward the many. What remains for the gravediggers, the Sonderkommandos, and all of us, in the best of cases, is the occasional feeling of compassion toward the individual, the *Mitmensch*, our fellow man: the flesh-and-blood human being who stands before us, within reach of our providentially myopic senses.

A doctor is summoned and revives the girl with an injection. No, the gas had not achieved its effect, yes, she will be able to survive, but where and how? At that moment Muhsfeld, one of the SS officers assigned to the machinery of death, arrives. The doctor takes him aside and explains the situation. Muhsfeld hesitates, then makes his decision. The girl has to die. If she were older the situation would be different, it would make more sense. Maybe she could be persuaded to keep quiet about what has happened to her, but she is only sixteen: she can't be trusted. But he does not kill her by his own hand; he summons a subordinate, who kills her with a shot to the nape of the neck. Now, this Muhsfeld was not a merciful man; his daily ration of slaughter was punctuated by arbitrary and capricious episodes, and he stood out for the refined cruelty of his inventions. He was tried in 1947, sentenced to death, and hanged in Kraków, and this was just. But not even he was a monolith. Had he lived in a different place and time, he probably would have behaved like any other ordinary man.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Grushenka tells the tale of the scallion. A wicked old woman dies and goes to hell, but her guardian angel, thinking hard, remembers that once, only once, she had done a good deed by giving to a beggar a scallion that she pulled up in her garden. He holds out the scallion to her, and the old woman grabs it and is pulled away from the flames of hell. I have always found this tale repugnant: what human monster has never in his life given a scallion to another, if only to his children, his wife, or his dog? That single instant of compassion, immediately erased, is not enough, of course, to absolve Muhsfeld, but it is enough to place him, if only at the far end, within the gray area, that zone of ambiguity that emanates from regimes founded on terror and obsequiousness.

It is not hard to judge Muhsfeld, and I don't think the court that sentenced him had any doubts. By contrast, our need and our ability to judge falter before the Sonderkommandos. Questions arise immediately,

convulsive questions that are hard to answer in a way that reassures us about human nature. Why did they accept this job? Why didn't they rebel? Why didn't they prefer death?

To some extent, the facts at our disposal allow us to attempt a response. Not everyone did accept. Some rebelled, knowing they would die. We have accurate reports of at least one case: in July of 1944, a group of four hundred Jews from Corfu were inducted into the Squad; to a man, they rejected the assignment and were immediately sent to the gas chamber. The memories of various other single mutinies remain, all of which were instantly punished by an atrocious death (Filip Müller, one of the very few survivors of the Sonderkommandos, tells of a comrade whom the SS threw into the oven while he was still alive). There were also many cases of suicide at the moment of induction or immediately afterward. Finally, we should remember that it was the Sonderkommando that organized, in October 1944, the only, desperate attempt at revolt in the history of the Auschwitz Lager.

The reports of the uprising that have come down to us are neither complete nor concordant. We know that the rebels (assigned to two of the five crematoriums at Auschwitz-Birkenau), who were poorly armed and had no contacts with the Polish partisans on the outside of the camps or with the underground defense organization on the inside, blew up crematorium No. 3 and battled the SS. The fight ended quickly. Some of the insurgents managed to cut the barbed wire and flee to the outside world, but they were captured soon afterward. None of them survived. Some four hundred and fifty were killed immediately by the SS; of the SS, three were killed and twelve wounded.

The ones we do know about, the miserable manual laborers of the slaughter, are therefore the others, the ones who occasionally preferred a few weeks more of life (and what a life) to instant death, but in no case did they force themselves, nor were they forced, to kill with their own hands. I repeat: I believe that no one has the authority to judge them, not those who experienced the Lager and, especially, not those who did not. I would invite anyone who dares to attempt judgment to undertake, with sincerity, a conceptual experiment: imagine, if you can, spending months or years in a ghetto, tormented by chronic hunger, by exhaustion, by forced proximity to others, and by humiliation; seeing your loved ones die around you, one after the other; being cut off from the world, unable to either send or receive

news; in the end being loaded onto a train, eighty or a hundred per boxcar; traveling toward the unknown, blindly, for sleepless days and nights; and finally finding yourself cast within the walls of an indecipherable hell. At this point you are offered a chance for survival: you are given a proposal, or rather an order, to perform a gruesome but unspecified job. This, it seems to me, is the true *Befehlnotstand*, the "state of coercion following an order": not the excuse invoked systematically and impudently by the Nazis at their trials and, later (in their footsteps), by war criminals from many other countries. The first situation is a rigid ultimatum: immediate obedience or death. The second, instead, occurs within the power center, and could be (and often was) resolved by corrective action, a stalled promotion, a moderate punishment, or, in the worst cases, by a transfer to the war front.

The experiment I have proposed is not pleasant. Vercors tried to portray it in his novella *Les armes de la nuit* (*The Weapons of the Night*), which talks about the "death of the soul," and which, reread today, seems to me intolerably contaminated by aestheticism and literary prurience. Yet its theme is still undoubtedly the death of the soul. No one can know how long and what torments his soul can resist before crumpling or breaking. Every human being has reserves of strength whose measure he does not know; they may be large, small, or nonexistent, but the only means of assessing them is severe adversity. Even without invoking the extreme case of the Sonderkommandos, we survivors commonly find that when we talk about our experiences our listeners say, "In your place, I wouldn't have lasted a day." This statement has no precise meaning; you are never in someone else's place. Each individual is an object so complex that it is useless to try to predict behavior, especially in extreme situations; we cannot even predict our own behavior. This is why I ask that the history of the "crematorium crows" be pondered with compassion and rigor, but that any judgment of them be suspended.

The same *impotentia judicandi* leaves us paralyzed before the case of Chaim Rumkowski. His story is not strictly a story of the camps, although it does end there. It is a story of the ghetto, but it speaks so eloquently to the fundamental theme of human ambiguity fatally provoked by oppression that

it seems to fit our argument almost too well. I will repeat the story here, although I have already told it elsewhere.[7]

When I returned home from Auschwitz, in one of my pockets I found an odd aluminum coin, scratched and corroded, that I have saved to this day. On one side it bears the Jewish star (the shield of David), the date, 1943, and the word *getto*, which is pronounced *ghetto* in German. On the other side are the inscriptions *quittung über 10 mark* and *der älteste der juden in litzmannstadt*, which mean "10-Mark Voucher" and "The Elder of the Jews in Litzmannstadt": in other words, it was the currency used inside the ghetto. I had forgotten its existence for many years until, around 1974, I was able to reconstruct its fascinating and sinister story.

In honor of the German general who had defeated the Russians in the First World War, the Nazis had rechristened the Polish city of Lodz Litzmannstadt. In the final months of 1944, the last survivors of the Lodz Ghetto were deported to Auschwitz, where I must have found the by then worthless coin on the ground.

In 1939, Lodz had 750,000 inhabitants, and it was the most industrialized Polish city, as well as the most "modern" and the ugliest. Like Manchester and Biella (Italy), it lived on textiles, and was shaped by the presence of myriad factories, large and small, most of which were already antiquated then. The Nazis, as they had in every city of a certain importance in occupied Eastern Europe, immediately established a ghetto, thereby reviving—with the addition of their modern ferocity—an administrative system from the Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation. The Lodz Ghetto, which was created in February 1940, was chronologically the first ghetto and in population the second (after Warsaw). It eventually held more than 160,000 Jews and was liquidated only in the fall of 1944. It was thus the longest-lived of the Nazi ghettos, and that can be ascribed to two reasons: its economic importance and the provocative personality of its president.

His name was Chaim Rumkowski: a failed minor industrialist, he settled in Lodz in 1917 after various travels and vicissitudes. In 1940, he was almost sixty years old and a childless widower. He enjoyed a certain status and had a reputation as a leader of Jewish charitable organizations and as an energetic, rough, and authoritarian character. The position of president (or elder) of a ghetto was intrinsically grotesque, but it was still a position; it represented a form of social recognition, provided advancement, and came

with rights and privileges—in short, authority. Well, Rumkowski was a man who loved authority with a passion. It's not known how he came to be appointed: maybe it was a joke in the sinister Nazi style (Rumkowski was, or appeared to be, a fool with an air of respectability, and thus the perfect dupe); or maybe he plotted to be selected, so great, apparently, was his will to power. It has been demonstrated that the four years of his presidency, or, rather, of his dictatorship, were a surprising tangle of megalomaniac dreams, barbaric vitality, and genuine diplomatic and organizational skill. He quickly came to see himself as an absolute but enlightened monarch, and he was obviously encouraged in that direction by his German masters, who, although they were playing with him, appreciated his talent for administration and orderliness. They granted him authorization to mint currency, both metal (like my coin) and paper, on watermarked stock that was provided to him officially. This currency was used to pay the ghetto's exhausted workers. They could spend it at the shops to procure their food rations, which amounted to an average of 800 calories a day. (I note, in passing, that at least 2000 calories a day are required to survive in a state of absolute repose.)

From his starving subjects, Rumkowski aspired to gain not only obedience and respect but also love: in this regard modern dictatorships are different from ancient ones. Since he had available an army of excellent artists and craftsmen, who were at his command for a slab of bread, he had stamps designed and printed that bore his effigy, with his white hair and beard illuminated by the rays of Hope and Faith. He had a carriage, drawn by a broken-down nag, in which he traveled through the streets of his tiny kingdom, which were teeming with beggars and petitioners. He wore a regal mantle and surrounded himself with a court of flatterers and assassins. From his courtier poets he commissioned anthems that celebrated his "firm and powerful hand," and the peace and order that by his virtue reigned in the ghetto. He ordered that the children in the appalling schools, every day ravaged by epidemics, malnutrition, and German roundups, be assigned compositions praising "our beloved and provident president." Like all autocrats, he promptly organized an efficient police force, nominally to maintain order but actually to protect his person and impose discipline: it consisted of six hundred guards armed with truncheons, and an unspecified number of informers. He gave many speeches in an unmistakable style, some of which have been preserved: he adopted the oratorical technique of

Mussolini and Hitler, consisting of an inspired delivery, a pseudo-conversation with the crowd, and the creation of consensus through praise and blame. His mimicry may have been deliberate, or it may instead have been an unconscious identification with the model of the "necessary hero," which, declaimed by D'Annunzio, dominated Europe in those years.[8] But his attitude was most likely provoked by his status as a petty tyrant, impotent before those above him and omnipotent toward those below. He spoke like a man with a throne and scepter, unafraid of being contradicted or derided.

Yet he is a much more complex character than all this would suggest. Rumkowski was not only a renegade and an accomplice; to some extent, he must have gradually convinced not only others but also himself that he was a messiah, a saviour of his people, whose good he must have wanted, at least intermittently. To feel beneficent one has to benefit, and even a corrupt despot likes to feel beneficent. Paradoxically, his identification with the oppressors alternates or is coupled with an identification with the oppressed, since man, as Thomas Mann says, is a confused creature. And he becomes even more confused, we might add, the more subject he is to tensions. Then he escapes our judgment, just as the needle of a compass goes wild at the magnetic pole.

Although he was despised and derided by the Germans, Rumkowski probably thought of himself not as a servant but as a master. He must have taken his own authority seriously: when the Gestapo seized "his" advisors without warning, he courageously rushed to their assistance, exposing himself to mockery and beatings that he managed to bear with dignity. On other occasions, he tried to haggle with the Germans, who were demanding from Lodz more and more cloth, and from him larger and larger contingents of useless mouths (the elderly, children, the sick) to send to the gas chambers of Treblinka and, later, of Auschwitz. He was quick to harshly repress the uprising of his subjects (in Lodz, as in other ghettos, there were daring pockets of political resistance, with Zionist, Bund, or Communist origins), but his harshness derived not so much from servility toward the Germans as from lèse-majesté, indignation at the outrage inflicted on his royal person.

In September 1944, with the approach of the Russian front, the Nazis began liquidating the Lodz Ghetto. Tens of thousands of men and women were deported to Auschwitz, *anus mundi,* the final sinkhole of the German

universe; given their exhausted state, almost all of them were immediately slaughtered. About a thousand men remained in the ghetto to dismantle the machinery in the factories and erase the traces of the massacre; not long afterward, they were liberated by the Red Army, and it is to them that we owe the information reported here.

There are two versions of Chaim Rumkowski's final destination, as if the ambiguity under whose sign he lived had gone on to envelop his death. According to the first version, during the liquidation of the ghetto he tried to oppose the deportation of his brother, from whom he did not want to be separated. A German officer proposed that he depart with him, voluntarily, and Rumkowski is supposed to have accepted. According to the second version, Hans Biebow, another character cloaked in duplicity, attempted to save Rumkowski. This shady German industrialist was the official in charge of the ghetto's administration, and at the same time he was its contractor: he thus had a delicate job, because the Lodz textile factories supplied the armed forces. Biebow was not a brute: he was not interested in causing useless suffering or in punishing the Jews for the crime of being Jews. He was interested in making money on provisioning, legally or otherwise. He was moved by the torment of the ghetto, but only indirectly. He wanted the slave laborers to work, so he did not want them to die of starvation; that was as far as his moral sense extended. In fact, he was the true master of the ghetto, and he was tied to Rumkowski by the type of customer-supplier relationship that often blossoms into a gruff friendship. Biebow, a petty profiteer too cynical to take seriously the demonology of race, would have preferred to postpone to the bitter end the liquidation of the ghetto, which was good business for him, and protect Rumkowski from deportation, trusting in his complicity, and this goes to show, objectively speaking, that a realist is often better than a theorist. But the theorists of the SS were of the opposite opinion, and they had the upper hand. They were *gründlich*, thorough. Out with the ghetto and out with Rumkowski.

Unable to make any other arrangements, Biebow, who had good connections, handed Rumkowski a sealed letter addressed to the commander of the camp he was assigned to, and assured him that it would protect him and guarantee favorable treatment. Rumkowski obtained permission from Biebow to travel to Auschwitz with the dignity suited to his rank, that is, in a special car, attached to the end of the convoy of freight cars crammed with deportees who had no privileges; but a single fate

awaited Jews in German hands, whether they were cowards or heroes, humble or proud. Neither the letter nor the car could save Chaim Rumkowski, king of the Jews, from the gas.

A story like this is not self-contained. It overflows. It raises more questions than it can satisfy, encapsulating the whole issue of the gray zone, and leaves us hanging. It cries out to be understood, to be seen as a symbol, as in dreams or heavenly signs.

Who is Rumkowski? He is neither a monster nor an ordinary man, yet many people around us are similar to him. The failures that preceded his "career" are significant: few men can draw moral strength from failure. To me his story seems to exemplify the almost physical necessity by which political duress gives rise to the undefined area of ambiguity and compromise. Men like him crowd around the foot of every absolute throne, trying to grab their tiny portion of power: it is a recurrent spectacle, reminiscent of the deadly infighting during the final months of the Second World War at Hitler's court and between the ministers of Mussolini's Republic of Salò. They, too, were gray men, more blind than criminal, ruthlessly dividing up the wreckage of an evil and moribund authority. Power is like a drug: the need for one and the other is a mystery to anyone who has never tried them, but, after the initiation, even if it was accidental (as it was for Rumkowsi), addiction kicks in, along with the need for higher and higher doses. And so does a rejection of reality and a return to childhood dreams of omnipotence. If it is true that Rumkowski was intoxicated by power, we have to admit that the intoxication was not because of but, rather, in spite of the ghetto environment. In other words, the intoxication was so powerful that it prevailed even in conditions that would seem to extinguish individual will. In fact, the syndrome of prolonged and uncontested power was clearly visible in him, as it was in his most famous models: the distorted vision of the world, the dogmatic arrogance, the need for adulation, the convulsive clinging to the levers of command, and the contempt for law.

None of this exonerates Rumkowski from his responsibility. It grieves and pains us that a man like Rumkowski could emerge from the affliction of Lodz. If he had survived his own tragedy, as well as the tragedy of the

ghetto he defiled by superimposing his histrionic image on it, no court would have acquitted him, nor can we absolve him on a moral level. But there are extenuating circumstances: an infernal system, such as National Socialism, exercises a shocking power of corruption from which it is hard to shield oneself. It degrades its victims and assimilates them, because it requires major and minor complicity. You need a solid moral backbone to resist it, and Chaim Rumkowski, merchant of Lodz, together with his entire generation, had only a frail one at his disposal. But are we Europeans today any stronger? How would any of us behave if we were to be driven by necessity and at the same time tempted by something seductive?

Rumkowski's story is the unpleasant, disquieting story of the Kapos and the Lager officials; of the petty hierarchs who serve a regime to whose faults they are willfully blind; of subordinates who sign everything, because a signature costs so little; of people who shake their heads yet assent; of people who say, "If I hadn't done it, someone else would have, someone worse than me."

In this strip of half-consciences Rumkowski, a symbolic, emblematic figure, should be placed. It is hard to know whether he should be at the top or the bottom. He alone could say, if he could speak to us—lying, perhaps, as he may always have lied, even to himself. Yet he would help us to understand all the same, the way every defendant helps his judge, even when he doesn't want to, even when he is lying, because man's capacity to play a role is not unlimited.

None of this is enough, however, to explain the sense of urgency and menace that emanates from this story. Perhaps it has a larger meaning: in Rumkowski we see a reflection of ourselves. His ambiguity is ours, the innate ambiguity of hybrids kneaded out of clay and spirit. His fever is ours, the fever of Western civilization that "descends into hell with trumpets and drums."[9] His shabby masquerade is the distorted image of our symbols of social prestige. His folly is the folly of the proud man described by Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, the man who:

> *Drest in a little brief authority,*
> *Most ignorant of what he's most assured,*
> *His glassy essence, like an angry ape,*
> *Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven*
> *As make the angels weep.*

Like Rumkowski, we, too, are so blinded by power and prestige that we forget our basic fragility. We make our deals with power, willingly or not, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the wall are the lords of death, and that not far away the train is waiting.

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5. From chapter 2 of *The Betrothed* (1842), by Alessandro Manzoni.
6. From the introduction to the screenplay of *The Night Porter*.
7. This story was first published, in very similar form, as a newspaper article, “Il re dei giudei” (“The King of the Jews”), in the November 20, 1977, issue of the Turin newspaper *La Stampa* and, later, in Levi’s 1981 short story collection *Lilith and Other Stories* (see volume 2, page 1409).
8. The expression the “necessary hero” is from the introductory poem in the sequence “Canti della ricordanza e dell’aspettazione” (“Songs of Remembrance and Awaiting”) by Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863–1938), in his book of poems *Elettra* (1903), dedicated to the myth of the superman.
9. The expression “hell with trumpets and drums” is taken from Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

3

Shame

In a stereotypical image that is endlessly proposed, consecrated by literature and poetry, and exploited by cinema, at the end of the tempest comes “the calm after the storm” and every heart rejoices. “Surcease from suffering / is happiness for us.”[10] After an illness, good health returns; the prison is breached by the arrival of our side, the liberators, flags unfurled. The soldier returns, and finds his family and peace again.

To judge from the stories told by many survivors, and from my own recollections, the pessimist Leopardi was stretching the truth in this description: he proved to be an optimist despite himself. In most cases, the hour of liberation was neither joyous nor exhilarating. It usually struck against a tragic backdrop of destruction, slaughter, and suffering. At that moment, when you felt human again—responsible, in other words—human despair returned: despair over a family that had been scattered or lost; despair at the universal suffering all around; at an exhaustion that felt incurable, permanent; at having to start life over again, amid the ruins, often alone. “Pleasure, child of suffering”—*piacer figlio d’affanno*—Leopardi writes. No, suffering is the child of suffering. Being released from despair was joyous only for the lucky few, or only for a few moments, or for very simple souls; it almost always coincided with a period of anguish.

Anguish is familiar to everyone, starting in childhood, and everyone knows it is often blank and indistinct. Rarely does it bear a plainly written label, indicating its cause; when it does, the label is often a lie. People can believe or say they are in anguish for one reason, and be so for another reason entirely: believe they are suffering at the thought of the future, and

be suffering instead because of their past; believe they are suffering for others, out of pity, out of compassion, and be suffering instead for reasons of their own that to varying degrees are deep, to varying degrees admissible and admitted, and sometimes so deep that only the specialist, the analyst of souls, can disinter them.

Of course, I would not go so far as to say that the scenario I have described is never true. Many liberations were experienced with full, genuine joy: especially by the combatants, both military and political, who saw the aspirations of their militancy and their lives fulfilled in that moment; and also by those who had suffered less, or for less time, or only themselves and not for family members, friends, or loved ones. Fortunately, not all human beings are the same, of course: there are some among us who have the virtue and the privilege of enucleating, isolating, those moments of happiness, of fully enjoying them, like those who extract native gold from gangue. And, finally, testimonies I have read or heard include some that are unconsciously stylized, in which convention prevails over genuine memory: "He who is liberated from slavery rejoices, I was liberated, so I, too, rejoiced. In every film, in every novel, as in the opera *Fidelio*, the breaking of chains is a moment of solemn or fervid delight, and so mine was, too." This is a special case of the drifting of memory I mentioned in the first chapter, accentuated by the passage of time and the piling up of other people's experiences, real or alleged, on one's own. But he who shuns rhetoric, deliberately or by temperament, usually speaks in a different voice. This, for example, is how the above-mentioned Filip Müller, whose experience was actually much worse than mine, describes his liberation on the last page of his memoir, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*:

> It was, incredibly, a complete anticlimax. This moment, on which all my thoughts and secret wishes had been concentrated for three years, evoked neither gladness nor, for that matter, any other feelings inside me. I let myself drop down from my rafter and crawled on all fours to the door. Outside I struggled along a little further, but then I simply stretched out on a woodland ground and fell fast asleep.

Let me reread a passage from *The Truce*. Although the book was published only in 1963, I had already written these words in 1947. This paragraph describes the first Russian soldiers when they came upon the sight of our Lager, piled high with the bodies of the dying and the dead:

> They didn't greet us, they didn't smile; they appeared oppressed, not only by pity but by a confused restraint, which sealed their mouths, and riveted their eyes to the mournful scene. It was a shame well-known to us, the shame that inundated us after the selections and every time we had to witness or submit to an outrage: the shame that the Germans didn't know, and which the just man feels before a sin committed by another. It troubles him that it exists, that it has been irrevocably introduced into the world of things that exist, and that his goodwill availed nothing, or little, and was powerless to defend against it.

I don't believe I have anything to delete or correct but, rather, to add. Many people (and I myself) felt "shame"—that is, a sense of guilt—both during and after imprisonment, as numerous witnesses have verified and confirmed. Absurd though this may sound, it exists. I will try to interpret this phenomenon and to comment on the interpretations of others.

As I mentioned at the start, the vague uneasiness that accompanied the liberation may not have been shame, exactly, but that is how it was perceived. Why? Various explanations can be attempted.

From this analysis I will exclude exceptional cases: the prisoners, almost all of them political, who had the force and the opportunity within the Lager to act in defense and for the benefit of their fellow captives. We common prisoners, practically the whole of the camp, did not know of or even suspect their existence. This was only logical, since, out of obvious political and policing necessity (the Political Department at Auschwitz was little more than a branch of the Gestapo), they had to carry out their operations in secret, not only from the Germans but also from everyone else. In Auschwitz, a concentration-camp empire that was more than 95 percent Jewish during my time there, this political network was rudimentary. I witnessed only a single episode that should have led me to guess something, if I had not been so overwhelmed by my daily travails.

Sometime around May 1944, our almost innocuous Kapo was replaced, and the newcomer proved to be terrifying. All the Kapos used to beat us: it was an evident part of their duties, their more or less accepted language, and, for that matter, the only language in that perpetual tower of Babel which could truly be understood by everyone. In its various nuances, it was understood either as an incitement to work or as an admonishment, or a punishment, and on the scale of suffering it came last. Yet there was something different about the way the new Kapo beat us, something convulsive, malicious, perverse: on the nose, the shins, the genitals. His blows were meant to hurt us, to cause suffering and humiliation. He was driven not by blind racial hatred, like many others, but, rather, by an open

desire to inflict pain, indiscriminately and without pretext, on all his subjects. He was probably mentally ill, but, under the circumstances, the indulgence toward the mentally ill that we consider appropriate today would obviously have been out of place there. I spoke with a colleague, a Croatian Jewish Communist: What should we do? How should we defend ourselves? Should we act collectively? He gave me a strange smile and said only, “He won’t last long, you’ll see.” Indeed, the beater disappeared within a week. Years later, at a gathering of survivors, I learned that some political prisoners assigned to the camp’s Work Office had the terrifying power to substitute matriculation numbers on the lists of prisoners destined for the gas chambers. Anyone who had the means and the desire to act in such a manner, to fight the Lager machine in this or in other ways, was protected from “shame”: or at least from the kind of which I speak, since he may perhaps feel another type. Sivadjan, a quiet, peaceful man I mentioned in passing in the “Canto of Ulysses” chapter of *If This Is a Man*, must have been protected in this way: at the same gathering I learned that he had introduced explosives into the camp in preparation for a possible insurrection.

In my view, the sense of shame and guilt that coincided with regaining freedom was highly composite: it contained different elements, and in different proportions, for each individual. Each of us, it should be remembered, experienced the Lager in his own way, both objectively and subjectively.

Upon emerging from the darkness, we suffered from the renewed awareness that we had been maimed. Through no desire, no laziness, no fault of our own, we had lived for months or years at a brutish level: from dawn to dusk our days had been filled with hunger, fatigue, cold, and fear, and any room to reflect, to reason, to feel had been wiped out. We had endured filth, overcrowding, and deprivation, suffering much less than we would have in normal life because our moral compass had shifted. What’s more, we had all stolen: from the kitchens, the factory, the fields—“from the others,” that is, from our adversaries. But it was still theft; some (very few) had stooped so low as to steal bread from their fellow prisoners. We had forgotten not only our country and our culture but also our families, our past, and the future we had envisioned, because, like animals, we were confined to the present. We had emerged from this abasement only at rare intervals, on the few Sundays of repose, in the fleeting moments before

falling asleep, during the frenzy of the air raids, but these excursions were painful precisely because they gave us the opportunity to measure from the outside how far we had fallen.

I believe that this very turning back to gaze at the dangerous waters, *acqua perigliosa*, was the cause of many cases of suicide after (sometimes immediately after) liberation.[11] It was always a critical moment, which coincided with a wave of rethinking and depression. Yet all the historians of concentration camps, including the Soviet Gulags, agree that cases of suicide *during* internment were rare. Various explanations of the phenomenon have been attempted. I would propose three, which are not mutually exclusive.

First: suicide pertains to man, not to animals. In other words it is a premeditated act, a choice that is not instinctive, not natural. And there were few opportunities for making choices in the Lager, since people lived like enslaved animals, as I was saying, who at times allow themselves to die but never kill themselves. Second: “We had other things on our mind,” as the saying goes. The day was packed: you had to worry about satisfying hunger, about finding a way to shield yourself from the hard labor and the cold, about avoiding beatings. The constant imminence of death meant there was no time to focus on the idea of death. There is the roughness of truth in Italo Svevo’s unsparing description of his father’s death agony in *Zeno’s Conscience*. He observes: “When a man dies he has too many other worries to allow any thinking about death. My father’s whole organism was concentrated on respiration.” Third: in most cases, suicide arises from a feeling of guilt that no punishment has come to alleviate. The harshness of prison was perceived as a punishment, and the sense of guilt (if there is punishment, there must have been guilt) was relegated to the background, only to reemerge after liberation. In other words, there was no need to punish oneself with suicide for a (real or presumed) guilt that was already being expiated through the sufferings of every day.

Why did we feel guilty? Once everything was over, the awareness dawned on us that we had done nothing, or not enough, against the system into which we had been absorbed. Regarding the lack of resistance in the Lagers, or, rather, in some Lagers, too much has been said and too superficially, especially by people who had very different transgressions to answer for. Those who did make attempts know that there were collective and personal situations in which active resistance was possible, and others,

far more frequent, when it was not. It is well-known that millions of Soviet military prisoners fell into German hands, especially in 1941. Young, and for the most part well nourished and healthy, they had military and political training, and often formed organized units, with enlisted men, noncommissioned officers, and officers. They hated the Germans, who had invaded their country, and yet they rarely put up any resistance. Malnutrition, being stripped of one's clothing, and other physical hardships —which are cheap and easy to bring about, and at which the Nazis were masters—quickly can destroy a person, and before they destroy they paralyze, especially when they have been preceded by years of segregation, humiliation, harassment, forced migration, rending of family ties, and the severing of all contact with the outside world. Such was the situation of the bulk of the prisoners who arrived at Auschwitz after passing through the ante-inferno of the ghettos or transit camps.

So at the rational level there would not have been much to be ashamed of, but still the shame remained, especially in the face of the few, lucid examples of people who had the strength and the opportunity to resist. I bring this up in the chapter "The Last One" of *If This Is a Man*, which describes the public hanging of a resister in front of a terrorized and apathetic crowd of prisoners. The thought barely occurred to us at the time, but it came back "after": maybe you, too, could have, certainly you should have. The survivor sees or thinks he sees this judgment in the eyes of people (especially young people) who listen to his tales and judge them with the easy wisdom of hindsight; or perhaps he feels he is being addressed too ruthlessly. Consciously or not, he feels accused and judged, compelled to justify and defend himself.

It is more realistic to accuse oneself or be accused by others of having failed in terms of human solidarity. Few survivors feel guilty for having deliberately injured, robbed, or beaten a fellow prisoner: people who committed such acts (the Kapos, but they were not alone) repress the memory. On the other hand, almost everyone feels guilty for not coming to the aid of another person. The presence beside you of a fellow prisoner who is weaker, more unprepared, older, or too young, pestering you by asking for help or by simply "being there," which is already asking for help, is a constant feature of life in the camps. The request for solidarity, for a kind word, a piece of advice, even just a sympathetic ear, was permanent and universal, but it was rarely satisfied. There was a shortage of time, space,

privacy, and strength. In addition, the one who received that request was also in a state of need, of credit.

I remember with a certain relief that I once tried to revive the courage (at a time when I still felt I had some) of an eighteen-year-old Italian who had just arrived and was floundering in the bottomless despair of the first days in the camp: I don't remember what I said to him, definitely some words of hope, maybe a few white lies for a "newcomer," spoken from the authority of my twenty-five years of age and my three months of seniority. In any case, I granted him a moment's attention. But I also remember, with discomfort, that much more often I shrugged my shoulders impatiently at other requests, and this was after I had been in the Lager for almost a year and had thus accumulated a hefty dose of experience. But I had also assimilated to the core the primary rule of the camps: to look out for oneself first of all. I never found it expressed more frankly than in Ella Lingens-Reiner's book *Prisoners of Fear*. She attributes the following words to a doctor who, despite what she says, proved to be generous and courageous and saved many lives:

> How was I able to survive Auschwitz? My principle is: I come first, second, and third. Then nothing. Then me again, and then all the others.

In August 1944, it was very hot at Auschwitz. A torrid, tropical wind kicked up clouds of dust from the bombed-out buildings, dried the sweat off our backs, and thickened the blood in our veins. My squad had been sent to a cellar to clear out the rubble, and we were all suffering from thirst: a new punishment that was added to or rather multiplied the old punishment of hunger. There was no potable water either in the camp or at the worksite. In those days there was often a shortage even of water in the washhouses, which was undrinkable but still good for refreshing oneself and rinsing off the dust. Normally, the evening soup, along with the surrogate coffee distributed at around ten o'clock in the morning, was more than sufficient to slake our thirst. Now it wasn't enough, and we were tormented by thirst. Thirst is more imperious than hunger: hunger obeys the nerves, grants reprieves, and can be temporarily covered by an emotion, a pain, a fear (as we realized during the train journey from Italy). Not thirst: it gives no respite. Hunger is exhausting, thirst is infuriating. At that time it was our constant companion, day and night: by day at the worksite, where order (although order was our enemy, it was still a place of logical and certain

things) had been transformed into a chaos of shattered construction projects; by night in the unventilated barracks, as we gasped for air breathed a hundred times over.

The Kapo had assigned me a corner of the cellar to clear of rubble. It was adjacent to a large room filled with laboratory equipment that was being installed but had already been damaged by the bombs. Running vertically down the wall was a two-inch-diameter pipe that terminated in a spigot close to the floor. Was there water in it? I tried opening the faucet, I was alone, no one could see me. It was stuck, but by using a stone as a hammer I was able to turn it a couple of millimeters. A few odorless drops came out, and I collected them on my fingers: it looked like water. I didn't have any sort of container. The drops came out slowly, without pressure: the pipe must have been only half full, maybe less. I stopped trying to open it and lay down on the ground with my mouth under the faucet: it was water that had been warmed by the sun, tasteless, perhaps distilled or the result of condensation; anyway, it was a delicacy.

How much water can a two-inch pipe one or two meters in length contain? One liter, if that. I could drink it all immediately, it would have been the safest thing. Or leave a little for the next day. Or split it evenly with Alberto. Or reveal the secret to the whole work squad.

I chose the third option: egotism expanded to the nearest person, which an old friend of mine has rightly called "*nosismo*"—we-ism. We drank all the water, in short greedy sips, taking turns under the faucet, just the two of us. Secretly. But on the march back to camp I found myself next to Daniele, who was covered with gray cement dust, his lips cracked and his eyes glazed over, and I felt guilty. I traded glances with Alberto, we understood each other immediately and hoped no one had seen us. But Daniele had noticed us in that strange position, on our backs next to the wall amid the rubble. He had suspected something was up and then guessed what it was. Many months later, in Belorussia, after the liberation, he had harsh words for me: why the two of you and not me? The "civilian" moral code was resurgent, the same code by which I, a free man today, am appalled by the death sentence meted out to the Kapo who beat us, a sentence decided and carried out with no appeal, in silence, with a swipe of the eraser. Is there any justification for feeling shame in hindsight? I could not figure this out then, nor can I today, but the shame existed and it is still there, concrete, heavy, perpetual. Today Daniele is dead, but in our affectionate, fraternal

get-togethers as survivors, the veil of that failure to act, that unshared glass of water, stood between us, transparent, unexpressed, but tangible and "costly."

It is always costly to change one's moral code: every heretic, apostate, and dissident knows this. We are no longer able to judge our own or other people's behavior at that time—which was governed by the moral code of that time—on the basis of today's codes. But I still think there is justification for the anger that invades us when one of the "others" feels he has the authority to judge us "apostates" or, rather, us "re-converts."

Do you feel shame because you are alive in the place of someone else? A person more generous, sensitive, wise, useful, and worthy of living than you? You cannot exclude the possibility: you reexamine yourself, comb through your memories, hoping that you will find them all and that none have been camouflaged or disguised. You find no obvious transgressions. You did not take anyone's place, you did not beat anyone (but would you have had the strength?), you did not accept appointments (but none were offered), you did not steal anyone's bread. Yet you cannot exclude the possibility. It's just a supposition, or, rather, the shadow of a doubt: that each is a Cain to his brother, that each of us (here I say "us" in a very broad —indeed, universal—sense) has betrayed his neighbor and is living in his place. It's a supposition, but it gnaws at you; it's nesting deep inside, like a worm. You cannot see it from the outside, but it gnaws, and it shrieks.

After my return from the camps, I received a visit from an older friend, a mild-mannered and intransigent man, a follower of his own personal religion, which struck me, however, as severe and serious. He was happy to find me alive and, for the most part, unharmed, more mature and stronger, perhaps, and definitely more experienced. He told me that my survival could not be the result of chance, of an accumulation of lucky breaks (as I maintained then and still do), but was, rather, the work of Providence. I was one of the elect, the chosen: I, the nonbeliever, and even less of a believer after my time in Auschwitz, had been saved, touched by Grace. Why me, of all people? There is no way to know, he replied. Perhaps so that you would write, and through your writing bear witness: was I not in fact writing a book about my imprisonment right then, in 1946?

This opinion struck me as monstrous. It hit a raw nerve and revived the doubts I described above: maybe I was alive in someone else's place, at someone else's expense. I might have supplanted him, in effect killed him. Those who were "saved" in the camps were not the best of us, the ones predestined to do good, the bearers of a message. What I had seen and experienced proved the exact opposite. Generally, those who survived were the worst: the egotists, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the "gray zone," the informers. It was not a fixed rule (there were no fixed rules, nor are there in human affairs), but it was still a rule. I felt innocent, to be sure, but herded among the saved and thus in permanent search of a justification, in my own eyes and in the eyes of others. Those who survived were the worst, that is to say, the fittest. The best all died.

Chaim died. A watchmaker from Kraków, he was a pious Jew who, despite our language difficulties, struggled to understand me and to make himself understood, and to explain to me, a foreigner, the essential rules of survival in the first crucial days of captivity. Szabó died. A quiet Hungarian farmer, he was almost two meters tall and therefore hungrier than everyone else, yet as long as his strength held out he did not hesitate to help his weaker comrades to push and to pull. And Robert, the Sorbonne professor, who emanated courage and confidence, spoke five languages, and labored to record everything in his prodigious memory. If he had lived, he would have been able to answer all the questions that I cannot. Baruch died. A dockworker from Livorno, he was killed immediately, the first day, because he responded to the first punches sent his way with his fists, and he was beaten to death by three Kapos who teamed up on him. These men and countless others died not despite their valor but because of it.

My religious friend told me I had survived so that I could bear witness. And I did, to the best of my abilities, nor could I have done otherwise. And I still do, every time the occasion arises. But I am disturbed by the thought that bearing witness should have earned me the privilege of surviving and of living for many years without major problems, because I see no comparison between the privilege and the result.

Let me repeat that we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is a troublesome notion that I became aware of gradually by reading other people's memoirs and rereading my own years later. We survivors are an anomalous and negligible minority. We are the ones who, because of our transgressions, ability, or luck, did not touch bottom. The ones who did,

who saw the Gorgon, did not come back to tell, or they came back mute. But it is they, the "*Muselmänner*," the drowned, the witnesses to everything—they are the ones whose testimony would have had a comprehensive meaning. They are the rule, we are the exception. Beneath another sky, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the survivor of a similar yet different slavery, observed the same thing:

> Almost anyone who served a long sentence and whom you congratulate because he survived is undoubtedly either a *pridurki* or was one for most of his imprisonment. Since the camps are meant for extermination, this should not be forgotten.

In the language of that other concentration-camp universe, the *pridurki* are prisoners who, one way or another, gained a position of privilege, the ones we called the Prominentz.

Those of us singled out by fate have sought, with greater or less wisdom, to relate not only our own fate but also the fate of the others, the drowned. But it has been a "third party" account, a tale of things observed closely but not experienced directly. No one has told the story of the demolition brought to its end, the finished work, just as no one has ever come back to tell us about his death. Even if they had possessed pen and paper, the drowned could not have borne witness, because their death had already begun before the body perished. Weeks and months before dying, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to measure, and to express themselves. We speak in their place, by proxy.

I could not say whether we did or are doing so out of a sense of moral obligation toward the silenced or if, rather, it is to free ourselves of their memory; certainly we are driven by a powerful, lasting impulse. I do not believe that psychoanalysts—who have delved into our tangles with professional rapacity—are competent to explain this impulse. Their knowledge has been built and tested "outside," in the world that for simplicity's sake we call civilian: they trace the phenomenon and seek to explain it; they study its deviations and attempt to heal them. Their interpretations, even those of someone who, like Bruno Bettelheim, lived through the ordeal of the Lager, seem approximate and simplistic, as if the theorems of plane geometry were being applied to spherical triangles. The mental mechanisms of the Häftlinge were different from ours; so, by a curious parallel, was their physiology and pathology. There were no colds or flus in the camps, but people died, at times suddenly, from diseases that doctors had never had the opportunity to study. Stomach ulcers and mental

illnesses were cured (or at least the symptoms), but everyone suffered from an incessant malaise that poisoned our sleep and has no name. To call it “neurosis” is reductive and ridiculous. Perhaps it would be more accurate to see it as the atavistic anguish that reverberates in the second verse of Genesis: the anguish, inscribed in each one of us, of the *tohu vaholu*, the formless and void universe, crushed beneath the Spirit of God, but from which the spirit of man—as yet unborn or already dead—is absent.

There is another, greater shame, the shame of the world. In a memorable line, much quoted, in this regard and others, John Donne wrote that “No man is an island,” and that every death bell tolls for us all. Yet there are those who turn their backs on their own transgressions and those of others, to avoid seeing or being touched by them. This is how most Germans behaved in the twelve years of Hitler, in the illusion that not seeing was not knowing, and that not knowing relieved them of their own share of complicity or connivance. But we were denied the shield of willful ignorance, T. S. Eliot’s “partial shelter”: we could not not see.[12] We were surrounded by the sea of suffering, past and present, and its level rose each year until it almost drowned us. There was no use closing our eyes or turning our backs, because it was all around us, in every direction, as far as the horizon. We could not or would not be islands: the righteous among us, whose number was neither higher nor lower than in any other human group, felt remorse, shame, and sorrow for the wrongs that were committed by others, not by them, but in which they felt implicated, because they felt that what had happened around them, in their presence, and in them was irrevocable. It could never be washed away. It would prove that man, the human race—we, in other words—was capable of building an infinite mass of suffering; and that suffering is the only force created from the void, with neither expense nor effort. All it takes is a refusal to see, to hear, and to act.

We are often asked, as if our past had conferred prophetic powers upon us, whether “Auschwitz” will return: whether there will be other unilateral, systematic, mechanized mass exterminations ordained at the governmental level, perpetrated on defenseless, innocent peoples, and legitimatized by the doctrine of contempt. Luckily, we are not prophets, although there are some things that can be said. That a similar tragedy, almost ignored in the West,

did take place around 1975 in Cambodia. That the German massacre was set off, and then fueled by cowardice and a craving for servitude, thanks to a combination of specific factors—the state of war, Germanic technological and organizational perfectionism, the determination and perverse charisma of Hitler, and the lack of solid democratic roots in Germany—each of which was indispensable but not enough by itself. These factors can be and, in part, already are being replicated in various parts of the world. A new combination of them in ten or twenty years (it makes no sense to speak of a more distant future) is highly unlikely but not impossible. In my opinion, mass slaughter is particularly unlikely in the Western world, Japan, and even the Soviet Union: the Lagers of the Second World War are still fresh in the memory of many, among the people and in the government, and a kind of immunological defense is at work that coincides broadly with the shame I have described.

It would be prudent to suspend judgment on what might happen in other parts of the world, or later. And the nuclear apocalypse, which will certainly be bilateral, and probably instantaneous and final, is a greater horror, different, strange, and new, that lies outside the theme I have chosen.

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10. "*Uscir di pena / è diletto fra noi*." From "La quiete dopo la tempesta" ("The Calm After the Storm"), by Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837), translated by Jonathan Galassi.
11. In Canto I, line 24, of Dante's *Inferno*, the narrator compares his state of mind to that of a castaway washed up on the beach, looking back at the "*acqua perigliosa e guata*."
12. "Living and partly living, / Picking together the pieces, / Gathering faggots at nightfall, Building a partial shelter, / For sleeping, and eating and drinking and laughter." *Murder in the Cathedral* (speech by Chorus of Women of Canterbury, in Part 1).

4

Communication

I have never liked the term “incommunicability,” which was so fashionable in the 1970s, first because it is a linguistic monstrosity and then for more personal reasons.

In the normal world today, which by convention and for contrast is variously called “civilian” and “free,” you almost never run into a total linguistic barrier and find yourself facing another human being with whom you absolutely must establish communication, on pain of death, and do not succeed. Antonioni gives a famous but incomplete example of this in the film *Red Desert*, in the episode where, one night, the protagonist comes across a Turkish sailor who doesn’t know a word of any language except his own, and tries in vain to make himself understood. Incomplete, because both the protagonist and the sailor have the desire to communicate, or at least they have no desire to reject contact.

According to a theory that was very fashionable in those years, and which I find frivolous and irritating, “incommunicability” is inevitable, a life sentence innate in the human condition, especially in industrial society. We are monads, incapable of reciprocal messages or capable only of incomplete messages that are false upon departure and misunderstood upon arrival. Speech is a fiction, sheer noise, a painted veil that conceals the existential silence. Alas, we are alone, even (or especially) if we live in couples. To me this critique seems to originate in, and betray, a mental laziness. It certainly encourages it, in a dangerous vicious circle. Except in cases of pathological incapacity, communication is both possible and necessary. It is an easy and useful way to contribute to one’s own peace of

mind and that of others, since silence, the absence of signals, is itself a signal but an ambiguous one, and ambiguity generates disquiet and suspicion. It is wrong to deny that communication is possible: communication is always possible. It is wrong to reject communication: we are biologically and socially predisposed to it, especially in its noble, highly evolved form, language. All the human races have speech; no non-human species does.

Also in the area of communication, or rather of its absence, we survivors have a unique experience. We have the irritating habit of interjecting, whenever someone (our children) says he or she is cold, hungry, or tired. “What do you know? You should have seen what we went through.” For reasons of good taste or neighborliness, we generally try to fight the temptation of such boasting, but whenever I hear talk of absent or impossible communication I am overcome by the temptation to say, “You should have seen what we went through.” It hardly compares to the experience of the tourist who travels to Finland or Japan and encounters speakers of other languages who are professionally (or even spontaneously) well-meaning and kind, and who make the effort to understand and assist him; besides, is there any corner of the world where people don’t know a few words of English? And tourists’ questions are few and generally the same, so impasses are rare, and near misunderstandings can be an amusing game.

The case of an Italian emigrant to America a hundred years ago, or of a Turk, Moroccan, or Pakistani to Germany or Switzerland today, is certainly more dramatic. For them it is not a short excursion, with no surprises, down the well-worn itineraries of travel agencies: it is a relocation that could be final; it is an insertion into a job that nowadays is rarely uncomplicated, and that requires an understanding of the spoken or written word. It involves indispensable human relations with neighbors, shopkeepers, colleagues, and superiors, at the workplace, on the street, in cafés, with foreigners who have different customs and are often hostile. But there is no lack of correctives: capitalist society is intelligent enough to realize how amply its own profits coincide with the guest worker’s output and consequently with his welfare and his adaptation. He is allowed to bring along his family, that is, a little piece of home. Some kind of accommodations are found for him. He can and sometimes must take language classes. The deaf-mute who has just

stepped off the train gets a maybe unloving but not inefficient hand, and soon he regains his ability to speak.

The way we experienced incommunicability was much more radical. I am referring in particular to the Italian, Yugoslav, and Greek deportees; to a lesser extent to the French, many of whom were of Polish or German origin, or Alsatian, and understood German quite well; and to the many Hungarians from rural areas. For us Italians, the impact with the language barrier began even before deportation, dramatically, and while we were still in Italy. It took place the moment the Italian public security officials, with visible reluctance, handed us over to the SS, which had already taken over command of the Fòssoli transit camp, near Modena, in February 1944. Immediately, from our first contact with the contemptuous men wearing black insignia, we realized that knowledge of German was a dividing line. Those of us who understood them, and responded articulately, were able to establish the semblance of a human relationship. Those who did not were subjected to a shocking and frightening reaction from the black shirts: the order, delivered in the calm tone of a man who knows he will be obeyed, was repeated in a loud, angry voice and then barked at earsplitting volume, the way one might shout at a deaf person or, rather, at a pet, more responsive to the tone of a message than to its content.

If you hesitated (we all hesitated, because we did not understand and we were terrorized), the blows rained down, and it became obvious that they were a variant of the same language: the custom of using words to communicate thought—the necessary and sufficient mechanism by which man is defined—had become obsolete. This was a signal: to those others, we were no longer men; we were to be treated like cows or mules, for whom there is no significant difference between a shout and a punch. For a horse to run or to stop, to turn, to pull or stop pulling, there is no need to come to an agreement or provide a detailed explanation. All it takes is a lexicon of a dozen variously assorted but unequivocal acoustic, tactile, or visual signals: a yank on the reins, a jabbing of spurs, shouts, gestures, cracks of the whip, clucking of the tongue, pats on the back—they all work equally well. Talking to a horse would be foolish, like talking to yourself, or ridiculously pathetic—what would it understand, anyway? In his book *Mauthausen*, Hans Maršálek relates how at the Mauthausen camp, which was even more multilingual than Auschwitz, the rubber whip was called *der*

Dolmetscher, the interpreter: the thing that could make itself understood by everyone.

In fact, the uneducated (and Hitler's Germans, especially the SS, were shockingly uneducated: either they hadn't been "educated" or they had been educated badly) do not know how to distinguish clearly between people who do not understand their language and people who do not understand anything. It had been hammered into the young Nazis' heads that there was only one civilization in the world, German civilization. All others, present or past, were acceptable only to the extent that they contained some Germanic element. Consequently, people who neither understood nor spoke German were barbarians by default. If they persisted in trying to express themselves in their own language, or, rather, non-language, they were to be beaten into silence and put in their place—hauling, lugging, pushing—since they were not *Menschen*, human beings. I remember a particularly telling episode. At the worksite, the fledgling Kapo of a squad consisting mainly of Italians, Frenchmen, and Greeks didn't realize that one of the more dreaded SS supervisors had come up behind him. He turned suddenly, jumped to attention in confusion, and delivered the prescribed *Meldung* (report): "Kommando 83, forty-two men." In his agitation, he said "*zweiundvierzig Männer*," forty-two men. The officer corrected him in a brusque but paternal tone: that's not what we say, we say "*zweiundvierzig Häftlinge*," forty-two prisoners. The Kapo was young, and could therefore be forgiven, but he still needed training in the job, in the social conventions, and in hierarchical differences.

This "not being spoken to" had quick and devastating effects. You dare not say a word to someone who does not speak to you or who addresses you only in seemingly inarticulate shouts. If you had the good fortune to find yourself near someone with whom you share a common language, lucky you: you can exchange impressions, ask for advice, let off some steam; but if you're not, your speech runs dry in a few days and, with it, thought.

Right then and there, you cannot understand the orders and prohibitions or decipher the regulations, some of which are futile and insulting, while others are crucial. In short, you find yourself in a void, and realize at your own expense that communication generates information and that without information you cannot live. Most of the prisoners who did not know German—almost all the Italians, in other words—died within the first ten to fifteen days of their arrival: at first sight, from starvation, exposure,

exhaustion, or disease; but on closer examination from insufficient information. If they had been able to communicate with more senior prisoners, they would have had an easier time getting their bearings. They would have learned more quickly how to procure clothes, shoes, and illegal food; to avoid the toughest jobs and the often deadly encounters with the SS; and to manage the inevitable diseases without making fatal errors. I do not mean to say that they would not have died, but they would have lived longer and had a better chance of regaining lost ground.

For those of us who survived, and who were scarcely polyglot, the first days in the Lager have remained impressed on our memories in the form of a blurry and frenzied movie filled with sound and fury signifying nothing: a hubbub of nameless, faceless people drowned out by a constant deafening background noise through which no human word could be heard. A black-and-gray film, with sound but not speech.

In myself and other survivors I have noticed a strange effect of this absence of and need for communication. At a forty-year distance, we still have a purely acoustic memory of words and phrases spoken around us in languages that we did not understand and never learned; for me, for example, they are in Polish or Hungarian. To this day I can still remember the Polish pronunciation not of my own serial number but, rather, of the number of the prisoner ahead of me in the roll call of one barrack: a jumble of sounds that ended harmoniously, like the undecipherable counting of children, in something like *stergísci stèri* (today I know that those two words were *czterdzieści cztery*, forty-four). In fact, in that barrack the soup distributor and most of the prisoners were Polish, and Polish was its official language. When your number was called, you had to be ready with your bowl outstretched to avoid missing your turn, and, to avoid being taken by surprise, the best thing to do was to jump up the minute the matriculation number of the person right ahead of you was called. That *stergísci stèri* worked like the bell that conditioned Pavlov's dogs: it provoked an instantaneous secretion of saliva.

Those foreign phrases were engraved in our memory as if on a blank magnetic tape, the way a hungry stomach rapidly assimilates even indigestible food. Their meaning did not help us to remember them, since for us they had no meaning. Many years later, however, we were able to repeat them to people who could understand, and we learned that they did have a petty, ordinary meaning: they were curses, swear words, or common

everyday expressions such as “What time is it?” “I can’t walk,” or “Leave me alone.” They were fragments torn from obscurity: the fruit of a useless, unconscious effort to carve meaning out of meaninglessness. They were also the mental equivalent of our bodily need for nourishment, which drove us to look for potato peels near the kitchens: little more than nothing, better than nothing. The undernourished brain, too, suffers from its own specific form of hunger. Or perhaps this useless and paradoxical memory had another meaning and another purpose: it was an unconscious preparation for “after,” for an unlikely survival, in which every scrap of experience would become a tile in a vast mosaic.

In the first pages of *The Truce*, I related the extreme case of absent but necessary communication: the case of a three-year-old boy, Hurbinek, who, perhaps born secretly in the Lager, had not been taught to speak, and had an intense need to speak, expressed by every part of his poor body. Here, too, the Lager was a laboratory of cruelty in which one witnessed situations and behavior never seen before, or since, or elsewhere.

I had learned a few words of German a few years earlier, when I was still a student, for the sole purpose of understanding my chemistry and physics textbooks—certainly not to actively convey my thoughts or understand the spoken language. These were the years of the Fascist racial laws, and for me the idea of meeting a German or traveling to Germany seemed unlikely. Cast into Auschwitz, I realized quite early, despite my initial bewilderment (or rather precisely because of it), that my meager *Wortschatz* had become critical to survival. *Wortschatz* means “lexical property,” literally a “treasury of words”: never has a term been more appropriate. Knowing German meant life: all I had to do was look around. My Italian comrades who did not understand it—almost everyone except for a few from Trieste—were drowning one by one in the stormy seas of incomprehension; they did not understand orders and were slapped and kicked without knowing why. In the rudimentary ethics of the camp, a blow was supposed to be somehow justified, to facilitate the establishment of the transgression-punishment-reformation cycle, so the Kapo or his deputies would accompany the punch with a grunted “Do you know why?” followed by a quick “communication of the crime.” But this ceremony was useless for the

newly deaf and dumb, who instinctively took refuge in the corner to cover their backs: aggression could come from any direction. They looked around with bewildered eyes, like animals caught in a trap, which is what they had in effect become.

Many Italians received vital assistance from the French and Spanish prisoners, whose languages were less “foreign” than German. While there were no Spaniards in Auschwitz, there were many Frenchmen (to be precise, deportees from France or Belgium), making up maybe 10 percent of the total in 1944. Some were Alsatians and some were German and Polish Jews who in the previous decade had sought refuge in France, which turned out to be a trap; they all knew German or Yiddish to varying degrees. The others—the metropolitan French, whether proletarian, bourgeois, or intellectual—had undergone a selection similar to ours one or two years earlier: the ones who did not understand disappeared from the scene. Almost all the survivors were *métèques*, who had been mistreated in France and now had a sad revenge. They were our natural interpreters: they translated for us the fundamental commands and notices of the day, “get up,” “muster,” “line up for bread,” “whose shoes are broken?” “in threes,” “in fives,” and so on.

This was hardly enough. I implored one of them, an Alsatian, to give me a private, accelerated course, subdivided into short lessons administered in whispers between curfew and our succumbing to sleep, lessons bartered for bread, there being no other currency. He accepted, and I think bread was never better spent. He explained to me the meaning of the barking of the Kapos and the SS, the inane or ironic mottos written in Gothic letters on the crossbeams of the barracks, the meaning of the colors of the triangles we wore on our chests above our serial numbers. Thus I realized that the German of the Lagers—skeletal, shouted, sprinkled with obscenities and curses—was only loosely related to the precise, austere language of my chemistry textbooks, or to the melodious and refined German of the poetry of Heine, which a classmate, Clara, used to recite to me.

What I did not realize then—and came to realize only many years later—was that the German of the Lagers was a separate language. In German it was called *Orts- und Zeitgebunden*, place- and time-bound. It was a particularly barbarized variant of what the German Jewish philologist Victor Klemperer christened the Lingua Tertii Imperii, the language of the Third Reich, going so far as to propose the acrostic LTI, in ironic analogy

with the hundred others so dear to the Germany of those years (NSDAP, SS, SA, SD, KZ, RKPA, WVHA, RSHA, BDM).

Much has already been written about LTI and its Italian equivalent, and by linguists, too. The observation that, where violence is done to man, it is also done to language is obvious; in Italy we have not forgotten the idiotic Fascist campaigns against dialects, "barbarisms," place names in the Val d'Aosta, Val de Susa, and Alto Adige, and the "servile and foreign" use of the pronoun *lei* to address a person formally.[13] In Germany the situation was different: for centuries already the German language had shown a spontaneous aversion to words of non-Germanic origin, leading German scientists to busy themselves with renaming bronchitis *Luftwegentzündung* (air-tube inflammation), the duodenum *Zwölffingerdarm* (twelve-finger intestine), and pyruvic acid *Brenztraubensäure* (burn-grape acid). In this respect, the Nazis—who wanted to purify everything—had very little left to purify. LTI differed from Goethe's German mainly in certain semantic shifts and the abuse of some terms; the adjective *völkisch* (national, folk), for example, which became ubiquitous and infused with nationalistic self-regard, and *fanatisch*, whose negative connotations became positive. But in the archipelago of the German Lagers a jargon emerged, subdivided into specific subjargons for each Lager and closely related to the old German of the Prussian barracks and the new German of the SS. There is nothing strange about its parallels with Soviet labor camp jargon, various terms of which are cited by Solzhenitsyn, and each of which has an exact counterpart in Lager jargon. It cannot have been very hard to translate *The Gulag Archipelago* into German, or if there were difficulties they were not of terminology.

Common to all the Lagers was the term *Muselmann*, Muslim, to describe prisoners who were irreversibly exhausted, emaciated, and close to death. Two equally unconvincing explanations for its origin have been proposed: fatalism, and the turban-like dressing of head wounds. This is perfectly mirrored, even in its cynical irony, by the Russian term *dochodjaga*, literally "come to the end," "concluded." In the Ravensbrück Lager (the only all-female camp) the same concept was expressed, Lidia Rolfi tells me, by the two specular nouns *Schmutzstück* and *Schmuckstück*, "garbage" and "jewel," which in German are almost homophones, one a parody of the other. The Italian women did not understand the first word's cold-blooded meaning and pronounced it *smistig*, combining the two terms

into one. “Prominent” is another term common to all the subjargons. In *If This Is a Man* I described at length the Prominentz, prisoners who had worked their way up. As an indispensable component of concentration-camp sociology, they also existed in the Soviet Gulags, where (as I mentioned in the third chapter) they were called *pridurki*.

In Auschwitz “to eat” was rendered by the verb *fressen*, which in proper German applies only to animals. To say “Get out of here,” the expression *hau’ ab* was used, the imperative form of the verb *abhauen*. Its proper meaning is “to cut, to crop,” but in the Lager jargon it was the equivalent of “Go to hell, scram.” Once, shortly after the end of the war, I used the expression “*Jetz hauen wir ab*” in all good faith, to take my leave of some very proper Bayer company officials after a business meeting. It was as if I had said, “Let’s hit the road.” They looked at me with astonishment: the term belonged to a linguistic register different from that of the preceding conversation, and it was certainly not taught in “foreign language” courses at school. I explained to them that I had not learned German at school but, rather, at a Lager called Auschwitz. A certain embarrassment ensued, but since I was there in the role of buyer, they continued to treat me with courtesy. Later I realized that my pronunciation is rough, too, but I have deliberately refused to gentrify it. I have never had the tattoo removed from my left arm for the same reason.

Of course, Lager jargon was heavily influenced by other languages that were spoken in the camps and their environs: Polish, Yiddish, the Silesian dialect, and, later, Hungarian. From the background din of my first few days of imprisonment, four or five non-German expressions emerged insistently: they must indicate, I thought, some basic object or action, such as work, water, or bread. They were engraved in my memory in the curious mechanical way I have just described. Only much later did a Polish friend reluctantly explain to me that these words simply meant “cholera,” “blood of a dog,” “thunder,” “son of a bitch,” and “fucked,” the first three as interjections.

Yiddish was the de facto second language of the camp (later replaced by Hungarian). Not only did I not understand it; I was only vaguely aware of its existence, on the basis of a few quotes or jokes that my father, who worked for a few years in Hungary, had picked up. The Polish, Russian, and Hungarian Jews were amazed that we Italians did not speak Yiddish: this made us suspicious, untrustworthy Jews, in addition to being “Badoghli” to

the SS and “Mussolini” to the French, the Greeks, and the political prisoners.[14] Apart from the difficulties of communication, it was inconvenient to be Italian Jews. After the well-deserved success of books by Isaac Bashevis Singer and his siblings, Israel Joshua Singer and Esther Kreitman, as well as many others, everyone knows that Yiddish is primarily an ancient German dialect whose vocabulary and pronunciation are different from those of modern German. It caused me more anguish than Polish, which I did not understand at all, because “I should have understood it.” I listened to it with strained attention: I often had a hard time understanding whether a sentence addressed to me, or uttered near me, was German, Yiddish, or a hybrid. In fact, some well-meaning Polish Jews made an effort to Germanize their Yiddish as best they could so that I might understand them.

I discovered a unique trace of the Yiddish we breathed in *If This Is a Man*. In the chapter “Kraus,” I report a dialogue in which Gounan, a French Jew of Polish origin, says to Kraus the Hungarian, “*Langsam, du blöder Einer, langsam, verstanden?*” which, word for word, means “Slow down, you stupid one, slow down, understand?” It sounded a little strange, but I felt sure that this was what I had heard (they were recent memories: I was writing in 1946), so this was how I transcribed it. My German translator was not convinced: I must have heard or remembered wrong. After a long epistolary exchange, he proposed that I revise the expression, which he thought unacceptable. In the published translation, the sentence appears as “*Langsam, du blöder Heini . . .*” Heini being the diminutive of Heinrich, Enrico. But I recently discovered, in a good book on the history and structure of Yiddish (*Mame Loshen*, by
J. Geipel; London: Journeyman, 1982), that one of its characteristics is the form “*Khamòyer du eyner!*”—“Donkey you one!” My mechanical memory had worked correctly.

Not everyone suffered in equal measure from the absence or shortage of communication. Not to suffer from it, accepting the eclipse of the word, was an ominous symptom: it signaled the approach of the final indifference. A select few, solitary by nature or already accustomed to isolation in “civilian” life, showed no signs of suffering from it. But most of the

prisoners who survived the critical initiation phase tried to defend themselves, each in his own way: some by begging for scraps of information, some by indiscriminately spreading news that was triumphant or disastrous, true, false, or invented, some by sharpening their eyes and their ears to seize on and try to interpret every human sign from the earth or the heavens. But the scarcity of internal information was compounded by the scarcity of communication with the outside world. In some Lagers the isolation was total. In this respect, my own camp, Auschwitz-Monowitz, could be considered privileged. Almost every week, "new" prisoners arrived from all the countries of occupied Europe, bringing the latest news, often as eyewitnesses. Despite the prohibitions, and the danger of being reported to the Gestapo, in the huge worksite we used to converse with Polish and German workers, and sometimes even with British prisoners of war. In the trash bins we would find newspapers that were a few days old, and read them avidly. One of my more enterprising fellow workers, a journalist by profession who as an Alsatian was bilingual, even boasted that he had a subscription to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the most authoritative daily newspaper in Germany in those days: what could be easier? He had asked a German worker, whom he trusted, to take out a subscription, and he paid for it by giving him a gold tooth. Every morning, during the long wait for the roll call, he gathered us around and gave us a thorough summary of the day's news.

On June 7, 1944, we saw a group of English prisoners going off to work, and there was something different about them: they marched in tight formation, chests puffed out, smiling, martial, and at such a brisk pace that the German guard escorting them, a local no longer in his prime, had to struggle to keep up. They greeted us with the V sign for victory. The next day, we found out that they had heard the news of the Allied landing in Normandy on their clandestine radio, and it was a great day for us, too: freedom seemed within reach. But things were much worse in most of the camps. The newcomers arrived from other Lagers or from ghettos that were, in turn, cut off from the world, so they brought with them only the horrific local news. Unlike us, they did not work in contact with free workers from ten or twelve different countries but, rather, on farms, in small workshops, in stone quarries or sand pits, and even in mines, and the conditions in the mine-lagers were the same as the ones that led to the deaths of the Roman prisoners of war and of the Indios enslaved by the

Spaniards. They were so deadly that no one returned to describe them. The news “from the world,” as we used to say, arrived irregularly and was vague. We felt forgotten, like the condemned prisoners left to die in the *oubliettes* of the Middle Ages.

The Jews, who were the quintessential enemies—impure, sowers of impurity and destroyers of the world—were forbidden the most precious form of communication, with their country of origin and their family. Those who have experienced exile, in any of its many forms, know how much suffering follows when this nerve is cut. It gives rise to a fatal impression of abandonment, together with an unfair resentment: they are free, so why don’t they write to me, why don’t they help me? We thus had the opportunity to understand clearly that on the great continent of freedom the freedom to communicate is an important province, like health, whose value can be understood only by those who have lost it. This suffering is not only at an individual level: in the countries and in the eras in which communication is obstructed, all other freedoms wither quickly. Debate dies of starvation, ignorance of others’ opinions spreads, and imposed opinions are triumphant. A well-known example is the mad genetics preached in the USSR by Trofim Lysenko, who, in the absence of opposition (anyone who disputed his theories was exiled to Siberia), jeopardized harvests for twenty years. Intolerance leads to censure, and censorship increases ignorance of other people’s reasons and thus intolerance: it is a rigid vicious circle that is hard to break.

The most disconsolate hour of the week for us was when our “political” comrades received mail from home. It was the hour when we felt the full burden of being alien, estranged, cut off from our country and, indeed, from the human race. It was the hour when our tattoos burned like a wound, and the certainty that none of us would return washed over us like a mudslide. Even if we had been allowed to write a letter, to whom would we have addressed it? The families of the Jews of Europe were drowned or scattered or destroyed.

I had the rare good fortune, as I related in *Lilith and Other Stories*, to exchange a few letters with my family. I am indebted to two very different people: an elderly and almost illiterate mason, and a courageous young woman, Bianca Guidetti Serra, who is today a well-known lawyer. I know that this was one of the factors that enabled me to survive. But, as I have

said before, each of us survivors is an exception in more ways than one, something that we ourselves, to exorcise the past, tend to forget.

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13. In standard Italian, the subject pronoun *lei* is used both as “she” and as the formal “you.” Objecting to its feminine connotations, Mussolini imposed the usage of *voi*—more common in southern Italy—for second-person formal address.
14. “Badoghli” is a German mispronunciation of the name of Pietro Badoglio, the marshal who became the prime minister of Italy immediately after the removal of Mussolini, and was consequently considered a traitor by the Germans.

5

Useless Violence

The title of this chapter may appear provocative or even offensive: is there such a thing as useful violence? The answer, unfortunately, is yes. Even an unprovoked or most merciful death is a form of violence, but it is sadly useful. A world filled with immortals (like the Struldbruggs in *Gulliver's Travels*) would be neither conceivable nor livable, and it would be even more violent than the already violent world of today. Nor is murder as a general principle necessarily useless: Raskolnikov gave himself a purpose by killing the old pawnbroker, however wrong he may have been. As did Princip when he assassinated the archduke in Sarajevo, and the kidnappers of Aldo Moro on Via Fani. Except for homicidal maniacs, murderers know why they are doing what they are doing: to make money, eliminate a real or presumed enemy, or avenge an offense. Wars are detestable, a terrible way to settle disputes between nations or factions, but we cannot call them useless. They do have a purpose, which may be evil or perverse, but they are not gratuitous and they do not deliberately inflict suffering. The suffering is a reality. It is collective, excruciating, and unjust, but it is a side effect, something extra. Now, I think that the violence of Hitler's twelve years had something in common with that of many other historical times and places, but that Hitler's era was characterized by a widespread violence that was useless, an end in itself, designed solely to create pain; sometimes for a purpose but always redundant and always disproportionate to that purpose.

When we look back at those years with the wisdom of hindsight, at a time when Europe and ultimately Germany itself were devastated, we are

torn between two judgments: Did we witness the rational unfolding of an inhuman plan, or a manifestation of collective madness (still unique in history, yet still poorly explained)? A malevolent logic or an absence of logic? As is often the case with human affairs, the two alternatives coexist. The fundamental design of National Socialism undoubtedly had a rationale: expansion toward the east (an old German dream); the suppression of the labor movement; hegemony over continental Europe; the annihilation of Bolshevism and Judaism, which Hitler simplistically saw as one and the same; the claiming of a share of world power with England and the United States; and the apotheosis of the German race through the "Spartan" elimination of the mentally ill and of useless mouths. All of these elements were compatible, and they can be deduced from a few postulates that had already been expressed with undeniable clarity in *Mein Kampf*. Arrogance and radicalism, hubris and *Gründlichkeit*: insolent logic rather than madness.

The measures taken to achieve these ends were also heinous, but they were not mad: the unleashing of military aggression or ruthless wars; the fostering of internal fifth columns; and the transfer or subjugation, sterilization, or extermination of entire populations. Neither Nietzsche nor Hitler nor Rosenberg was mad when he intoxicated himself and his followers by preaching the myth of the superman, to whom all is conceded in recognition of his dogmatic congenital superiority. But it is worth considering the fact that all of them, master and pupils, gradually took leave of reality at the same pace as their morals became detached from the morals common to every time and every civilization, morals that belong to our heritage as human beings and must ultimately be recognized.

Rationality ended and the disciples surpassed (and betrayed) their master by a broad measure in the practice of useless cruelty. Nietzsche's language repels me deeply; I struggle to find a statement that does not coincide with the opposite of my own preferred way of thinking. His oracular tone annoys me, but I do not think it ever expresses a desire for the suffering of others: indifference there is, on almost every page, but never *Schadenfreude*, joy in the hardships of his fellow man, or joy in deliberately causing pain. The suffering of the common people, the *Ungestalten*, the unformed, the not nobly born, is the price to pay for the coming of the kingdom of the elect. It is a lesser evil but evil nonetheless; it is not

desirable in itself. Hitler's language and practices were another matter entirely.

Today, much of the Nazis' useless violence has been consigned to history; take, for example, the "disproportionate" massacres at the Ardeatine Caves, Oradour, Lidice, Boves, Marzabotto, and too many others, where the already intrinsically inhuman limit of reprisals was surpassed by enormous lengths. But other minor, individual acts of violence—details of the larger picture—are still inscribed in indelible characters in the memory of each of us former deportees.

The memory's sequence almost always begins with the train that marked the departure toward the unknown: not only for chronological reasons but also because of the gratuitous cruelty by which those otherwise innocuous convoys of ordinary boxcars were employed for an uncustomary purpose.

Of our many diaries and stories, there is not one without the appearance of the train, the sealed boxcar, transformed from a commercial vehicle into a mobile prison or even an instrument of death. It's always overcrowded, but a rough calculation does seem to have been made, case by case, of how many people to cram in: from fifty to a hundred and twenty, depending on the length of the journey and the hierarchical value the Nazi system assigned to the "human material" being transported. The convoys departing from Italy contained "only" between fifty and sixty people per car (Jews, political prisoners, partisans, unlucky souls who had been rounded up on the streets, soldiers captured after the capitulation of Italy to the Allies on September 8, 1943): consideration may have been given to the distance, or to the impression these transfers might make on possible witnesses along the route. The transports from Eastern Europe were at the opposite extreme: the Slavs, especially if they were Jewish, were baser goods, of no value, in fact; they were supposed to die anyway, it didn't matter whether they did so during the journey or after. The convoys that transported the Polish Jews from the ghettos to the Lagers, or from Lager to Lager, held up to a hundred and twenty people per car: the trip was short. . . . Well, fifty people can fit in a freight car very uncomfortably; they can all lie down to rest at the same time, one body against the other. If there are a hundred or more, even a journey of a few hours is a living hell. They all have to stand, or take turns

crouching; and the passengers often included the elderly, the infirm, children, breast-feeding women, the mentally ill, or individuals who lost their minds during the journey or as a result of it.

Some variables and constants can be identified in the practices of the Nazi railway transports. We don't know whether they were based on regulations, or whether the officials in charge acted on their own. One of the constants was the hypocritical advice (or order) to bring with you as much as possible: especially gold, jewelry, hard currency, furs, and, in some cases (certain transports of Jewish farmers from Hungary and Slovakia), small livestock. "It could all come in handy," the guards would whisper with an air of complicity. In reality it was self-plunder: it was a simple and ingenious stratagem by which valuables were transferred to the Reich without publicity, bureaucratic complications, special transports, or fear of theft en route: because in reality everything was confiscated upon arrival. Another constant was the complete barrenness of the cars: for a journey that could last up to two weeks (as it did for the Jews deported from Thessaloniki), the German authorities provided literally nothing: no food or water, no mats or straw for the wooden floor, no receptacles for bodily functions. Nor did they bother warning the local authorities or commanders (if there were any) of transit camps to arrange provisions of some sort. A notification would have cost nothing: but the whole point of this systematic neglect was to produce useless cruelty, in a deliberate creation of pain for the pure sake of it.

In some cases the prisoners destined for deportation were able to glean something from experience. They had seen other convoys depart and learned at their predecessors' expense that they would have to provide for all their own logistical needs, as well as they could and within the constraints imposed by the Germans. The case of the trains that departed from the transit camp of Westerbork, in Holland, is typical. Westerbork was a huge camp, holding tens of thousands of Jewish prisoners, and Berlin demanded that the local commander dispatch one train every week with about a thousand deportees. A total of ninety-three trains departed from Westerbork in the direction of Auschwitz, Sobibór, and other smaller camps. Approximately five hundred people survived, none of whom had been in the first convoys, whose occupants departed blindly, in the unfounded hope that the most elementary needs for a three- or four-day journey would have been provided for as a matter of procedure. We do not

know how many people died en route or what the dreadful journey was like, since no one has come back to tell. After a few weeks, however, a worker in the Westerbork infirmary, a keen observer, noticed that the convoys always used the same boxcars, shuttling back and forth between the Lager of departure and the Lager of destination. So it came to be that some people in the later transports were able to hide messages in the cars that came back empty, after which it was possible to make provisions for at least a supply of food and water, and a bucket for bodily functions.

The convoy in which I was deported, in February 1944, was the first to depart from the Fòssoli transit camp (others had left earlier from Rome and Milan, but no news of them had reached us). The SS, which had just removed the Italian public security forces from command of the camp, gave no precise instructions for the journey. They indicated only that it would be long, and they circulated the self-serving, ironic advice I have just mentioned ("Bring gold and jewelry, and especially wool coats and furs, because you are going to work in a cold country"). The camp leader, who was also deported, had the good sense to procure a reasonable supply of food but no water: water costs nothing, after all. And while the Germans give away nothing, they are good organizers. . . . He did not even think to supply every car with a recipient for a latrine, an omission that proved grievous, causing an affliction far worse than thirst or cold. In my car there were quite a few elderly people, both men and women. Among them were all the residents of the Jewish Home for the Aged of Venice. For everyone, but especially for them, evacuating in public was agonizing or impossible, a trauma for which our civilization leaves us unprepared, a deep wound inflicted on human dignity, an obscene and ominous attack, but also the sign of a deliberate, gratuitous malice. By our paradoxical fortune (a word I hesitate to write in this context), in our car there were two young mothers with babies a few months old, and one of them had brought with her a chamber pot: only one, and it had to serve about fifty people. After traveling for two days we found a couple of nails stuck in the wooden walls, repositioned them in a corner, and with string and a blanket improvised a shelter that was largely symbolic: we are not yet beasts, not as long as we try to resist.

It is hard to imagine what happened in cars that were without this minimal arrangement. The convoy stopped two or three times in the open countryside, the doors of the cars were opened, and the prisoners allowed to

get out: but not to stray from the tracks or go off by themselves. Once the doors were opened during a stop at an Austrian transit station. The SS guards did not hide their amusement at seeing men and women squatting wherever they could, on the benches, on the tracks. The German travelers openly expressed their disgust: people like that deserve their destiny, just look how they behave. They are not *Menschen*, human beings. They're animals, pigs, it's as plain as day.

This was in effect a prologue. In the life that was to follow, in the daily rhythms of the Lager, the affront to decency represented, at least at the beginning, a major component of the overall suffering. It was neither easy nor painless to get used to the enormous group latrine, the rigid compulsory schedule, the presence, right in front of you, of the next person in line, standing there, impatient, sometimes pleading, sometimes hectoring, insisting every ten seconds, "*Hast du gemacht*"—"Are you done?" Within a few weeks, however, the discomfort lessened until it disappeared, to be replaced (but not for everyone) by habituation, a charitable way of saying that the transformation from human being to animal was well under way.

I don't believe that this transformation was ever clearly planned or formulated at any level of the Nazi hierarchy, in a document or at a "working meeting." It was a logical consequence of the system: an inhumane regime spreads and extends its inhumanity in every direction, especially downward. Unless it encounters exceptional resistance and toughness, it also corrupts its victims and its opponents. The useless cruelty of violated modesty conditioned life in every Lager. The women of Birkenau relate that once you got your hands on a mess tin (a large enameled metal bowl), it had to be used for three distinct purposes: to collect the daily soup; to evacuate at night, when access to the latrines was forbidden; and to wash when there was water in the washhouses.

The food rations at every camp included one liter of soup a day; in our Lager, by concession of the chemical factory where we worked, there were two liters. Consequently there was a great deal of water to eliminate, which compelled us to frequently ask permission to go to the latrine, or to make alternative arrangements in the corners of the worksite. Some of the prisoners couldn't control themselves: whether because of a weak bladder, or panic attacks, or a nervous disorder, they had an urgent need to urinate and often wet themselves, for which they were punished and mocked. An Italian my age, who slept on a third-tier berth of the bunk beds, had an

accident one night and wet the occupants of the lower level, who immediately reported the incident to the barrack chief. He pounced on the Italian, who against all the evidence denied the accusation. So the chief ordered him to urinate, right then and there, to prove his innocence. Of course he couldn’t and he was beaten up badly, but despite his reasonable request he was not moved to the lower bunk. Such an administrative act would have created too many complications for the quartermaster.

The forced nakedness was similar to the forced evacuation. You entered the Lager naked: more than naked, in fact, deprived not only of your clothing and shoes (which were confiscated) but also of all the hair on your head and body. The same is done, or used to be done, of course, upon entering the military, but at the camps the shaving was total and weekly, and the public and collective nudity was a typical, recurrent condition that was charged with significance. It was also a form of violence with some roots in necessity (you obviously have to get undressed for a shower or for a medical examination), but offensive because of its useless redundancy. The day in the Lager was punctuated by countless irritating moments of denuding: the check for lice, the search of our clothing, the inspection for scabies, the morning washup. And also for the periodic selections, when a “commission” decided who was still fit to work and who instead was destined for elimination. A man who is naked and barefoot feels as if his nerves and tendons had been severed: he is defenseless prey. Clothing, even the filthy clothes that were handed out, even the shoddy wooden-soled clogs, is a tenuous but indispensable defense. Without it, a man no longer feels like a human being. He feels like a worm: naked, slow, ignoble, prostrate on the ground. He knows that he might be crushed at any moment.

The same debilitating feeling of impotence and destitution was provoked, in the first days of imprisonment, by the lack of a spoon. This might seem like a minor detail to anyone accustomed since childhood to having an abundance of utensils available, in even the poorest kitchen, but it was not. Without a spoon, you could consume your daily soup ration only by lapping it up like a dog. Only after many days of apprenticeship (here, too, it was important to figure out immediately how to understand and be understood) did you come to learn that there really were spoons in the camp, but they had to be bought on the black market, paid for with soup or bread. One spoon usually cost a half-ration of bread or a liter of soup, but the inexperienced newcomers were always asked for much more. When the

Auschwitz camp was liberated, however, in the warehouses we found thousands of brand-new clear plastic spoons, in addition to tens of thousands of aluminum, steel, and even silver spoons that had come from the baggage of the arriving deportees. So the point was not to save but rather a deliberate intent to humiliate. I am reminded of the episode in Judges 7:5, when the warrior Gideon chooses the best soldiers by observing how they drink water from the river: he rejects anyone who laps the water, "as a dog lappeth," or who kneels down, and accepts only those who stand to drink, cupping their hands to bring the water to their mouths.

There are other forms of vexation and violence described repeatedly and consistently in all the concentration-camp memoirs that I would hesitate to call completely useless. It is common knowledge that in every camp there was a roll call once or twice a day. Not a roll call by name, of course, which would have been impossible with thousands or tens of thousands of prisoners, especially since they were never designated by name but, rather, only by a five- or six-figure serial number. It was a *Zählappel*, a head count that was complicated and laborious because it included prisoners transferred to other camps or to the infirmary the night before and those who had died during the night, and because the actual figure had to square exactly with the data from the day before and with the count by fives when the squads marched to work. In *The Theory and Practice of Hell*, Eugen Kogon describes how at Buchenwald even the dying and the dead had to report for the evening roll call. Stretched out on the ground rather than standing on their feet, they, too, had to be arranged in rows of five, to facilitate the count.

The roll call took place (in the open, of course) in all weather. It lasted for at least an hour but could go on for two or three if the numbers didn't add up, and even twenty-four hours or longer if there were suspicions of an escape. In the rain, snow, or bitter cold it became an even worse torture than the work, whose fatigue it compounded at night. It was perceived as an empty ritual ceremony, but in all probability it was not. It was not useless, nor, following the same logic, were the hunger, the exhausting labor, or even (forgive my cynicism: I am trying to reason with a logic not my own) the death by gas of adults and children. All this suffering developed a theme, namely the presumed right of the superior people to subjugate or eliminate the inferior people. As did the roll call, which in our "later" dreams became the very emblem of the Lager, summarizing the fatigue, the

cold, the hunger, and the frustration. The suffering that it provoked, causing collapses or deaths every day in winter, was part of the system, the tradition of the "drill," the harsh military practice, a Prussian legacy, immortalized by Büchner in *Woyzeck*.

Besides, to me it seems clear that in many of its most painful and absurd respects the concentration-camp world was just another version, an adaptation, of German military practices. The army of concentration-camp prisoners was supposed to be an inglorious copy of the true army, or rather a caricature of it. An army has a uniform: the soldier's uniform is clean, honored, and covered with insignia; the Häftling's is dirty, mute, and gray. But both must have five buttons, otherwise there will be trouble. An army parades in march step, in tight formation, to the sound of a band, and so there must be a band in the Lager, too; and the parade has to be properly executed, with eyes left when passing before the reviewing stand, in time with the music. This protocol is so necessary, so obvious, that it prevailed even over the anti-Jewish legislation of the Third Reich. With paranoid sophistry, these laws prohibited Jewish orchestras and musicians from playing music by Aryan composers, since they would contaminate the scores. But there were no Aryan musicians in the Jewish Lagers, nor for that matter are there many military marches written by Jewish composers. So in a dispensation from the racial purity laws, Auschwitz was the only German place where Jewish musicians could or indeed had to play Aryan music: necessity knows no laws.

Another military legacy was the ritual of "making the bed." Granted, this expression is largely euphemistic. When there were bunk beds, each bed consisted of a thin mattress stuffed with wood shavings, two blankets, and a horsehair pillow, and generally two people slept there. The beds had to be made immediately after waking, and simultaneously throughout the barrack. So the occupants of the lower bunks had to straighten out their mattress and blankets standing between the feet of the occupants of the upper bunks, who were perched precariously on the wooden edges, intent on the same task. All the beds had to be made within one or two minutes, since the bread distribution began right afterward. They were frantic moments: the air filled with dust until it was opaque, along with nervous tension and insults traded in every language, because "making the bed" (*Bettenbauen* was the technical term) was a sacred operation, and had to be executed according to ironclad rules. The mattress, stinking of mold and

spotted with suspicious stains, had to be plumped: for this purpose there were two slits in the cover through which to insert your hands. One of the two blankets had to be tucked in around the mattress, while the other had to be smoothed out over the pillow at a sharp angle and with straight edges. Once the operation was complete, everything was supposed to look like a flat rectangle, with the smaller rectangle of the pillow lying on top.

The camp SS and consequently all the barrack chiefs invested the *Bettenbauen* with a primary and indecipherable importance: maybe it was the symbol of order and discipline. Those who made their bed poorly, or forgot to do so, received harsh public punishment. In addition, each barrack had a pair of officials known as the *Bettnachzieher* ("bed inspectors": a term that I don't believe exists in standard German, and which Goethe would not have understood) whose duty was to inspect every single bed, and then make sure they were all lined up in a row. For that purpose, they had a piece of string as long as the barrack that they held over the made beds, correcting possible deviations to the centimeter. This maniacal neatness seemed absurd and grotesque rather than torturous. The carefully smoothed mattress had no consistency at all, and in the evening, beneath the weight of the bodies, it flattened immediately into the battens that held it. In fact, we slept on wood.

You get the impression that within the much broader borders of Hitler's Germany, the military code and military etiquette were supposed to replace traditional "bourgeois" rules everywhere. By 1934 the dull violence of the "drill" had begun to invade the schools and was turned against the German people themselves. Newspapers of the time, which had maintained a degree of freedom and of criticism, report the exhausting marches forced on teenage boys and girls as part of pre-military training: up to fifty kilometers a day, wearing a knapsack, and no mercy for stragglers. Any parent or doctor who dared to protest was threatened with political sanctions.

The tattoo, an invention specific to Auschwitz, is another matter. Starting in early 1942, in Auschwitz and the Lagers under its command (there were around forty in 1944), the prisoners' serial numbers were not only sewn on their clothes but also tattooed on their left forearm. The only prisoners exempt from this rule were non-Jewish Germans. The operation was carried

out with methodical speed by specialized “scribes,” upon registration of new arrivals, whether they were coming from freedom, from other camps, or from the ghettos. In deference to the characteristic German talent for classification, a strict procedure was quickly outlined: the men were to be tattooed on the outer arm, the women on the inner. The numbers of Gypsies were to be preceded by a Z (for *Zigeuner*), while those of Jews, starting in May 1944 (before the mass arrival of Hungarian Jews), were to be preceded by an A, which was soon replaced by a B. Until September 1944, there were no children in Auschwitz: they were killed with gas upon arrival. After this date, entire Polish families began to arrive, families who had been arrested at random during the Warsaw uprising: all of them were tattooed, including newborns.

The procedure was relatively painless and lasted less than a minute. Its symbolic meaning was clear to everyone: this is an indelible sign that you will never get out of here alive; this is the mark branded on slaves and on livestock being sent to the slaughter, which is what you have become. You no longer have a name; this is your new name. The violence of the tattoo was gratuitous, an end in itself, a pure insult: wasn’t it enough to have three cloth numbers sewn on your pants, jacket, and winter coat? No, something more was needed, a nonverbal message, so the innocent would feel their sentence inscribed in their flesh. The tattoo also constituted a return to barbarism that was particularly upsetting to Orthodox Jews, since it is precisely in order to distinguish the Jews from the barbarians that tattooing is forbidden by Mosaic law (Leviticus 19:28).

Some forty years later, my tattoo has become a part of my body. I am neither proud of it nor ashamed, neither show it off nor conceal it. To anyone who asks out of pure curiosity, I am reluctant to show it. To anyone who expresses skepticism, I show it quickly and irately. I am puzzled by the fact that young people often ask me why I don’t have it removed: why should I? There are not many of us in the world who bear this testimony.

It is necessary to do (useful?) violence to oneself to be persuaded to speak of the destiny of the most defenseless. I will try, once again, to follow a logic that is not my own. For an orthodox Nazi, it must have been obvious, clear-cut, self-evident that all Jews had to be killed: it was dogma, a

postulate. Including children, of course, and also, especially, pregnant women, to prevent the birth of future enemies. But why, in their furious raids, in every city and village of their immense empire, did they violate the doors of the dying? Why did they go to the trouble of dragging them on to the trains, of carrying them off to die far away, after a senseless journey, in Poland, on the threshold of the gas chambers? In my convoy there were two ninety-year-old women near death, who had been removed from the infirmary at Fòssoli. One died in transit, assisted in vain by her daughters. Wouldn't it have been simpler, "cheaper," to let them die, or perhaps kill them, in their beds rather than insert their agony into the collective agony of the train? It is hard to escape the conclusion that, in the Third Reich, the best option, the option imposed from above, was the one involving the maximum affliction, the maximum squandering of physical and moral suffering. The "enemy" was supposed not only to die but to die in agony.

Much has been written about work in the Lagers. I have described it elsewhere myself. Unpaid labor—slave labor—was one of the three main purposes of the concentration-camp system. The other two were the elimination of political adversaries and the extermination of the so-called inferior races. Parenthetically, the key difference between the Soviet and the Nazi concentration-camp systems was that in the Soviet camps the first aim was paramount and the third did not exist.

In the first Lagers, which were built roughly at the same time as Hitler's rise to power, labor was purely punitive and practically useless for productive purposes. The only reason to send malnourished people off to shovel peat or split rocks was to sow terror. Besides, according to Nazi and Fascist rhetoric "work is ennobling"—a sentiment inherited from bourgeois rhetoric—and therefore the ignoble adversaries of the regime are unfit to work in the customary sense of the term. Their work has to be distressful: it leaves no room for professionalism but is, rather, the work of a beast of burden—pulling, pushing, carrying heavy loads—back bent to the ground. This was another form of useless violence: useful perhaps only for crushing resistance in the present and punishing resistance from the past. The women of Ravensbrück have described endless days spent during the quarantine period (before assignment to work squads in the factories) shoveling sand

from the dunes: in a circle, under the July sun, every deportee had to shift the sand from her pile to the pile of her neighbor to the right, in a pointless and endless circle, since the sand ended up back where it had come from.

But this mythical, Dantesque torment of the body and the spirit was probably not devised to prevent the formation of pockets of self-defense or active resistance: the SS soldiers in the Lagers were obtuse brutes rather than cunning demons. They had been schooled in violence. Violence ran in their veins, it was normal, a given. It oozed from their faces, their gestures, and their language. To humiliate "the enemy," to make him suffer, was one of their daily chores. They didn't have to think about it and they had no ulterior motives: violence was the motive. I do not mean to imply that they were made of a perverse human substance that was different from our own (there were sadists and psychopaths among them, but they were few). Put simply, for several years they had been subjected to a schooling that turned the reigning morality upside down. In a totalitarian regime, education, propaganda, and information encounter no obstacles: they have an unlimited power that is almost unimaginable to anyone who has been born and lives in a pluralistic system.

Unlike the purely punitive labors I have just described, work could occasionally become a form of self-defense. Such was the case for the few people in the camps who managed to be placed in their own trades: tailors, cobblers, carpenters, smiths, masons. The regaining of their customary activity also restored their human dignity to some extent. But for many others as well, it was a mental activity, an escape from the thought of death, a way of living from day to day. Besides, it is common experience that everyday cares, no matter how painful or annoying, help distract the mind from graver but more distant threats.

I have often noticed a curious phenomenon in some of my fellow prisoners (and at times in myself): the desire for a "job well done" is so deeply rooted that they feel compelled to "do well" even enemy jobs that are harmful to their families, their friends, and their side, and especially since it requires a conscious effort for them to do a job "badly" instead. Sabotage of Nazi work, in addition to being dangerous, also required overcoming an atavistic inner resistance. The mason from Fossano who saved my life, and whom I have described in *If This Is a Man* and in *Lilith*, detested Germany, the Germans, their food, their speech, and their war, but when they put him to work building defensive walls against the bombings,

he built them straight and solid, with well-fitted bricks and all the mortar necessary. He did so not in obedience to orders but out of pride in his craft. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn describes an almost identical situation. Ivan, the protagonist, sentenced to ten years of hard labor for a crime he did not commit, gets satisfaction from building a state-of-the-art wall and seeing it come out perfectly straight. “Eight years in a camp couldn’t change his nature. He worried about anything he could make use of, about every scrap of work he could do—nothing must be wasted without good reason.” Anyone who has seen the celebrated film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* will remember the absurd zeal with which the English officer imprisoned by the Japanese goes about building an audacious wooden bridge for them. He is horrified when he realizes that the English saboteurs have mined it with explosives. The love of a job well done is a highly ambiguous virtue, as we can see. It kept Michelangelo going until his last days, but then there was Stangl, the diligent butcher of Treblinka, who replied to an interviewer with irritation: “Everything I did of my own free will I had to do as well as I could. That’s the way I am.” Rudolf Höss, the commander of Auschwitz, was proud of the same virtue when he described the creative labors that led to his invention of the gas chamber.

I would also like to mention, as an extreme example of violence that is both stupid and symbolic, the evil use that was made (not sporadically but methodically) of the human body as an object, belonging to no one, that could be disposed of arbitrarily. Much has already been written about the medical experiments conducted in Dachau, Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, and elsewhere, and some of the perpetrators, who were often not real doctors but acted as if they were, have also been punished (but not Josef Mengele, the greatest and the worst of them all). These experiments ranged from testing new medicines on unknowing prisoners to senseless and scientifically useless torture, such as the acts committed at Dachau on Himmler’s orders for the benefit of the Luftwaffe. Here the selected individuals, who were sometimes overfed beforehand to restore them to physiological normalcy, were subjected to long baths in freezing-cold water or placed inside decompression chambers that simulated the rarefaction of air at twenty thousand meters (a height that none of the airplanes in those years could reach!) to establish the altitude at which human blood starts to boil: a fact that can be obtained in any laboratory at minimum cost and without victims, or even deduced from ordinary charts. It is important to

remember such abominations today, when legitimate questions are being raised about the limits on subjecting lab animals to painful scientific experiments. This typical and apparently pointless but highly symbolic cruelty was extended, precisely because it was symbolic, to human remains after death: remains that every civilization, since the most remote prehistory, has respected, honored, and sometimes feared. The treatment they received in the Lagers implied that these remains were not human but, rather, brute, indifferent matter, useful at best only for industrial purposes. These many decades later, it is still horrifying and appalling to see the display at the Auschwitz museum of hair sheared from women destined for the gas chambers or the Lager, exhibited in a jumble and by the ton. Over time it has faded and wasted away, but it continues to whisper its silent accusation to the visitor. The Germans had run out of time to send it to its destination: this unusual merchandise was bought by German textile manufacturers who used it to make ticking and other industrial fabrics. It's unlikely that the users did not know what material it was. It's equally unlikely that the vendors, namely the SS authorities in the camps, made any money from it: their contempt prevailed over the profit motive.

Human ashes from the crematoriums, tons every day, were easily recognizable since they often contained teeth or vertebrae, but they were still used for various purposes: as landfill for marshy terrain, as cavity-wall insulation in wooden structures, and as phosphate fertilizer. They were notoriously used instead of gravel to pave the pathways of the SS village next to the camp. I couldn't say whether this was out of sheer callousness or because, given its origins, it was material to be crushed underfoot.

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I have no illusions about having exhausted the question, or having proved that useless cruelty was the exclusive legacy of the Third Reich and the necessary consequence of its ideological premises. What we know of the Cambodia of Pol Pot, for instance, suggests other explanations, but Cambodia is far from Europe and I know too little about it to be able to discuss it. This was certainly one of the essential features of Hitlerism, and not only inside the camps. The best commentary, in my view, is

summarized in these two lines from Gitta Sereny's long interview with Franz Stangl, the former commander of Treblinka:

> "Why?" I asked Stangl, "if they were going to kill them anyway, what was the point of all the humiliation, why the cruelty?" "To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies," he said. "To make it possible for them to do what they did."

In other words, before dying, the victim had to be degraded to alleviate the killer's sense of guilt. This explanation is not without logic, but it cries out to the heavens: it is the only use of useless violence.

6

The Intellectual in Auschwitz

To enter into an argument with the deceased is embarrassing and unfair, especially when the absent party is a potential friend and a privileged interlocutor; but it can also be forced upon you. I am speaking of Hans Mayer, alias Jean Améry, philosopher, victim, and theoretician of suicide, whom I have already mentioned on page 2421. Stretched between these two names is a life that knew neither peace nor the quest for peace. He was born in Vienna in 1912 into a family that was primarily Jewish but had been assimilated and integrated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although no one had converted to Christianity in any formal sense, the family used to celebrate Christmas at home around a tree decked with ornaments. When small household accidents occurred his mother used to invoke the names of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and the memorial photograph of his father, who had died on the front in the First World War, depicted not a wise bearded Jew but an official wearing the uniform of the Tyrolean Kaiserjäger, the Austro-Hungarian infantry. Until the age of nineteen, Hans had never even heard that there was such a thing as a Yiddish language.

He takes his degree in literature and philosophy at Vienna, but not without some conflicts with the nascent National Socialist Party: while to him being Jewish is of no importance, to the Nazis the only thing that counts is blood, not his opinions and tendencies, and his is impure enough to make him an enemy of Pan-Germanism. A Nazi fist breaks a tooth, and the young intellectual is proud of the gap in his smile, as if it were a scar left by a student brawl. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938 place him at the crossroads of destiny, and

the young Hans, skeptical and pessimistic by nature, has no illusions. He is lucid enough (*Luzidität* will always be one of his favorite words) to understand precociously that every Jew in German hands is “a dead man on leave, someone to be murdered.”

He does not consider himself a Jew. He knows neither the Hebrew language nor Jewish culture. The word “Zionist” is of little concern to him, and religiously he’s agnostic. Nor does he feel he can construct an identity that does not belong to him; it would be a falsification, a masquerade. Anyone not born within the Jewish tradition is not a Jew and would have a hard time becoming one: by definition a tradition is something inherited; it is a product of centuries, not something that can be fabricated after the fact. But in order to live you need an identity or, rather, dignity. For him the two concepts coincide, he who loses one loses the other and suffers a spiritual death; left defenseless, he is exposed to physical death as well. Now he and other German Jews who, like him, believe in German culture are denied German identity. In the vicious pages of Julius Streicher’s newspaper *Der Stürmer*, Nazi propaganda depicts the Jew as a hairy, fat, bowlegged, hook-nosed, jug-eared parasite whose only use is to harm other people. The Jew is self-evidently not German. On the contrary, his presence alone contaminates public baths and even park benches.

It is impossible to defend oneself from such *Entwürdigung*, such degradation. The whole world sits back and watches impassively. Even the German Jews, almost all of them, submit to the tyranny of the State and feel objectively degraded. The only escape is paradoxical and contradictory: to accept destiny, in this case Judaism, and at the same time to rebel against the imposed choice. For the young Hans, a returning Jew, to be Jewish is simultaneously impossible and obligatory. This is where the rupture begins that pursues him until death and ultimately provokes it. He denies that he possesses physical courage, but he is not lacking in moral courage. In 1938 he leaves his “annexed” homeland and immigrates to Belgium. Thenceforth he will be Jean Améry, a near anagram of his original name. For the sole sake of dignity, he will accept Judaism, but as a Jew “[he will wander] through the world like an invalid suffering from one of those illnesses that do not cause great suffering but definitely have a lethal outcome.” Educated as a German humanist and critic, he struggles to become a French writer (he never succeeds), and in Belgium joins a resistance movement whose actual political prospects are faint. The moral of his life, for which he will pay

dearly in material and spiritual terms, has changed: symbolically, at least, it now consists in “returning the blow.”

In 1940, the tide of Hitler submerges Belgium, too, and in 1943 Jean, who despite his choice has remained a solitary and introverted intellectual, falls into the hands of the Gestapo. He is asked under torture to reveal the names of his comrades and commanders. He is no hero. In his writings, he admits honestly that if he had known who they were he would have talked, but he didn’t know them. They tie his hands together behind his back and hoist him up by his wrists with a pulley. After a few seconds his arms are dislocated and remain turned upward, straight behind his back. The torturers persist, flogging his almost unconscious body fiercely, but Jean knows nothing and cannot take refuge even in betrayal. He recovers, but he has been identified as a Jew, and they ship him to Auschwitz-Monowitz, the same Lager where I, too, was interned a few months later.

Although we never saw each other again, we did exchange a few letters after liberation, since we recognized or, rather, came to know each other through our respective books. Our memories of the lower depths are very similar in physical details, but they diverge on a curious particular. While I have always maintained that I preserve a complete and indelible memory of Auschwitz, I have forgotten him. He says he remembers me, although he had me confused with Carlo Levi, who was already well-known at the time in France as an émigré and a painter. He even claims that we spent a few weeks in the same barrack, and that he hasn’t forgotten me because there were so few Italians, which made us a rarity; and also because during my last two months in the Lager I was largely able to practice my profession as a chemist, an even greater rarity.

My essay would like to be simultaneously a summary, a paraphrase, a discussion, and a critique of *his* cold and bitter essay, which has two titles: “The Intellectual in Auschwitz,” and “At the Mind’s Limits.” His essay is taken from a volume I have wanted to see translated into Italian for many years, which also has two titles: “Beyond Guilt and Atonement” (*Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*) and the subtitle “Attempt to Overcome a Defeat” (*Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten*).

As the first title indicates, the theme of Améry's essay is strictly circumscribed. Améry spent time in various Nazi prisons. After Auschwitz, he was held briefly in Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, but his observations are limited to Auschwitz, and for good reason: this is the location of the mind's limits, the unimaginable. Was being an intellectual in Auschwitz an advantage or a disadvantage?

We should, of course, begin by defining what is meant by the term "intellectual." Améry proposes a typical but arguable definition:

> Who is, in the sense of the word that I have adopted, an intellectual or a cultivated man? Certainly not every practitioner of a so-called higher profession; advanced formal training is perhaps a necessary condition, but it certainly is not enough in itself. All of us know lawyers, engineers, doctors, probably even scholars who may be intelligent and perhaps even outstanding in their fields, but whom nonetheless one can hardly designate as intellectuals. An intellectual, as I wish to define him here, is a person who lives within what is a spiritual frame of reference in the widest sense. His realm of thought is an essentially humanist one, that of the liberal arts. He has a well-developed esthetic consciousness. By inclination and ability he tends toward abstract trains of thought. . . . When presented with the cue word "society," he does not take it in its mundane sense, but rather sociologically. The physical process that produces a short circuit does not interest him, but he is well informed about Neidhart von Reuenthal, the courtly poet of village lyrics.

I find this definition needlessly restrictive. Rather than a description it is a self-portrait, and, given the context in which it is inserted, I would not exclude a hint of irony: in effect, knowing von Reuenthal, as Améry certainly did, was of little use at Auschwitz. To me it would seem more appropriate for the term "intellectual" to also include, for instance, mathematicians, naturalists, or philosophers of science; and it should also be remarked that the term takes on different shades of meaning in different countries. But there is no reason to split hairs; after all, we are living in a Europe that claims to be united, and Améry's thoughts still hold even if the concept under discussion can be understood in a wider sense. Nor do I wish to follow in Améry's footsteps and base an alternative definition on my current situation. (I may be an "intellectual" today, although the word makes me somewhat uneasy. I was certainly not an intellectual then, because of my moral immaturity, my ignorance, and my alienation. If I became one later, I owe it paradoxically to the experience of the Lager.) I would propose extending the term to the person who is cultured

independent of his or her profession; whose culture is alive, in that it seeks to renew, grow, and refresh itself; and who does not feel indifference or distaste before any branch of knowledge, although he is obviously unable to cultivate all of them.

Whatever the case may be, and whatever definition one may choose, it is hard to disagree with Améry's conclusions. On the subject of labor, which was primarily manual, in the Lager the educated man was generally worse off than the uneducated man. He lacked not only physical strength but also familiarity with the tools and the training that his working- or peasant-class comrades often possessed. To make matters worse, he was tormented by an acute sense of humiliation and destitution. By a sense of *Entwürdigung*, of lost dignity. I remember clearly my first day of work at the Buna worksite. Even before inscribing in the camp register our convoy of Italians (almost all of whom were either in the professions or shopkeepers), they sent us off temporarily to widen a large trench of clayey soil. They put a shovel in my hands, and I immediately proved to be a disaster: I was supposed to shovel the loosened soil from the bottom of the trench and toss it up to the edge, which by then was more than two meters high. It seems easy and it isn't: unless you work rhythmically, and with the right momentum, the dirt won't stay on the shovel. It will fall, and often on the head of the inexperienced digger.

The "civilian" boss to whom we were assigned was also temporary. An elderly German who appeared to be a good person, he seemed genuinely shocked by our clumsiness. When we tried to explain to him that almost none of us had ever held a shovel, he shrugged his shoulders impatiently: for goodness' sake, we were prisoners in striped pajamas, and Jews to boot. Everyone has to work, because "*Arbeit macht frei*": isn't that what was written on the gates of the camp? It was no joke: it was the rule. So if we didn't know how to work, then we had better learn—weren't we capitalists, after all? It served us right: today it's my turn, tomorrow, yours. Some of us rebelled and got the first beatings in our career from the Kapos supervising the area; others lost heart; still others (I among them) managed to intuit confusedly that there was no way out, and that the best solution was to learn how to handle a pick and shovel.

Unlike Améry and others, however, I felt only moderately humiliated by manual labor: obviously I was not yet "intellectual" enough. What was wrong with it, anyway? I had a university degree, of course, but that was an

undeserved stroke of luck. My family had been wealthy enough to allow me to study. Many boys my age had been digging ditches since adolescence. Wasn't I in favor of equality? Well, here I had it. I was forced to change my mind a few days later, when my hands and feet were covered with blisters and infections: no, you can't even improvise being a ditchdigger. I had to quickly learn a few basics that the less fortunate (but the most fortunate in the Lager!) learn in childhood: how to hold tools, move your arms and torso correctly, restrain your exertions and withstand pain, and know how to stop at the brink of exhaustion, even if that meant being slapped and kicked by the Kapos, and sometimes, too, by the "civilian" Germans of I.G. Farbenindustrie. As I have written elsewhere, the beatings were generally not fatal, but collapse was. A well-landed punch contains its own anesthesia, both bodily and spiritual.

Apart from the hard labor, life in the barracks was more painful for the educated person. It was a Hobbesian existence, an ongoing war of all against all. (I insist: so it was at Auschwitz, capital of the concentration-camp universe, in 1944. In other places or times, the situation might have been better or much worse.) A punch delivered by Authority could be accepted; it was literally a case of force majeure. Unacceptable, instead, because they were unexpected and against the rules, were the blows received from fellow prisoners, to which a civilized man rarely knew how to react. Moreover, dignity could be found in even the most exhausting manual labor, and a person could adapt, maybe by recognizing in it a rough asceticism or, depending on one's temperament, a Conradian measuring of oneself, a patrolling of one's own borders. It was much harder to accept the barrack routines: to make your bed in the idiotic perfectionist way I have described in the chapter on useless violence; to wash the wooden floors with damp and filthy rags; to get dressed and undressed on command; to expose your naked body for countless inspections for lice, scabies, and personal hygiene; to assimilate the militaristic parody of "close ranks," "eyes right," and "caps off," before a potbellied SS officer. These routines were genuinely perceived as demeaning, a fatal regression to a desolate childlike state, bereft of teachers and of love.

Améry/Mayer claims that he, too, was pained by the mutilated language I have described in chapter 4, but he was a German speaker. His suffering was different from that of us speakers of other languages, who were reduced to the condition of deaf-mutes. His suffering, if I may, was more

spiritual than physical. He suffered *because* he was a German speaker, because he was a philologist who loved his language: the way a sculptor would suffer to see one of his statues defaced or mutilated. So in this case the suffering of the intellectual was different from that of the uneducated foreigner. For the foreigner, the German of the Lager was a language he didn't understand, although his life depended on it. For the intellectual, it was a barbaric jargon that he understood but that flayed his mouth if he tried to speak it. One was a deportee, the other a stranger in his own land.

On the subject of blows traded between fellow prisoners, in another one of his essays Améry relates a key episode, not without bemusement and retrospective pride, that illustrates his new morality of the *Zurückschlagen*, the "answering a blow with a blow." A giant Polish common criminal punched him in the face over nothing. Améry hit him back as hard as he could, not out of an animal reaction but rather out of a reasoned revolt against the upside-down world of the Lager. "My human dignity," he writes, "lay in this punch to his jaw—and that it was, in the end I, the physically much weaker man, who succumbed and was woefully thrashed, meant nothing to me. Painfully beaten, I was satisfied with myself."[15]

Here I have to admit my absolute inferiority: I have never known how to "answer a blow with a blow," not because I am an evangelical saint or an intellectual aristocrat but because of my intrinsic inability to do so. Maybe it's my lack of a serious political education: for there is no political program, even the most moderate, that does not allow for some form of active defense. Maybe it's my lack of physical courage. If I am facing a natural danger or a disease I can muster some bravery, but I have always been totally bereft of courage when faced by a human being on the attack. Fist-fighting is an experience missing from my life as far back as I can remember. Nor can I say that I mind. This is why my career as a partisan was so short, painful, stupid, and tragic: I was playing someone else's part. I admire Améry's reinvention of himself, his courageous decision to leave the ivory tower and enter the fray, but this was and continues to be beyond the scope of my abilities. I admire it, but I cannot help pointing out that this decision, which overshadowed his whole post-Auschwitz life, led him to such severe and intransigent positions that he was unable to find joy in life, in living. A man who gets into fistfights with the whole world regains his dignity but pays a very high price because he is certain of his own defeat. Like every suicide, Améry's, in Salzburg in 1978, admits a nebula of

explanations but, in retrospect, the episode of his taking on the Pole provides one interpretation.

A few years ago, I learned that in a letter to our common friend Hety S., whom I will speak about shortly, Améry called me “the pardoner.” I don’t consider this an insult or a commendation, but it is inexact. I do not have a tendency to forgive. I have never forgiven any of our enemies from those years nor do I feel inclined to forgive their imitators in Algeria, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, Chile, Cambodia, and South Africa, because I do not know of any human actions that can undo a wrong. I ask for justice, but I am personally incapable of throwing punches or answering a blow with a blow.

I tried to only once. Elias, the hardy dwarf I wrote about in *If This Is a Man* and *Lilith*, was a man who, to all appearances, “was happy in the Lager.” One day, for some reason I do not remember, he grabbed me by the wrists and was insulting me and pushing me against the wall. Like Améry, I felt a surge of pride; aware that I was betraying myself and transgressing a rule handed down to me by countless ancestors who were strangers to violence, I tried to defend myself by giving him a kick in the shins with my wooden clog. Elias howled, not from pain but from wounded dignity. In an instant he had folded my arms over my chest and pushed me to the ground with all his weight. Then he caught me in a chokehold, carefully studying my face with eyes I can remember perfectly, of a pale blue porcelain color, a few inches from my own, staring at me. He squeezed until he could see the signs of unconsciousness approaching; then, without a word, he let go and went on his way.

Since this confirmation, I have preferred, within the limits of the possible, to delegate punishment, revenge, and retaliation to the laws of my country. It is a choice forced upon me. I know how badly these mechanisms work, but I am what my past has made me, and it is too late for me to change. If I, too, had seen the world collapse on top of me;
if I had been condemned to exile and the loss of national identity; if I, too, had been tortured until I lost consciousness and more, maybe I would have learned to strike back, and, like Améry, would nurture the resentments to which he devoted a long and painful essay.

These were the obvious disadvantages of having an education in Auschwitz. But were there not also advantages? If I denied it, I would be unappreciative of the modest (and antiquated) high school and university education I happened to receive. Nor does Améry. An education could be useful: not often, not everywhere, and not for everyone, but sometimes, on rare occasions, as precious as a gemstone, it was useful and you felt as if you'd been lifted off the ground, but with the danger of crashing back down, which would hurt all the more the higher and longer the exaltation lasted.

Améry tells the story, for example, of a friend of his who studied Maimonides at Dachau. But his friend was a nurse at the clinic, and although Dachau was a very harsh Lager, there was still a library, while at Auschwitz it was dangerous and inconceivable to even glance at a newspaper. He also describes one evening, on the march back from work through the Polish muck, trying—and failing—to rediscover in some of Hölderlin's verses the poetic message that had moved him in happier days. He could remember the verses, they echoed in his ear, but they no longer had anything to say to him. Another time (in the infirmary, typically, after consuming an extra ration of soup: in other words, in a brief respite from hunger), he became almost intoxicated with excitement at remembering the character of Joachim Ziemssen, the fatally ill officer still mindful of his duties, in *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann.

Education was useful for me. Not always, and sometimes in subterranean and unexpected ways, but it served me and may have saved me. I am rereading, forty years later, the "Canto of Ulysses" chapter of *If This Is a Man*. It is one of the few episodes whose authenticity I have been able to verify (a reassuring exercise: over time, as I wrote in the first chapter, you begin to doubt your own memory), because the person to whom I was speaking in that episode, Jean Samuel, is among the very few characters in the book who have survived. We have remained friends and have met several times. His memories coincide with mine: he remembers our conversation but, in a manner of speaking, without the same accents or, rather, with the accents in different places. At the time, he was not interested in Dante; he was interested in me, in my naïve and presumptuous attempt, in half an hour and with the soup pole over our shoulders, to transmit to him Dante, my language, and my confused classroom memories.

I wasn't lying and I wasn't exaggerating when I wrote, "I would give today's soup to be able to connect 'than any I had seen' to the last lines." I really would have given bread and soup—my life's blood, in other words—to rescue from the void memories that today, with the secure support of the printed page, I can refresh whenever I like, and free of charge, which makes them seem worth very little.

Then and there, those memories were worth a great deal. They allowed me to reestablish a connection with the past, rescuing it from oblivion and strengthening my sense of who I was. They convinced me that although my mind was gripped by everyday needs, it hadn't stopped working. They promoted me, in my own eyes and in the eyes of my interlocutor. They granted me a fleeting but not foolish vacation: in fact, it was liberating and it made a difference—a way, in other words, of finding myself again. Anyone who has read the book or seen the film of *Fahrenheit 451,* by Ray Bradbury, can imagine what it would mean to have to live in a world without books, and the value that the memory of books would take on in such a world. For me the Lager was this, too. Before and after "The Canto of Ulysses," I remember pestering my Italian comrades to help me recover this or that fragment of my former world, without getting much out of them, indeed, seeing in their eyes irritation and suspicion: what does he want, this guy, with Leopardi and the Avogadro constant? Has he been driven mad by hunger?

Nor should I ignore the help I derived from my profession as a chemist. At the practical level, it probably saved me from at least some of the selections for the gas chamber. From my later readings on the subject (especially *The Crime and Punishment of I.G. Farben,* by J. Borkin), I learned that although the Monowitz Lager was under the authority of Auschwitz, it was owned by I.G. Farbenindustrie; in other words, it was a private Lager. The German industrialists, who were somewhat less shortsighted than the Nazi leaders, realized that the specialists, the group to which I belonged after passing the chemistry exam that was administered, were not easily replaceable. I do not mean to refer here to this privileged status, or to the obvious advantage of working indoors, without physical fatigue and without Kapos always ready to beat us. I am referring to another advantage. I believe I can dispute "on the basis of personal experience" Améry's assertion, which excludes scientists and especially technicians from the ranks of the intellectuals: for him intellectuals were to be recruited

exclusively from the field of letters and philosophy. Was Leonardo da Vinci, who called himself an *omo senza lettere* (an unlettered man), not an intellectual?

Together with a wealth of practical notions, I had taken from my studies, and brought with me to the Lager, what for want of a better term I would call a legacy of mental habits, derived from chemistry and its related fields but with a much broader application. If I act in a certain manner, how will the substance I'm holding or my human interlocutor react? Why does it, or he, or she manifest or stop or alter a specific behavior? Can I anticipate what will happen around me in a minute, a day, or a month? If I can, which are the signs that matter and which should be ignored? Can I predict a blow, know where it will come from, shield myself from it, escape it?

But above all, and to be more specific, from my profession I acquired a habit that can be variously judged and defined as human or inhuman: the habit of never being indifferent to the people whom chance sets before me. They are human beings, but they are also "specimens," samples in a sealed envelope to be identified, analyzed, and weighed. The cross-section of humanity that Auschwitz placed before me was abundant, varied, and strange. It consisted of friends, neutrals, and enemies, all of whom fed my curiosity, which some, then and later, have criticized as detached. Food that certainly helped to keep a part of me alive, and that subsequently provided material for thought and for writing books. As I said, I don't know if I was an intellectual in the lower depths: maybe I was one intermittently, when the pressure let up. If I became one afterward, the experience I gained certainly gave me a hand. I know, this "naturalistic" attitude doesn't come only or necessarily from chemistry, but for me it came from chemistry. It hardly seems cynical to say so, anyway: as for Lidia Rolfi and many other "lucky" survivors, for me the Lager was a university; it taught us to look around ourselves and take the measure of men.

In this respect, my vision of the world was different from and complementary to that of my comrade and antagonist Améry. Different interests are conveyed by his writings: the political combatant's interest in the disease that plagued Europe and threatened the world (and still does); the philosopher's interest in the Spirit, which in Auschwitz was empty; the interest of the demeaned scholar, stripped of his homeland and his identity by the forces of history. His gaze is directed upward, in fact, and rarely

lingers on the commoners of the Lager, or on its typical character, the *Muselmann*, the exhausted man whose intellect is dying or dead.

So education could be helpful, if only in some marginal cases or for short periods; it could make a few hours beautiful, establish a fleeting connection with a fellow prisoner, keep the mind alive and sane. Of course it didn't help to get one's bearings or to understand: here my experience as a foreigner coincides with that of Améry the German. Reason, art, and poetry do not help to decipher the place from which they have been banished. In the daily life of "down there," consisting of boredom punctuated by horror, it was healthy to forget them, just as it was healthy to learn to forget home and family. I do not mean to suggest a definitive oblivion, of which no one is capable, anyway, but, rather, an extradition to the attic of memory where we store the clutter no longer needed for everyday life.

The uneducated were more predisposed to this mental exercise than the educated. They were quicker to adapt to the "not trying to understand," the first words of wisdom to learn in the Lager. Trying to understand, there, on the spot, was a useless undertaking even for the many prisoners who arrived from other camps or who, like Améry, knew history, logic, and morality, and had also experienced imprisonment and torture: a waste of energy that would more usefully be invested in the daily struggle against hunger and fatigue. Logic and morality impeded acceptance of an illogical and immoral reality: the result was a rejection of reality that, as a rule, quickly filled the educated man with despair. But there are countless varieties of the human animal, and I have seen and described men of refined culture, especially younger men, who cast it aside and became simpler, more barbaric, and survived.

The simple man, unaccustomed to asking himself questions, was shielded from the useless torment of wondering why. Besides, he often had a trade or a manual skill that made it easier for him to adapt. It would be hard to give a complete list, partly because it varied from camp to camp and from moment to moment. One curiosity: in Auschwitz, in December of 1944, with the Russians at the gates, daily air raids, and the freezing cold that cracked the pipes, an accounting team was established, the *Buchhalter-Kommando*. Steinlauf, whom I described in the third chapter of *If This Is a*

Man, was one of the prisoners summoned to take part, which wasn't enough to save him from death. This was clearly an extreme case, belonging to the context of general madness amid the collapse of the Third Reich. But it was normal, understandable, that tailors, cobblers, mechanics, and masons would find good jobs; in fact, there were too few. In Monowitz a masonry school was set up for prisoners under the age of eighteen (but certainly not for humanitarian purposes).

The philosopher, too, according to Améry, could reach acceptance but by a longer path. He might be able to overcome the barrier of common sense, which forbade him to accept such a brutal reality. Ultimately, living in a monstrous world, he would be able to admit that there are monsters, and that alongside the logic of Descartes exists the logic of the SS:

> Were not those who were preparing to destroy him in the right, owing to the undeniable fact that they were the stronger ones? Thus, absolute intellectual tolerance and the methodical doubting of the intellectual became factors in his autodestruction. Yes, the SS could carry on just as it did: there are no natural rights, and moral categories come and go like the fashions. A Germany existed that drove Jews and political opponents to their death, since it believed that only in this way could it become a full reality. And what of it? Greek civilization was built on slavery and an Athenian army had run wild on the Island of Melos as had the SS in Ukraine. Countless people had been sacrificed as far back as the light of history reaches, and mankind's eternal progress was only a naïve belief of the nineteenth century anyhow. "Left, two, three, four" was a ritual just like any other. Against the horrors there wasn't much to say. The Via Appia had been lined with crucified slaves and over in Birkenau the stench of cremated bodies was spreading. One was not Crassus here, but Spartacus, that was all.

The surrender to the intrinsic horror of the past could lead the scholar to an intellectual abdication and at the same time equip him with the defensive weapons of his uneducated comrade: "So has it always been, so will it always be." My ignorance of history may have protected me from this metamorphosis. On the other hand, luckily for me, I was not exposed to another danger that Améry rightly mentions: by nature, the intellectual (the German intellectual, allow me to add to his formulation) tends to become complicit with Power and therefore to sanction it. He tends to follow in the footsteps of Hegel and deify the State, any State: the mere fact of existing justifies its existence. The chronicles of Nazi Germany are filled with cases that confirm this tendency: the philosopher Heidegger, Sartre's teacher; the physicist Stark, a Nobel laureate; Cardinal Faulhaber, the supreme Catholic authority in Germany; and countless others acquiesced in Nazism.

Alongside this latent propensity of the agnostic intellectual, Améry observes something that all we former prisoners have observed: the non-agnostics, the believers in some faith, were better able to withstand the seduction of Power, provided, of course, that they were not believers in the National Socialist gospel. (This exception is not gratuitous: in the Lagers, there were also some die-hard Nazis—distinguished by the red triangle of political prisoners—who had fallen from grace for ideological dissidence or personal reasons. They were hateful to all.) Ultimately, they withstood the ordeal of the camps better and survived in proportionally higher numbers.[16]

Like Améry, I, too, entered the Lager as a nonbeliever, and as a nonbeliever I was liberated and I have lived until today. In fact, the experience of the camp, its appalling evil, confirmed my agnosticism. It prevented me, and still does, from being able to imagine any form of providence or transcendental justice: Why the dying people in cattle cars? children in the gas chambers? Still, I have to admit that (only once) I felt the temptation to give up, to seek refuge in prayer. It was in October 1944, the only time I sensed clearly the imminence of death. Naked and pressed between my naked comrades, holding my registration card, I was waiting to pass in front of the "Commission" that, with a single glance, would decide whether I should go immediately to the gas chamber or if, instead, I was strong enough to continue working. For an instant, I felt the need to ask for help and asylum. Then, despite my distress, equanimity prevailed. The rules of the game don't change when it's about to end, or when you're losing. A prayer in that situation would have been not only absurd (what rights could I have claimed? and from whom?) but also blasphemous, obscene, and filled with as much impiety as a nonbeliever can muster. I wiped out the temptation: I knew that otherwise, if I survived, I would have had to be ashamed.

The believers had better lives not only in the crucial moments of the selections or the air raids but also in the grind of daily life. Both Améry and I observed this. Their creed didn't matter, whether religious or political. Catholic and reformed priests, rabbis of different orthodoxies, militant Zionists, naïve or advanced Marxists, and Jehovah's Witnesses alike shared the redeeming power of their faith. Their universe was larger than ours, more extensive in space and time, and above all more comprehensible: they had a key and a foothold, a millenarian tomorrow that could lend meaning to their sacrifice, a place in heaven or on earth where justice and mercy had

prevailed or would prevail in a perhaps distant but certain future: Moscow or the heavenly or earthly Jerusalem. Their hunger was different from ours. It was a divine punishment, atonement, a votive offering, or the wages of capitalistic rot. The pain in and around them was decipherable, and so it never overflowed into despair. They looked at us with pity, sometimes with scorn; during the breaks from our toil some of them tried to convert us. But how can an agnostic construct or provisionally accept an "opportune" faith only because it is opportune?

In the frenzied, intense days that immediately followed liberation, against a pitiful scene of the dying and the dead, of contaminated wind and polluted snow, the Russians sent me to the barber to be shaved for the first time in my new life as a free man. The barber was a former political prisoner, a French factory worker from the *ceinture*, the working-class suburbs of Paris. We immediately felt a sense of kinship and I made a few banal comments about our improbable salvation: condemned to death, we had been freed on the very platform of the guillotine, no? He looked at me openmouthed and exclaimed, scandalized, "*mais Josef était là!*"—but Josef was nearby! Josef? It took me a few seconds to realize that he was alluding to Stalin. The barber had never lost hope, not him. Stalin was his fortress, the Rock that is declaimed in the Psalms.

Needless to say, the demarcation between the educated and the uneducated did not coincide in the least with the line between believers and nonbelievers. Rather, it cut across it at right angles to create four sharply defined quadrants: the educated believers, the educated agnostics, the uneducated believers, and the uneducated agnostics—four small rocky, colored islands that stood out from the endless gray sea of the half-dead who perhaps had been educated or believers, but who no longer asked questions, and of whom it would have been useless and cruel to ask them.

Améry observes that the intellectual (the "young" intellectual, I would specify, such as he and I were at the time of our capture and imprisonment) derived an odorless, decorous, literary image of death from his readings. Here I translate "into Italian" his observations as a German philologist, who was obliged to quote the "*mehr Licht!*" of Goethe, *Death in Venice*, and Tristan. For us Italians death is the second term of the binomial "love and

death." It is the tender transfiguration of Petrarch's Laura, Manzoni's Ermengarda, and Tasso's Clorinda; it is the soldier's sacrifice in battle ("*Chi per la patria muor, vissuto è assai*"—he who dies for the fatherland has lived long and well); and it is, of course, Petrarch's "*Un bel morir tutta la vita onora*"—to die well honors a whole lifetime. This immense archive of formulas to ward off evil did not last long in Auschwitz (nor would it, for that matter, in any hospital today). *Death in Auschwitz* was trivial, bureaucratic, and commonplace. It wasn't commented on, it wasn't "comforted by tears" (Foscolo). In the face of death, of inurement to death, the border between education and lack of education disappeared. Améry asserts that you no longer thought about "if" you would die, which was a given, but, rather, "how":

> Inmates carried on conversations about how long it probably takes for the gas in the gas chamber to do its job. One speculated on the painfulness of death by phenol injections. Were you to wish yourself a blow to the skull or a slow death through exhaustion in the infirmary?

Here my experience and memories depart from Améry's. Maybe because I was younger or more ignorant than him, less damaged or less conscious, I almost never had time to devote to death. I had too many other things on my mind: to scrounge some bread, avoid the grueling work, patch my shoes, steal a broom, interpret the signs and faces around me. The business of living is the best defense against death, and not only in the camps.

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15. "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," in *At the Mind's Limits*, p. 90.
16. Levi is indirectly quoting *Inferno* III:63, which refers to the cowards as "*a Dio spiacenti e a' nemici sui*," hateful to God and to his enemies.

7

Stereotypes

People who have been imprisoned (and, in general, all those who have gone through severe experiences) can be divided into two distinct categories, with rare intermediate nuances: those who are silent and those who speak. Both groups have valid reasons. The ones who are silent feel more deeply the uneasiness that for the sake of simplicity I have called “shame”; they don’t feel at peace with themselves, or their wounds are still raw. The ones who speak, and they often speak a great deal, yield to different impulses. They speak because, consciously or not, they identify imprisonment (no matter how long ago) as the center of their life, the event that, for better or worse, has marked their entire existence. They speak because they know they are witnesses at a trial whose dimensions span the planet and the centuries. They speak because, as a Yiddish saying goes, “It’s good to tell past troubles”;[17] in the *Inferno,* Francesca tells Dante that there is “no greater pain / than to remember happy times / in misery,”[18] but, as every survivor knows, the opposite is also true, that it’s good to be inside where it’s warm, seated before food and wine, and recall to oneself and others the exhaustion, the cold, the hunger, as, in the *Odyssey*, Ulysses immediately surrenders to the urgent need to tell his story before the feast laid out at the court of the King of the Phaeacians. They speak, perhaps exaggerating, like Swaggering Soldiers, of fear and courage, of cunning, of offenses, of defeats and a few victories;[19] in doing so, they differentiate themselves from the “others,” consolidating their identity through membership in a guild, and they feel their prestige increase.

But they speak, or, rather, we speak (I may use the first-person plural: I do not belong to the silent category), in part because we are asked to. Some years ago, Norberto Bobbio[20] wrote that the Nazi death camps were not "one" of the events but "*the* monstrous, perhaps unrepeatable event in human history." The others, the listeners—friends, children, readers, or even strangers—are able to sense it, apart from their indignation and their pity. They understand the uniqueness of our experience, or at least they make an effort to understand it. This is why they urge us to speak and they ask us questions, sometimes embarrassing ones. Not all of their questions are easy for us to answer, since we are not historians or philosophers but witnesses, and, besides, the history of human affairs does not necessarily abide by strict logical models. Not every watershed is necessarily the consequence of a single "why." Simplifications are good only for textbooks; there may be many "whys," muddled or unknowable if not outright nonexistent. No historian or epistemologist has yet succeeded in proving that human history is a deterministic process.

There is one question that we are always asked. Indeed, it is formulated more insistently, and with a more openly accusatory tone, as the years go by. It is not so much a single question as a cluster of questions. Why didn't you escape? Why didn't you rebel? Why didn't you avoid capture "before"? It is precisely because of the inevitability and growing frequency of these questions that they deserve our attention.

My first comment on these questions, and my first interpretation of them, is optimistic. There are countries that have never known freedom, since man's natural need for it is secondary to many more urgent needs: to withstand cold, hunger, diseases, parasites, and attacks by animals and humans. But, in countries where basic needs have been met, the youth of today see freedom as a good that should never be given up: we cannot live without it, it is an obvious natural right, and it costs nothing, like health and the air we breathe. They perceive the times and places where this birthright has been denied as remote, alien, strange. So for them the idea of imprisonment is associated with the idea of escape or revolt. The prisoner's condition is seen as unjust and abnormal, like a disease that should be cured through flight or rebellion. For that matter, the concept of escape as a moral obligation has solid roots; according to the military code of conduct in many countries, a prisoner of war is expected to make every effort to free himself and to resume his post as a combatant, and according to the Hague

Convention an escape attempt should not be punished. In the common conscience escape washes away and expunges the shame of imprisonment.

Consider, in passing, Stalin's Soviet Union, where the practice if not the law was different and far more drastic. For the returning Soviet prisoner of war there was neither healing nor redemption: he was considered irremediably guilty, even if he had succeeded in escaping and rejoining his combat division. He was supposed to die rather than surrender, and, in addition, because he had been in enemy hands (even if for only a few hours), he was automatically suspected of collusion with the enemy. Former prisoners of war, upon their ill-considered return home, were deported to Siberia or killed, including many soldiers who had been captured by the Germans on the front and dragged into occupied territory, and who had then escaped and joined partisan groups active against the Germans in Italy, France, or even behind the lines in Russia. In wartime Japan, the soldier who surrendered was also regarded with extreme disdain. This was the reason for the harsh treatment of Allied soldiers who fell into Japanese hands: not only were they enemies; they were cowardly enemies who had been degraded by their surrender.

There is more. The concept of escape as a moral duty and a reaction demanded by captivity is constantly reiterated in Romantic literature (*The Count of Monte Cristo*) and popular literature (witness the extraordinary success of Papillon's memoirs). In the world of cinema, the unjustly (or perhaps justly) incarcerated hero is always a positive figure and always attempts to escape, even in the most implausible circumstances, and his attempt is invariably crowned with success. Amid the thousand films buried in oblivion, I can still remember *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* and *The Hurricane*. The typical prisoner is portrayed as an able-bodied man, in full possession of his physical and moral faculties, who, with a force born of desperation and wits sharpened by necessity, hurls himself against barriers and climbs over or breaches them.

This schematic image of imprisonment and escape bears very little resemblance to the situation in the concentration camps. If we use the term in its broader sense, to include not only the death camps whose names are universally known but also the very many camps for military prisoners and internees, in Germany there were several million foreigners in conditions of enslavement: exhausted, despised, malnourished, poorly clothed and cared for, and cut off from contact with their home country. They were not

“typical prisoners.” They were not able-bodied; in fact, they were demoralized and broken. An exception has to be made for Allied prisoners of war (Americans and members of the British Commonwealth), who received food supplies and clothing from the International Red Cross. They were in possession of good military training, high motivation, and a strong esprit de corps, and they maintained a fairly solid internal hierarchy that was exempt from the gray zone I discussed earlier in this book. With few exceptions they could trust one another, and they also knew that, if captured, they would be treated in accordance with international conventions. Many of them did indeed try to escape, some successfully.

Things were different for the other prisoners, the pariahs of the Nazi universe (including Gypsies and Soviet prisoners, both military and civilian, who in racial terms were considered only slightly superior to the Jews). For them escape was difficult and extremely dangerous: hunger and mistreatment had left them debilitated and demoralized. They were regarded as less valuable than beasts of burden, and they felt this. Their heads were shaved, their clothing filthy and immediately recognizable, and they had wooden clogs that prevented them from moving swiftly and silently. The foreigners had no acquaintances or possible hiding places in the vicinity; the Germans knew that the ever-vigilant secret police kept a close watch on and records of their movements, and that very few of their fellow citizens would risk their freedom or their lives to give them shelter.

The special (but numerically imposing) case of the Jews was the most tragic. Even if they had managed to make it past the barbed wire and the electric fence, and evade the patrols, the surveillance of the guards armed with machine guns in the watchtowers, and the dogs trained to hunt humans, which way could they have gone? Who could they have asked for hospitality? Men and women of the air, they were no longer of this world. They no longer had a homeland—their citizenship of origin had been taken away from them—or a home, since it had been confiscated and turned over to legitimate citizens. With some exceptions, they no longer had families, or if relatives were still alive they didn’t know where to find or write to them without putting the police on their trail. The anti-Semitic propaganda of Goebbels and Streicher had borne fruit. Most Germans, especially the young, hated the Jews, despising them and regarding them as enemies of the people. The rest of the population, with a very few heroic exceptions, refrained from providing any assistance out of fear of the Gestapo. Anyone

who provided hospitality to or simply aided a Jew risked terrifying punishment. In this connection it is only fair to remember that a few thousand Jews survived throughout the period of Hitler's rule, hidden in monasteries, cellars, and attics in Germany and in Poland by citizens who were courageous, merciful, and above all intelligent enough to maintain the strictest confidentiality for years.

In the Lagers the escape of even a single prisoner was considered a major failure on the part of all the supervisory personnel, from the inmate-functionaries to the camp commander, who risked dismissal from his post. In the Nazi way of thinking, such an event was intolerable: the escape of a slave, especially a member of a race "of inferior biological value," seemed to be charged with symbolic value, representing a victory by someone who is defeated by definition, a shattering of the myth. From a more realistic perspective, it could also cause objective damage, since every prisoner had seen things that the world was not supposed to know. Consequently, all hell broke loose when a prisoner was missing at roll call (a not uncommon occurrence, often the result of a simple counting error or of a prisoner fainting from exhaustion). The whole camp was placed on high alert. In addition to the SS guards, the Gestapo patrols were called in, and searches were conducted of Lagers, job sites, farmhouses, and nearby homes. At the camp commander's discretion, emergency measures were taken. The fugitive's countrymen, known friends, or bunkmates were interrogated under torture and then killed. Escape was in effect a difficult undertaking, and it was unlikely that the fugitive had no accomplices or that no one had noticed the preparations. The barrack mates and sometimes all the camp prisoners were forced to stand in the roll-call area for hours or even days on end, in snow, rain, or withering heat, until the fugitive had been found, dead or alive. If tracked down or captured alive, he or she was invariably punished by public hanging, preceded by a ceremony that varied each time but always involved unspeakable savagery, in which the imaginative cruelty of the SS ran wild.

To illustrate how desperate an undertaking an escape was, but for other reasons as well, I would like to recall the feat of Mala Zimetbaum; in fact, I would like it to remain etched in our memories. The story of Mala's escape from the women's Lager of Auschwitz-Birkenau has been told by several people, but the details coincide. Mala was a young Polish Jew who had been captured in Belgium. She was fluent in many languages, so at

Birkenau she served as an interpreter and a messenger, which gave her a certain freedom of movement. Generous and courageous, she had helped many fellow prisoners and was loved by all. In the summer of 1944 she decided to escape with Edek, a Polish political prisoner. They wanted to do more than regain their freedom: they wanted to document to the world the massacres that were taking place every day at Birkenau. They managed to bribe an SS officer and get hold of two uniforms. They left in disguise and got as far as the Slovak border, where they were stopped by customs agents on suspicion of being deserters, and handed over to the police. They were immediately identified and sent back to Birkenau. Edek was hanged right away, but he did not want to wait until, according to the inexorable protocol of the camp, the sentence was read. He slipped his head inside the noose and stepped off the stool.

Mala had also resolved to die her own death. While she waited in a cell to be interrogated, one of her prison mates managed to get close and ask, "How is it going, Mala?" She replied, "For me it's always fine." Mala had managed to hide a razor blade on her person. At the foot of the scaffold she slit the arteries of one wrist. The SS officer acting as the executioner tried to grab the blade, and Mala, in front of all the women of the camp, slapped her bloody hand across his face. Other soldiers immediately came running in a rage: a prisoner, a Jew, a woman, had dared to defy them! They beat her nearly to death. Luckily for her, she died on the cart taking her to the crematorium.

This was not "useless violence." It was useful: it served quite effectively to nip in the bud any wishful thoughts of escape. It was normal for a new prisoner, unfamiliar with such refined and consolidated techniques, to think of escape. It was very rare for the same thought to cross the minds of more senior prisoners; in fact, preparations for escape were commonly reported by inhabitants of the gray zone, or by simple third parties, fearful of the repercussions just described.

I remember with a smile something that happened to me a few years ago in a fifth-grade classroom, where I had been invited to talk about my books and answer the pupils' questions. A smart-looking boy, apparently the class leader, asked me the ritual question: "Why didn't you escape?" I explained to him briefly what I have just written. Not quite convinced, he asked me to draw on the blackboard a sketch of the camp, indicating the location of the watchtowers, the gates, the fences, and the electric power station. I did my

best with thirty pairs of eyes staring at me. My questioner studied the drawing for a few seconds, asked me for some additional details, and then illustrated the plan he had devised: over here, at night, slit the sentry's throat; then put on his uniform; right afterward, run down to the power station and cut the electricity, so that the searchlights would go off and the electric fence would be deactivated. After that, I could easily make my getaway. He added, in all seriousness, "If it should happen to you another time, do as I said: you'll see, you'll succeed."

Within its limits, this episode seems like a good illustration of the gap, growing wider as the years pass, between the way things were "down there" and the way they are represented in today's imagination, fueled by inaccurate books, films, and myths. It drifts fatally toward simplification and stereotypes. Here I would like to build an embankment against this drifting. At the same time, I would like to point out that the phenomenon is not confined to the perception of the recent past or historic tragedies: it is much more general, pertaining to our difficulty or inability to perceive the experiences of others, which becomes more pronounced the further removed these experiences are from our own in time, space, and quality. We tend to liken them to "closer" experiences, as if the hunger of Auschwitz could be compared to the hunger of someone who has skipped a meal, or as if escape from Treblinka were similar to an escape from the Regina Coeli prison, in Rome. It is the historian's task to bridge this gap, which grows wider as the events being studied slip further and further into the past.

With the same frequency, and in an even harsher tone of accusation, we are asked "Why didn't you rebel?" This question is quantitatively different from the previous one but similar in nature, and it, too, is based on a stereotype. The answer is best divided into two parts.

First, it is not true that there were no uprisings in the Lagers. The revolts at Treblinka, Sobibór, and Birkenau have been described in great detail many times. There were also revolts in smaller camps. They were extremely audacious undertakings and they deserve our deepest respect, but none of them ended in victory, if by victory we mean the liberation of the camp. It would have been senseless to set such a goal. The guards had such overwhelming power that it would have failed in a few minutes, since the

insurgents were practically unarmed. Their real purpose was to damage or destroy the death machinery, and to enable their small group to escape; sometimes they succeeded (in Treblinka, for example, although only in part). There were never designs for a mass escape, which would have been a mad undertaking. What would have been the sense or the use of opening the gates to thousands of individuals barely able to crawl and others who would not have known where to seek refuge in enemy territory?

But there were insurrections all the same. They were prepared intelligently and with incredible courage by a resolute and still able-bodied minority. These uprisings took a shocking toll in terms of human lives and collective sufferings inflicted in reprisal, yet they helped to show, and still do, that it is not true that the prisoners of the German concentration camps never attempted rebellion. In the insurgents' minds, they were supposed to lead to another, more concrete result: namely, to make the free world aware of the terrible secret of the mass murder. The few who managed to escape and, after further ordeals, gain access to the news media did in fact speak, but, as I mentioned in the introduction, they were almost never listened to or believed. Inconvenient truths have a difficult road.

Second, the link between oppression and rebellion is just as stereotypical as the one between imprisonment and escape. I do not mean to say that it is never valid, only that it is not always so. The history of uprisings—that is to say, of rebellions from below by the "oppressed many" against the "powerful few"—is as old as the history of humanity and just as varied and tragic. A few uprisings have been victorious, many have failed, and countless others were suppressed at the outset, so precociously that no trace of them appears in the history books. There are many variables in play: the numeric, military, and idealistic force of the rebels and of the authorities they are defying; their respective inner cohesiveness or divisions; outside assistance to one side or the other; the skill, charisma, or demonism of the leaders; luck. In every case, however, it can be observed that the most oppressed individuals never appear at the head of an uprising; revolutions, in fact, are usually guided by audacious, daring leaders who throw themselves into the fray out of generosity (or maybe ambition), although they themselves have the potential to live safe, peaceful, and perhaps even privileged lives. The image of the slave breaking his heavy chains, so often depicted in monuments, has something rhetorical about it:

his chains were broken by fellow slaves whose bonds were lighter and looser.

We should not be surprised by this. A leader has to be effective. He has to have moral and physical force, both of which are depleted by oppression when it goes beyond a certain very low level. To rouse anger and indignation, the engines of all true uprisings (by which I mean grassroots rebellions and certainly not putsches or palace revolts), there must indeed be oppression, but it has to be of a modest degree or carried out very inefficiently. The measure of oppression in the Lagers was extreme, and it was carried out with the Germans' well-known and, in other areas, commendable efficiency. The typical prisoner, who constituted the backbone of the camp, was at the limits of exhaustion: starving, debilitated, covered with sores (especially on his feet: "impeded" in the original sense of the term—and it's not a minor detail), and thus deeply despondent. He was a ragged man, and with rags, as Marx knew, you can't start a revolution in the real world, only in the world of literary or film rhetoric. All revolutions—those which changed the course of world history and the tiny ones described here—were led by individuals who knew oppression well, but not on their own skin. The Birkenau revolt, which I have already mentioned, was incited by the Sonderkommando assigned to the crematoriums. Its members were desperate and exasperated men but they were well fed and had decent clothing and shoes. The Warsaw Ghetto uprising deserves our utmost respect; it was the first European "resistance," and the only one carried out without the least hope of victory or salvation, but it was the work of a political élite that had rightly maintained some basic privileges for the sake of conserving its energies.

I come to the third variant of the question: Why didn't you escape "before"? Before the borders were closed? before the trap was set? Here again I have to point out that many people threatened by Nazism and fascism left "before." They were limited to political exiles or they were intellectuals considered suspect by the two regimes: there are thousands of names, many of them obscure, others eminent, such as Palmiro Togliatti, Pietro Nenni, Giuseppe Saragat, Gaetano Salvemini, Enrico Fermi, Emilio Segrè, Lise Meitner, Arnaldo Momigliano, Thomas and Heinrich Mann,

Arnold Zweig, Stefan Zweig, Bertolt Brecht, and many others. Not all of them returned home, in a hemorrhage that drained Europe, perhaps irremediably. Their immigration—to England, the United States, South America, and the Soviet Union, but also to Belgium, Holland, and France, where the Nazi tide reached them a few years later: they were blind to the future, as we all are—was neither an escape nor a desertion but, rather, a natural rejoining of potential or real allies in citadels where they could resume the struggle or their creative activity.

But it is also true that, for the most part, the families under threat (first of all, the Jews) stayed in Italy and Germany. To ask why is yet another sign of a stereotypical, anachronistic concept of history, or, to put it simply, of a widespread ignorance and oblivion that tends to increase the further away the events become. The Europe of 1930–1940 was not the Europe of today. It is always painful to emigrate, but then it was even more difficult and more expensive than today. Emigration requires not only a lot of money but also a "bridgehead" in the country of destination—namely, friends or relatives willing to provide guarantees or even hospitality. Many Italians, especially peasants, had emigrated in the previous decades, but they were driven by poverty and hunger, and they had or thought they had a bridgehead. They were often invited, and warmly welcomed, because at the local level there was a shortage of laborers. But leaving the *patria*, the homeland, was also a traumatic decision for them and for their families.

It would be useful to dwell on the word *patria*, which is situated conspicuously outside of the spoken language: no Italian, except jokingly, would ever say, "I'm taking the train and returning to the *patria*." The term is of recent coinage and its meaning is not unambiguous. There are no exact equivalents for it in other languages, it doesn't appear, as far as I know, in any of our dialects (a sign of its erudite origins and hypothetical nature), and it has not always had the same meaning in Italy. In fact, depending on the era, it has denoted geographic entities of varying sizes, ranging from the village where a person was born and (etymologically speaking) the place where our fathers (*padri*) lived, to the whole nation, after Italian Unification, in the 1860s. The rough equivalent for *patria* in other countries is the hearth or the birthplace. In France (and sometimes in Italy, too) the term has taken on a connotation that is dramatic, polemical, and rhetorical at the same time: *la Patrie* begins to exist only when it is under threat or disowned.

For a person who is migrating, the concept of *patria* becomes painful and at the same time tends to fade. Already the poet Giovanni Pascoli, having left the "*dolce paese*," his native Romagna (although he didn't move far), sighed, "*io, la mia patria or è dove si vive*"—from now on my *patria* is wherever I live.[21] For Lucia Mondella, the heroine of Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, the *patria* is visibly identified with the "jagged peaks" of her mountains rising from the waters of Lake Como. By contrast, in countries and times of intense mobility, such as the United States or the Soviet Union today, the *patria* is spoken of only in political and bureaucratic terms: because what is the hearth, what is the "land of the fathers" for a citizenry that is always on the move? Many of them do not know nor do they care.

But the Europe of the 1930s was a very different place. Already industrialized, it was still either deeply rural or highly urbanized. "Abroad" was a vague and distant scenario for the vast majority of people, especially the middle class, which was less troubled by need. Faced with the threat of Hitler, the majority of Jews born in Italy, France, Poland, and even Germany, preferred to stay in what they felt was their *patria*, for the same basic reasons, although with nuances that differed from place to place.

Emigration presented everyone with the same organizational difficulties. These were times of serious international tensions: the European borders, which are almost nonexistent today, were practically closed, while England and the Americas were admitting extremely low quotas of immigrants. Nevertheless, the primary difficulty was of an interior, psychological nature. This is my village, city, region, or nation. I was born here. My forefathers are laid to rest here. I speak the language. I have adopted its customs and its culture, to which I may have contributed. I have paid my taxes, obeyed the laws. I have fought its battles, right or wrong. I have risked my life for its borders and some of my friends or relatives are buried in the war cemeteries. I myself, in deference to current rhetoric, have declared that I am ready to die for my country. I do not wish to nor can I leave. If I must die, I'll die "*in patria*": this will be my way of dying "for the *patria*."

It's obvious that this moral, which is more homespun and domestic than actively patriotic, would not have persisted had the European Jews been able to predict the future. Not that there were no ominous symptoms of the massacre. Hitler had spoken clearly from his first books and speeches: the Jews (and not only the German Jews) were the parasites of humankind, and

they had to be eliminated in the same way that harmful insects are eliminated. Nevertheless, as I have said, unsettling conclusions have a difficult life: until the end, until the raids of Nazi (and Fascist) dervishes from house to house, people found a way to deny the signals, ignore the danger, and fabricate the convenient truths that I describe in the first pages of this book.

This phenomenon took place to a larger extent in Germany than in Italy. The German Jews were almost all bourgeois, and they were German: like their "Aryan" quasi-compatriots, they loved law and order. Not only did they not foresee but they were organically incapable of imagining state terrorism, even when it was already upon them. There is a celebrated and pithy line by Christian Morgenstern, a bizarre Bavarian poet (who was not Jewish, despite his last name), that seems relevant here, although it was written in 1910, in the clean, honest, and law-abiding Germany described by Jerome K. Jerome in *Three Men on the Bummel*: a line that is so German and so packed with meaning that it has become a proverb that cannot be translated but only paraphrased awkwardly:

> *Nicht sein kann, was nicht sein darf*
> That which should not be, cannot be.

This is the concluding line of an emblematic short poem: Palmström, a dutiful German citizen to the extreme, is hit by a car on a street where traffic is forbidden. He pulls himself up, battered and bruised, and thinks about what happened: if traffic is forbidden, vehicles cannot circulate, which is to say, they do not circulate. Therefore, the accident cannot have happened: it is an impossible reality, an *unmögliche Tatsache* (the title of the poem). He must have only dreamed it, because, to be precise, "things whose existence is not morally allowed cannot exist."

We should beware of the wisdom of hindsight and stereotypes. More generally, we should beware of the error of judging eras and places according to the prevailing standards of the here and now: an error that is harder to avoid the more remote they become in space and time. This is why it is so arduous for us nonspecialists to understand Biblical or Homeric texts, or even the Greek and Latin classics. Many Europeans in those years —and not Europeans alone, and not only in those years—acted like Palmström, as they still do, denying the existence of things that should not

exist. According to common sense—which Manzoni astutely distinguishes from “good sense”—a man who is threatened readies himself, resists, or flees; but in those years many threats that appear obvious today were veiled by deliberate disbelief, repression, and autocatalytic and freely traded consoling truths.

This raises the inevitable question by way of rebuttal: How safely are we living today, we people of the end of the century and the end of the millennium? And, more particularly, we Europeans? We have been told, and there is no reason to doubt, that for every human being on the planet a quantity of nuclear explosives has been stockpiled equivalent to three or four tons of dynamite. If only 1 percent of these explosives were to be used, tens of millions of people would die instantly, and there would be horrifying genetic damage to the entire human race, and indeed to all life on the planet, with the possible exception of insects. It is also probable, to say the least, that a third world war—even conventional, even partial—could be fought on our territory, between the Atlantic and the Urals, the Mediterranean and the Arctic. This threat is different from the threats of the 1930s. It is less imminent but greater. Some people would associate it with a historical demonism that is new, still indecipherable, but disconnected (so far) from human demonism. This threat is aimed at everyone and is thus particularly “useless.”

What then? Are today’s fears less or more justified than the fears of those years? We are blind to the future, no less than our forebears. The Swiss and the Swedes have nuclear bomb shelters, but what would the survivors find when they came above ground? Polynesia, New Zealand, Tierra del Fuego, and Antarctica might be left unharmed. It is much easier to get passports and entry visas today than it was then: why don’t we go, why don’t we leave our countries, why don’t we escape “before”?

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17. “*Ibergekumeneh tsores iz gut tsu dertsailen*.”
18. Canto V:121–23.
19. “Swaggering Soldiers” is a reference to Plautus’ Miles Gloriosus.
20. Bobbio (1909–2004) was a legal and political philosopher, best known for his work on the relationship between social equality and individual freedom.
21. From the poem “Ricordi” (“Memories”) in *Myricae*.

8

Letters from Germans

If This Is a Man is a book of modest dimensions but, like a nomadic creature, it has left behind a long and tangled trail for forty years now. It was first published in 1947, in a printing of 2500 copies, which were welcomed by the critics but only some of which sold: the remaining 600 copies, deposited in Florence in a warehouse for unsold books, were drowned in the flood of the autumn of 1966. After ten years of "apparent death," the book came back to life when it was accepted by the publisher Einaudi, in 1957. I have often asked myself a useless question: What would have happened if the book had immediately been popular? Maybe nothing in particular: I would have probably continued my humdrum life as a chemist and Sunday writer (and not even every Sunday); or maybe instead I would have let it go to my head and, with who knows how much luck, hoisted the flag of the full-time writer. As I was saying, the question is moot: the business of reconstructing the hypothetical past, the what-ifs, is just as discredited as predicting the future.

Despite this false start, the book found its way. It was translated into eight or nine languages, adapted for the radio and for the theater in Italy and abroad, and discussed in countless schools. One stop on its journey was of crucial importance to me: its translation into German and publication in the Federal Republic of Germany. When, around 1959, I learned that a German publisher (Fischer Verlag) had acquired the translation rights, I was overcome by a violent new emotion, that of having won a battle. I had written those pages without imagining a specific readership; for me, they were things that I had inside, that had invaded me, and that I had to release

—to say them, indeed to shout them from the rooftops. But people who shout from rooftops address everyone, and no one, and cry in the desert. With the announcement of that contract, everything changed and became clear to me. I had indeed written the book in Italian, for Italians, for their children, for those who did not know, who did not want to know, who had not yet been born, who, willfully or not, had acquiesced in the offense. But its real audience, those at whom the book was aimed like a gun, was them, the Germans. And now the gun was loaded.

You will recall that only fifteen years had gone by since Auschwitz. The Germans who read me would be “them,” not their heirs. From oppressors or passive spectators they would become readers: I would force them to, I would tie them up in front of a mirror. The time had come to settle accounts, to put my cards on the table. Above all, the time had come to talk. I was not interested in revenge; I had been inwardly satisfied by the (symbolic, incomplete, tendentious) religious pageant of Nuremberg, but it was fine with me for others, the professionals, to handle the very legitimate hangings. It was my job to understand, to understand them. Not the handful of great perpetrators, but them, the people, the ones I had seen up close, the ones from whose ranks the SS soldiers had been recruited, as well as the others, the ones who had believed, or who while not believing had remained silent, who hadn’t mustered the feeble courage to look us in the eyes, to throw us a piece of bread, to whisper a kind word.

I have very clear memories of that time and that climate, and I think I can judge the Germans of those years without prejudice and without anger. Almost all of them, but not everyone, had been deaf, dumb, and blind: a mass of “invalids” huddled around a core of savages. Almost everyone, but not everyone, had been cowardly. At this moment, and with a sense of relief, and to show how far I am from blanket judgments, I would like to relate an episode: it was exceptional, but still it happened.

In November of 1944, we were working, in Auschwitz. With two comrades I was in the chemistry laboratory I have described elsewhere. The air-raid alarm went off, and right away the bombers appeared. There were hundreds of them, and a monstrous air strike seemed imminent. There were some large bunkers in the yard, but they were for the Germans, and we were not allowed in. The uncultivated land between the fences, which was already covered with snow, was supposed to be sufficient for us. All of us, prisoners and civilians alike, hurried down the steps to our respective

destinations, but the laboratory chief, a German technician, pulled us Häftlinge-chemists to the side: “You three, come with me.” Dumbstruck, we ran behind him to the bunker, but in the doorway stood an armed guard with a swastika on his armband. He said, “You can come in; the others, get out of here.” The chief replied, “They’re with me: either everyone or no one,” and he tried to force a way in. The two men started punching each other. The guard would have had the best of it, he was stocky, but luckily for everyone the alarm-over sounded: the air raid wasn’t for us—the planes had continued northward. If (another if! How to resist the appeal of the road not taken?), if there had been many more anomalous Germans, capable of this modest courage, the history of the past and the geography of the present would be different.

I didn’t trust my German publisher. I wrote him a letter bordering on insolence, warning him not to remove or change a single word of the text, and making him agree to send me the manuscript of the translation in installments, chapter by chapter, as the work progressed. I wanted to check its fidelity not only to the words but to their innermost meaning. Together with the first chapter, which I found translated very well, I received a letter from the translator, in perfect Italian.[22] The publisher had shown him my letter: I had nothing to fear from the publisher, much less from him. He introduced himself: he was the same age as me, had studied for several years in Italy, and in addition to being a translator was also an Italian scholar, an expert on the eighteenth-century playwright Carlo Goldoni. He, too, was an anomalous German. He had been called up, but he was repelled by Nazism. In 1941 he feigned illness, was hospitalized, and managed to spend his putative convalescence studying Italian literature at the University of Padua. When he was declared temporarily unfit for duty, he stayed in Padua, where he came into contact with the anti-Fascist groups of Concetto Marchesi, Egidio Meneghetti, and Otello Pighin.[23]

The armistice between Italy and the Allied forces came in September 1943, and the Germans, in two days, effected a military occupation of northern Italy. My translator “naturally” joined the Paduan partisans of Justice and Liberty, which fought in the Euganean Hills against the Fascists of the Republic of Salò and against his fellow Germans. He had had no

doubts, he felt more Italian than German, partisan and not Nazi, but he knew what he was risking: hard labor, danger, suspicion, and discomfort. If he was captured by the Germans (and in fact he had been informed that the SS were on his trail), an atrocious death. In his country, he would have been labeled a deserter or even a traitor.

After the war, he settled in Berlin, which in those years had not yet been divided in two by the wall but was ruled by a complicated joint regime of the four powers (the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France). After his partisan adventure in Italy, he was perfectly bilingual: he spoke Italian without a trace of a foreign accent. He did translations: first Goldoni, because he loved him and knew the dialects of the Veneto region well. For the same reason, he translated the Renaissance playwright Angelo Beolco, also known as Ruzante, who until then had been unknown in Germany. But he also did modern Italian authors such as Carlo Collodi, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Stefano D'Arrigo, and Luigi Pirandello. The work wasn't paid very well; rather, he was too scrupulous, and therefore too slow, to receive fair pay for his work day. All the same, he never made up his mind to take a job with a publishing house. For two reasons: he loved his independence, and, subtly and indirectly, his political past weighed on him. No one ever told him so openly, but a deserter, even in the ultra-democratic Germany whose capital was Bonn, even in four-power Berlin, was persona non grata.

He was enthusiastic about translating *If This Is a Man*: the book was well suited to him, confirming and substantiating through contrast his love of freedom and justice. Translating it was a way of continuing his fearless and solitary fight against his troubled country. At the time, both of us were too busy to travel, so a frenetic exchange of letters began between us. We were both perfectionists: he, by professional inclination; I, because although I had found an ally, and a worthy one, I feared that my text would fade, that it would lose expressiveness. It was the first time I had encountered the always burning, never gratuitous adventure of being translated, of seeing my thoughts manipulated, refracted, my words sifted, transformed, or misunderstood, or maybe invigorated through an unexpected resource of the new language.

From the first installments I could see that, in truth, my "political" suspicions were unfounded: my partner was as much an enemy of the Nazis as I, and no less indignant. My linguistic suspicions remained, however. As

I mentioned in the chapter on communication, the German that my text required, especially in the dialogue and the quotations, was much more coarse than his. A man of letters, who had had a refined upbringing, he was familiar with barracks German (he had done a few months of military service, after all), but he could not help ignoring the degraded, often satanically ironic jargon of the concentration camps. Each of our letters contained a list of proposals and counterproposals, and at times a fierce argument broke out over a single word, such as the example I have given earlier.[24] Our general pattern was as follows: I would indicate to him a thesis suggested by my auditory memory, which I have described elsewhere; he would counter with the antithesis “That’s not good German, today’s readers won’t understand it”; I would object, “That’s exactly how they said it down there”; and in the end we would arrive at a synthesis, that is, a compromise. Experience later taught me that translation and compromise are synonymous, but at the time I was obsessed by a scruple for hyperrealism. I did not want the book, especially in its German guise, to lose any of the harshness, any of the violence done to language, that I had worked so hard to replicate in the original Italian. In a certain sense, it was not so much a translation as a restoration: what he was creating, and what I wanted, was a *restitutio in pristinum*, a translation back into the language in which the events had taken place and to which they belonged. Rather than a book, it had to be a tape recording.

The translator understood quickly and clearly, and the result was a translation that was excellent in every respect. I could judge its fidelity for myself, and its style was later praised by all the reviewers. The question of a preface arose. The publisher, Fischer, asked me to write one myself. I hesitated and then said no. I felt a confused restraint, a repugnance, an emotional block that stifled the flow of ideas and of writing. I was being asked, in other words, to follow the book—a bearing of witness—with a direct appeal to the German people: a plea, a sermon. This would have required me to raise my voice, climb up on the podium, go from being a witness to being a judge or preacher, propose theories and interpretations of history, separate the saints from the sinners, and shift from writing in the third person to writing in the second. All these tasks were beyond me, and I would have gladly assigned them to others, perhaps to the readers themselves, German and not.

I wrote to the publisher that I did not feel capable of drafting a preface that would not pervert the nature of the book, and I proposed an indirect solution: to preface the text, by way of an introduction, with a passage from the letter I had written to the translator in May of 1960, at the end of our laborious collaboration, to thank him for his work. I reproduce it here:

> . . . And thus we have finished. I am glad, and satisfied with the result, and grateful to you, and at the same time a little sad. You see, this is the only book I have written, and now that we have finished transplanting it into German I feel like a father whose son has come of age and leaves, and no longer needs his care.
>
> But it's not just this. You may have already noticed that the Lager, and writing about the Lager, was an ordeal that changed me deeply; it has given me maturity and a reason to live. Perhaps it is presumption, but here, today, I, 174517, can speak to the Germans through you, remind them of what they did, and say to them, "I am alive, and I would like to understand you so that I can judge you."
>
> I don't think a man's life necessarily has a specific purpose, but if I think of my own life and the purposes I have set for myself, there is only one among them that I can identify consciously and precisely: to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people, to "talk back" to the Kapo who wiped his hand on my shoulder, to Dr. Pannwitz, to the men who hanged the Last One [these are all characters in *If This Is a Man*], and to their heirs.
>
> I am sure that you have not misinterpreted me. I have never harbored any hatred toward the German people, and, if I had, I would be cured of it now that I have come to know you. I cannot understand, I cannot bear to see a man judged not for who he is but for the group he happens to belong to. . . .
>
> But I can't say that I understand the Germans. Now, something that one does not understand becomes a sore point, a sharp pain, a permanent itch that asks to be satisfied. I hope that this book will have some kind of echo in Germany: not only because of my ambitions but also because the nature of this echo will perhaps allow me to understand the Germans better and to soothe this itch.

The publisher accepted my proposal, and the translator agreed enthusiastically, so this page constitutes the introduction to all the German editions of *If This Is a Man*; indeed, it is read as an integral part of the text. I was made aware of this as a result of the "nature" of the echo I mention in the last lines.

This echo materialized in some forty letters written to me by German readers in the years 1961–64: in other words, during the crisis that led to the building of the wall that still divides Berlin today, and is one of the points of greatest friction in today's world—the only place, along with the Bering Strait, where the Americans and the Russians face each other directly. All these letters reflect a careful reading of the book, but they all respond, try to respond, or deny that a response can be made to the question implied by the last sentence of my letter, namely *whether it is possible to understand the Germans*. Other letters have come to me, a few at a time, in the years that followed, coinciding with reprints of the book, but the more recent they are the blander they are. The people who write today are the children and the grandchildren. The trauma isn't theirs, it wasn't lived in the first person. They express vague solidarity, ignorance, and detachment. For them, that past is truly past, hearsay. They are not specific to Germany: with some exceptions, their writings could be confused with the letters I continue to receive from their Italian contemporaries, so I will not consider them in this sampling.

The first letters, the ones that matter, are almost all from young people (who declare themselves as such, or who appear to be so from their texts), with the exception of one that was sent to me in 1962 by Mr. T.H., of Hamburg, which I cite first because I am in a hurry to be rid of it. I will translate the main passages, trying to preserve their clumsiness:[25]

> Dear Mr. Levi,
>
> Your book is the first story by an Auschwitz survivor that has come to our knowledge. My wife and I were deeply moved by it. Now, since, after all the horrors you have lived through, you are addressing yourself once again to the German people "to understand," "to stir up an echo," I dare hope for a reply. But it

will be little more than an echo: no one can “understand” things like this! . . .

The man who is without God is to be feared: he has no restraint, no control! And so another passage from Genesis 8:21 is more appropriate: “For the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth,” which is explained and proved today by Freud’s tremendous psychoanalytic discoveries in the field of the unconscious, of which I am sure you are aware. In every era there have been moments when “all hell broke loose,” uncontrollably and senselessly: persecutions of Jews and Christians, the extermination of entire populations in South America, of the Indians in North America, of the Goths in Italy under Narses, the horrendous persecutions and massacres during the French and Russian Revolutions. Who could “understand” all this?

But you must be expecting a specific answer to the question of why Hitler came to power and why we did not subsequently shake off his yoke. Well, in 1933 . . . all the moderate parties disappeared and the only choice left was between Hitler and Stalin, the National Socialists and the Communists, whose numbers were almost equal. We knew the Communists from the various big revolts after the First War. Hitler seemed suspect to us, it’s true, but clearly the lesser evil. At first we didn’t realize that all his fancy words were lies and treason. In foreign policy, he had one success after another. Every state maintained diplomatic relations with him, and the Pope was the first to conclude a concordat with him. Who could have suspected that we were mounting [sic] a criminal and a traitor? In the end, no guilt can be assigned to the betrayed: only the traitor is guilty.

And now the more difficult question, his senseless hatred of the Jews. Well, this hatred was never popular. Germany was rightly considered the country most friendly toward Jews in the world. Never, from the beginning to the end of the whole period of Hitler’s rule, as far as I know or have read, was a single case of spontaneous outrage or aggression against Jews heard of. Always and only (extremely dangerous) attempts at providing help.

And now the second question. It is not possible to rebel in a totalitarian state. The whole world was unable to help the

Hungarians.[26] . . . There was certainly no way we could resist by ourselves. You mustn't forgot that, in addition to all the battles of the resistance, on one day alone, July 20, 1944, thousands and thousands of officers were executed. It was not just a "small gang," as Hitler later called it.

My dear Mr. Levi (I allow myself to address you thus because anyone who has read your book cannot but be fond of you), I have no excuses, no explanations. The guilt weighs heavily on my poor betrayed and misguided people. Take comfort in the life that has been restored to you, in peace, and in your beautiful homeland, which I, too, know. Dante and Boccaccio are on my bookshelf, too.

Faithfully yours,
T.H.

Probably without informing her husband, Frau H. added the following laconic lines, which I also translate literally:

When a people realizes too late that it has become a prisoner of the devil, some psychic alterations are the consequence:

1. It brings out the evil in man. The result is the Pannwitzes and the Kapos who wipe their hands on the backs of the helpless;
2. On the other hand, it appears there was also an active resistance against injustice, which sacrificed itself and its family [sic] to the suffering, but without visible success.
3. What is left is the large mass of those who, to save their lives, keep their mouths shut and abandon their endangered brother.

This we recognize as our sin before God and mankind.

I have often thought about this strange couple. He sounds like a typical specimen of the bulk of the German middle class: a Nazi who was opportunistic rather than fanatical, repenting when it was opportune to repent, stupid enough to believe that he could make me believe his

simplified version of recent history, and to dare to cite the retaliation of Narses against the Goths.[27] She was a little less hypocritical than her husband but more sanctimonious.

I replied in a long letter, perhaps the only angry letter I have ever written. I wrote that no church offers indulgence to the Devil's disciples or accepts as a justification blaming the Devil for one's sins. That a person has to answer for his sins and errors, otherwise every trace of civilization would disappear from the face of the Earth, as in fact it did disappear during the Third Reich. That his electoral data were infantile: in the general elections of November 1932—the last free elections—the Nazis had actually won 196 seats in the Reichstag, but at the same time the Communists won 100 seats and the Social Democrats—who were hardly extremists, and were in fact detested by Stalin—won 121. And, above all, that on *my* bookshelf, next to Boccaccio and Dante, I keep a copy of *Mein Kampf*, written by Adolf Hitler many years before he came to power. That evil man was not a traitor: he was a coherent fanatic with extremely clear ideas that he never changed or concealed. Anyone who voted for him had certainly voted for his ideas. Everything is already there in his book: blood and soil, living space, the Jew as the eternal enemy, the Germans who embody "the loftiest humanity on Earth," and the explicit treatment of other countries as instruments for German domination. This was more than just "fancy words." Hitler may have said other things as well, but these he never denied.

As for the German resisters, they deserve to be honored, but, truth be told, the conspirators of July 20, 1944, took action a little too late. In closing, I wrote:

> The most outrageous statement you make regards the unpopularity of anti-Semitism in Germany. It was the foundation of the "Nazi" discourse, from its beginnings. It was of a mystical nature: the Jews could not be "the people chosen by God," since the Germans were. There isn't a single page or speech by Hitler in which hatred of the Jews is not repeated obsessively. It was not marginal to Nazism: it was its ideological core. So I ask: how could the people "most friendly toward Jews" vote for the party and acclaim the man who called the Jews the primary enemies of

Germany, and whose principal political goal was “to strangle the Jewish hydra”?

As for spontaneous outrages and aggressions, your sentence itself is outrageous. Given the millions of deaths, it seems pointless and vile to discuss whether it was a case of spontaneous persecutions. For that matter, the Germans have little inclination for spontaneity. But may I remind you that no one obliged the German industrialists to hire starving slaves except their own desire for profit; that no one forced the Topf company (which is flourishing in Wiesbaden today) to build the enormous multiple crematoriums of the concentration camps; that maybe the SS were ordered to kill Jews, but enlistment in the SS was voluntary; and that I myself found in Katowice, after the liberation, stacks and stacks of forms authorizing German heads of household to pick up, free of charge, clothing and shoes for adults *and for children* from the Auschwitz warehouses. Did no one wonder where so many children’s shoes had come from? And did you never hear talk of a certain Kristallnacht? Or do you think that every single crime committed that night was imposed by law?

There were attempts to help, I know, and I know they were dangerous; just as, having lived in Italy, I know “that it is not possible to rebel in a totalitarian state”; but I know there are thousands of ways, far less dangerous, to express solidarity with the oppressed, that these were frequent in Italy, even after the German occupation, and that in Hitler’s Germany they were put into action all too rarely.

The other letters are very different and depict a better world. I have to point out, however, that not even the best intentions to absolve would allow me to consider them a “representative sample” of the German people of that time. In the first place, my book was published in twenty or thirty thousand copies, and was therefore read by perhaps one in a thousand citizens of the Federal Republic. Some probably bought it by chance, others because they were to some extent predisposed—sensitized, permeable—to the impact with events. Of these readers, only about forty, as I mentioned, decided to write to me.

In forty years of experience, I have become quite familiar with a singular character, the reader who writes to the author. Such a person can belong to one of two very distinct groups, one agreeable, the other annoying; intermediate cases are rare. Those in the first group give joy and teach. They have read the book carefully, often more than once. They have loved and understood it, sometimes better than the author. They say that they have been enriched by it and clearly explain their judgment and sometimes their criticisms. They thank the author for his work and often explicitly exempt him from a reply. The second type irritate you and waste your time. They flaunt their merits and parade them before you; they often have a manuscript in a drawer, and insinuate their intention to climb up the book and the author as ivy does a tree. Sometimes they are even children or adolescents writing on a dare, a wager, to get an autograph. My forty German correspondents, to whom I dedicate these pages with gratitude, all belong (with the exception of the aforementioned Mr. T.H., who is a case in himself) to the first group.

• • •

L.I. is a librarian in Westphalia; she admits to having had a violent temptation to close the book halfway through, “to escape the images it evokes,” but she immediately felt ashamed of this selfish and cowardly impulse. She writes:

> In your preface you express the wish to understand us Germans. Believe us when we tell you that we do not understand ourselves or what we did. We are guilty. I was born in 1922, in Upper Silesia, and grew up not far from Auschwitz, but at the time I really did not know anything—please do not take this as a cheap excuse but as fact—about the atrocious things that were happening right nearby. Yet, at least until the outbreak of the war, I would occasionally run into people with the Jewish star and I did not invite them into my house, I did not provide them with the hospitality I would have shown others, I did not intervene on their behalf. For this I am guilty. The only way I can live with my terrible thoughtlessness, cowardice, and selfishness is through Christian forgiveness.

She also mentions that she belongs to Action Reconciliation Services for Peace (Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste), an evangelical association of young people who spend their vacations abroad, rebuilding the cities most heavily damaged by the German war (she has been to Coventry). She says nothing about her parents, which is symptomatic. Either they knew and didn't tell her; or they didn't know, and so they had never talked to the people who certainly did know about "down there," the railway men on the trains, the warehousemen, the thousands of German workers in the factories and mines where the slave laborers were worked to death: anyone, in short, who hadn't covered his eyes with his hands. I repeat: the true, collective, general crime of almost all the Germans of that period was that they did not have the courage to speak.

M.S. from Frankfurt says nothing about himself and looks for cautious distinctions and justifications: this, too, is symptomatic.

> You write that you do not understand the Germans. . . . As a German who feels the horror and the shame, and who will until the end of his days be aware that the horror happened by means of the people of his country, I feel implicated in your words and wish to reply to them.
>
> I, too, cannot understand men like the Kapo who wiped his hands on your shoulder, and Dr. Pannwitz and Eichmann, and all the others who carried out their inhuman orders without any sense that a person cannot escape responsibility by hiding behind that of others. Who as a German cannot feel distress at the fact that so many of the German people were the lackeys of a criminal system . . . and that all this was possible first because of the large number who were so willing?
>
> But are these people "the Germans"? . . . And can we speak in general of "the Germans," "the English," "the Italians," or "the Jews" as a single entity? You mentioned exceptions to "the Germans," whom you do not understand. . . . I thank you for these words, but I ask you to please remember that countless Germans . . . suffered and died in the fight against injustice. . . .
>
> I hope with all my heart that many of my fellow citizens will read your book so that we do not become complacent and apathetic, but rather remain aware of how low a man falls when

> he becomes the torturer of his fellow man. Then your book will have contributed to this never happening again.

I replied to M.S. with dismay: the same dismay, for that matter, that I felt in replying to all these polite, civil correspondents, members of the population that had exterminated mine (and many others). Essentially, it was the same perplexity of the dogs studied by neurologists, who were conditioned to react in one way to a circle and in another to a square. When the square was rounded and started to look like a circle, the dogs were paralyzed or showed signs of neurosis. I wrote to him, in part:

> I agree with you: it is dangerous, it is illegitimate, to talk about the "Germans" or any other people as a single, undifferentiated entity, and to lump together all individuals in a judgment. Yet I do not feel I can deny that a spirit of the people exists (otherwise it would not be a people). *Deutschtum*, *italianità*, and *hispanidad* are all the sum of traditions, customs, history, language, and culture. Anyone who does not feel this spirit—which is national in the best sense of the word—does not fully belong to his people, and, worse, does not fit into human civilization. For example, while I find no sense in the syllogism "All Italians are passionate; you are Italian; therefore you are passionate," I do think it is legitimate, within limits, to expect one specific collective behavior rather than another from the Italian people as a whole, or from the Germans, etc. There may well be individual exceptions, but in my opinion a cautious, probable expectation is possible. . . .
>
> Let me be honest with you. Among the generation of people who are older than forty-five, how many Germans are truly aware of what took place in Europe in the name of Germany? Judging from the baffling outcomes of several trials, I fear they are few: together with sorrowful and compassionate voices, I hear others that are discordant, strident, too proud of the power and wealth of today's Germany.

I.J., from Stuttgart, is a social worker. She writes:

> That you were able to write without letting an implacable hatred of us Germans seep through . . . is extraordinary and should make

> us feel ashamed of ourselves. I wish to thank you for this. Unfortunately there are many among us who refuse to believe that we Germans really did commit these inhuman horrors against the Jewish people. Of course, this denial stems from many different motives, maybe even the simple fact that the intellect of the average citizen is incapable of believing that such unfathomable evil among us "Western Christians" is possible.
>
> It is good that your book has now been published in German translation, so that some young people will be enlightened. . . . It could also perhaps be put in the hands of some older people, which would, however, require, in what you call our "sleeping Germany," a certain civic courage.

I wrote back to her:

> Many people are amazed that I do not feel hatred toward the Germans, and they should not be. In reality, I do understand hatred, but only *ad personam*. If I were a judge, although I would repress the hatred I might feel inside, I would not hesitate to impose the heaviest penalties, or even death, on the many guilty individuals who are still living today undisturbed on German soil or in countries with suspect hospitality. But I would be horrified if even a single innocent person were to be punished for a crime he did not commit.

W.A., a doctor, writes from Württemberg:

> For us Germans, who bear the heavy weight of our past, and—God knows!—our future, your book is more than a deeply distressing account: it is help. For this guidance I thank you. I have no excuses to offer. I believe that guilt—and first *this* guilt—is not easy to expiate. . . . Much though I may try to disassociate myself from the evil spirit of the past, I am still a member of this population, which I love, and which in the course of the centuries has produced in equal measure works of noble peace and others of diabolical danger. In the convergence of all the periods of our history, I know I share in the greatness and the guilt of my people.

> I thus stand before you as an accomplice to the fate that befell you and your people.

W.G. was born in Bremen in 1935. He is a historian and a sociologist, and an active member of the Social Democratic Party:

> At the end of the war I was still a child. I cannot shoulder any of the blame for the massive crimes committed by the Germans, yet I feel ashamed of these crimes. I hate the criminals under whom you and your companions suffered, and I hate their accomplices, many of whom are still alive. You write . . . that you cannot understand the Germans. . . . If you mean to refer to the criminals and their accomplices, I cannot understand them, either. . . . But I hope that I would be capable of fighting them should they appear again. I have spoken openly of shame. By this I mean the feeling that what the Germans did then should never have been done and should never have been approved of by other Germans.

Things became more complicated with H.L., a student from Bavaria. She first wrote to me in 1962. Her letter was singularly alive, free of the leaden gloom that characterized almost all the other letters, even the best intentioned. She believed that I was expecting “an echo” especially from important people, officials, not from a girl, but she felt “implicated, as an heir and accomplice.” She is satisfied with the education she is getting at school, and with what she has been taught about the recent history of her country, but she is not sure “that one day the excessiveness typical of the Germans will not erupt again, in another guise and aimed at other targets.” She deplores the fact that her peers reject politics “as something dirty.” She rebelled in a “violent and unruly” manner against a priest who spoke ill of the Jews, and against her Russian teacher, a Russian woman, who blamed the Jews for the October Revolution and considered Hitler’s massacres to be a just punishment. In those moments, she felt “an unspeakable shame at belonging to the most barbarian of peoples.” “All mysticism or superstition aside,” she is convinced “that we Germans will not escape the just punishment for what we have done.” In some way, she feels authorized, indeed obligated, to state “that we, the children of a guilt-ridden generation,

are fully aware of it, and we will try to alleviate the horrors and suffering of yesterday to prevent them from being repeated tomorrow."

Since she seemed like an intelligent correspondent, open-minded and "new," I wrote to her asking for more specific information about the situation in Germany (it was the Adenauer era). As for her fear of a collective "just punishment," I tried to convince her that a punishment, if it is collective, cannot be just, and vice versa. She sent me by return mail a postcard in which she said that my questions would require some research and asking me to be patient, adding that she would reply more thoroughly as soon as possible.

Twenty days later, I received a twenty-three-page letter from her: a doctoral thesis, almost, compiled thanks to a frenetic series of interviews with people by telephone and by mail. So this nice girl also had a propensity for *Masslosigkeit*, the same excessiveness—albeit for good purposes—she had criticized in others. She apologized with a comic sincerity: "I had little time, and so many things that I could have said more succinctly have remained the way they were." Since I am not *masslos*, I will limit myself to summarizing, and to quoting the passages that seem most significant:

> I love the countryside where I grew up, I adore my mother, but I cannot look at the German as a particular type with any pleasure: maybe because he still seems too marked by those qualities that in the recent past were so floridly displayed. But also perhaps because what I hate in him is that part of myself that is like him.

She answered one of my questions about school by saying (and documenting) that the entire teaching staff had been passed through the sieve of "denazification" demanded by the Allies, but that it had been conducted in an amateurish way and widely subverted. There was no other way to approach it: otherwise they would have had to bar an entire generation from teaching. In the schools, recent history was taught, but there was little talk about politics. The Nazi past was touched on occasionally, in tones that varied; a few teachers took pride in it, a few concealed it, even fewer declared themselves immune to it. A young teacher told her:

> The students are very interested in this period, but they immediately start to protest if you speak to them about Germany's guilt. Many indeed state that they have had enough of the mea culpas from the press and from their teachers.

H.L. comments:

> From the young people's resistance to the mea culpas you can see that for them the problem of the Third Reich still appears just as unresolved, "annoying," and typically German as it was for all those before them who experienced it. Only when this is no longer so will people sit up and take notice in horror.

Elsewhere, in speaking about her own experience, H.L. writes (quite plausibly):

> The teachers did not evade the problems; on the contrary, they illustrated Nazi propaganda methods through newspapers of the period. They related how, as youths, they had joined the new movement uncritically and enthusiastically: the young people's assemblies, the sports organizations, and such. We students attacked them harshly, and wrongly, to my thinking today: can anyone reproach them for having less foresight into the situation than the grown-ups? And would we, in their place, have been any better at recognizing the Satanic methods by which Hitler won over young people for his war?

Note: this is the same justification that T.H. of Hamburg adopted. For that matter, no witness of the time has denied Hitler's truly diabolical power of persuasion, which also helped him in his political contacts. It is acceptable from young people, who understandably try to exonerate the entire generation of their parents, but not from their compromised and falsely repentant elders, who try to limit the guilt to a single man.

H.L. sent me many other letters, to which I had ambivalent reactions. She described her father, a restless, shy, and sensitive musician who died when she was a child: was she looking for a father in me? She wavered between documentary gravity and childish fantasy. She sent me a kaleidoscope, and along with it she wrote:

> I have also constructed a clear image of you: you are the one who, having escaped a horrifying destiny (forgive my boldness), wanders about our country, still a foreigner, as in a bad dream. And I think I should sew you a garment like the one the heroes wear in legends to protect you from every danger.[28]

I did not recognize myself in this image, but I did not tell her. I answered that such garments cannot be given to others: each person has to weave them and sew them for him- or herself. H.L. sent me Heinrich Mann's two *Henry IV* novels, which I have unfortunately never found the time to read. I sent her the German translation of *The Truce*, which in the meantime had been published. In December 1964, from Berlin, where she had moved, she sent me a pair of gold cuff links, which she had commissioned from a girlfriend who was a goldsmith. I didn't have the heart to send them back to her. I thanked her but asked her not to send me anything else. I sincerely hope I did not offend this innately kind person. I hope she understood the reason for my defense. Since then I have heard nothing from her.

I have left to the end my exchange of letters with Hety S., of Wiesbaden, who is my age, because it represents a self-contained episode in both quality and quantity. My "HS" file is fatter than the one where I keep all the other "letters from Germans." Our correspondence went on for sixteen years, from October 1966 to November 1982. It contains, in addition to about fifty of her letters (which are often four or five pages long) and my replies, carbon copies of an at least equal number of letters that she wrote to her children, her friends, other writers, publishers, local government offices, newspapers or magazines, of which she thought it was important to send me a copy, plus newspaper clippings and book reviews. Some of her letters were "circulars": half of the page is a photocopy that is the same for various correspondents, the rest, blank, is filled in by hand with more personal news or questions. Hety wrote to me in German and did not know Italian. At first I answered her in French, then I realized it was hard for her to understand, and for a long time I wrote to her in English. Later, with her amused consent, I wrote to her in my shaky German, in duplicate. She would send one copy back to me, with her "reasoned" corrections. We met only twice:

at her house, during a quick business trip I took to Germany, and in Turin, during an equally hurried vacation of hers. The meetings were not important: the letters matter much more.

Her first letter was also inspired by the question of "understanding," but it had an energetic and vigorous tone that distinguished it from all the others. My book had been given to her by a common friend, the historian Hermann Langbein, but very late, when the first edition had already sold out. As cultural commissioner for a regional government, she was trying to have it reprinted immediately, and she wrote to me:

> You will certainly never succeed in understanding "the Germans": not even we Germans are able to. So much happened in those years that should never have happened, at any price. For a great many Germans it really led to us forever losing what Germany used to mean to us—terms like "Fatherland" are extinct. . . . What we nevertheless cannot allow ourselves is to forget all this. Books like yours, which in such a humane way recall the inhumane, are for precisely this reason so important to the younger generation. . . . Perhaps you do not fully realize how many things a writer reveals about himself—and therefore about people in general. This is precisely what confers weight and value on every chapter of your book. What moved me most were your experiences in the Buna laboratory. So that is how it must have looked when the "free men" encountered the "prisoners."

A little later, she tells the story of a Russian prisoner who delivered coal to her basement in the fall. Speaking to him was forbidden: she slipped food and cigarettes into his pockets, and to thank her he would shout, "Heil Hitler!" By contrast, she was not forbidden to speak with a young French woman "volunteer" worker. (Germany must have been such a maze of hierarchies and differential prohibitions in those years! Even the "letters from Germans," especially hers, say much more than initially appears.) She used to pick the woman up from her camp, bring her to her house, and even take her to concerts. In the camp, the girl was not able to wash herself very well and she had lice. Hety did not dare to tell her: she felt uncomfortable and was ashamed of her discomfort.

I replied to her first letter saying that my book had indeed produced an echo in Germany, but from the Germans who least needed to read it. I had received letters of repentance from the innocent, not from the guilty. The guilty, understandably, kept quiet.

In the letters that followed, Hety (I'll call her this for the sake of simplicity, although we never did become that familiar) slowly provided me with a portrait of herself in her indirect way. Her father, an education specialist by profession, had been a Social Democratic activist since 1919. In 1933, the year that Hitler came to power, he immediately lost his job; this was followed by random searches and economic hardship. The family had to move to a smaller house. In 1935, Hety was expelled from high school because she refused to join the Hitler Youth Organization. In 1938, she married an engineer from I.G. Farben (hence her interest in the Buna laboratory), with whom she immediately had two children. After the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Hitler, her father was deported to Dachau, and her marriage entered a difficult period because her husband, while not registered in the party, could not tolerate having Hety endanger herself, him, and the children to "do what had to be done," namely, to bring a little food every week to the gates of the camp where her father was a prisoner:

> He considered all our efforts to be absolutely senseless. . . . Once the family got together to discuss whether there were any possible ways of helping our father, and if so what were they. He said very simply, "Don't waste your time: you'll never see him again."

When the war was over, her father did return, but he was reduced to a skeleton (he died a few years later). Hety, who was very close to him, felt it was her duty to carry on his activities in the revived Social Democratic Party. Her husband objected, they quarreled, and he asked for and obtained a divorce. His second wife was a refugee from eastern Prussia[29] who, through the two children, maintained decent relations with Hety. Once, when they were talking about her father, Dachau, and the Lagers, she told her:

> Don't be angry with me if I can't bear to hear or to read about these things of yours—when we had to flee, we experienced

> something so dreadful; and the worst part of it is that we had to take the same road on which the Auschwitz prisoners had been evacuated earlier—the road was bordered by dead bodies. I would like to forget those images and I cannot: I continue to dream about this road and about those mounds along the sides.

Her father had just returned home when Thomas Mann spoke on the radio about Auschwitz, the gas, and the ovens:

> We listened in horror, and for a long time none of us spoke. My father paced up and down the room, saying nothing, brooding, until I finally asked him, “Do you think it is humanly possible that people could be gassed and burned, and their hair, skin, and teeth used?” And he, who had been in the Dachau camp, answered, “No, it’s unthinkable. Someone of Thomas Mann’s stature should not let himself be swayed by these stories of atrocities.” . . . We first learned that it was true a few weeks later.

In another long letter she described their life in “internal emigration”:

> My mother had a close Jewish friend. She was a widow and lived alone, her children had emigrated, but she could not make up her mind to leave Germany. We were persecuted, too, but we were “politicals”: for us it was different, and we had some luck despite the many dangers. I will never forget the night the woman came to us, in the dark, to tell us, “Please don’t come to see me anymore, and forgive me if I don’t come to you. Do you understand? It will put you in danger.” . . . We continued to visit her, of course, until she was deported to Theresienstadt. We never saw her again, and we didn’t “do” anything for her: what could we have done? Yet the thought that nothing could be done still torments us: please try to understand.

She told me that she had witnessed the euthanasia trials in 1967.[30] One of the defendants, a doctor, stated in court that he had been ordered to personally inject the mentally ill with poison, and that he had refused because of professional ethics. On the other hand, turning the gas tap had seemed unpleasant but tolerable. When she got home, Hety found the

cleaning woman, a war widow, busy with her work, and her son, who was cooking. All three of them sat down at the table, and she told her son what she saw and heard at the trial. All at once:

> The woman put down her fork and spoke out very aggressively. "What is the point of these trials they're holding now? What else could our poor soldiers have done if they were given these orders? When my husband came home from Poland on leave, he told me, 'Almost the only thing we did was shoot Jews: always shooting Jews. We did so much shooting that my arm hurt.' But what else could he have done if they gave him those orders?" . . . I fired her, repressing my temptation to congratulate her on her poor husband who had died in the war. . . . There you have it, how here in Germany we are still living surrounded by people like this.[31]

Hety had worked for many years at the Ministry of Culture for the state of Hessen: she was a diligent but impulsive official, the author of controversial reviews, a "passionate" organizer of conferences and meetings with young people, and equally passionate about the victories and defeats of her party. After her retirement, in 1978, her cultural life became even richer: she wrote to me about her travels, her readings, and her language courses abroad.

Above all, and for her whole life, she was avid, even starved, for human relationships: her rich and lasting relationship with me was only one of many. "My destiny pushes me toward people with a destiny," she once wrote to me, but she was driven not by destiny but by a vocation. She sought them out, found them, and put them in touch with one another, curious about their encounters or confrontations. It was she who gave me Jean Améry's address and gave my address to him, but on one condition: that both of us send her carbon copies of the letters that we exchanged (and we did). She also played an important part in helping me track down Dr. Müller, the chemist at Auschwitz, and later my provider of chemical products and penitent, whom I wrote about in the "Vanadium" chapter of *The Periodic Table*. He had been a colleague of her ex-husband. She also asked for the carbon copies of the "Müller file," and with good reason. She

later wrote intelligent letters to him about me and to me about him, dutifully sending each of us carbon copies of the letters she had written to the other.

On only one occasion did we (or, at least, I) sense a disagreement. In 1966, Albert Speer was released from the interallied Spandau prison. He was notoriously the "court architect" of Hitler, but in 1943 he was appointed minister of war production, and in that capacity he was largely responsible for the organization of the factories in which *we* died of exhaustion and starvation. At Nuremberg he was the only defendant to admit his guilt, even for things he did not know; indeed, precisely for not wanting to know about them. He was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment, during which he wrote his prison diaries, published in Germany in 1975. At first Hety hesitated, then she read them, and was deeply disturbed by them. She asked for a meeting with Speer, which lasted two hours. She gave him Langbein's book on Auschwitz and a copy of *If This Is a Man*. He gave her a copy of his *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* to send to me.

I received and read his diaries, which bear the mark of an educated and lucid man and of a change of heart that seems sincere (but an intelligent man knows how to simulate). In the book, Speer emerges as a Shakespearean figure, with boundless ambitions, so great that they blinded and corrupted him, but not as a barbarian, a coward, or a slave. I would have been happy never to have read it, because for me it is painful to judge someone, especially Speer, not a simple man, a guilty person who had paid for his crimes. I wrote to Hety with a touch of irritation: "What drove you to see Speer? Curiosity? A sense of duty? A mission?"

She wrote back:

> I hope you took my sending of the Speer book in the right way; but your question is of course legitimate. . . . For the moment I only wanted to acquaint you with and give you an impression of what kind of a man allowed himself to be "enslaved" by and become a "creation" of Hitler. . . . He says (and I believe him) that he was traumatized by the whole concentration-camp complex and especially by the "extermination machinery" in Auschwitz and elsewhere. In his books he dedicates a lot of space to the ever-recurring question of how it was possible for him to "neither want to see nor to know" . . . and that in those days he

> was able to simply “repress” everything. . . . I do not have the impression that he is trying to justify himself: he would like to learn to understand what is so impossible to understand (also for him). . . . He impressed me as a person without “falsehood,” who sounds earnest and who is tormented by the past. For me he became a key: he is a symbolic figure, the symbol of Germany losing its way! . . . In the meantime he has read Langbein’s big Auschwitz book, which must have been very hard for him; and he will be reading your book in the next few days—I will write to you then to let you know of his reactions.

These reactions never arrived, to my relief: it would have been hard for me to have to reply to a letter (as is customary among civilized people) from Albert Speer. In 1978, apologizing to me because of the disapproval she sensed in my letters, Hety went to see Speer a second time, and she came back disappointed. She found him aged, egocentric, pompous, and stupidly proud of his past as a pharaonic architect. After that, the content of our letters shifted toward themes that were more alarming because they were closer to the present day: the Aldo Moro kidnapping; Herbert Kappler’s escape from an Italian hospital; the simultaneous deaths of the Baader-Meinhof terrorists in the high-security Stammheim prison. She tended to believe the official thesis of suicide. I was skeptical. Speer died in 1981, and Hety, suddenly, in 1983.

Our friendship, which was almost exclusively epistolary, was long and rich, and often joyous. Strange, when I think about the enormous difference between our paths through life and our geographic and linguistic distance. Not so strange when I acknowledge that she, of all my German readers, was the only one who was pure of heart and therefore unencumbered by feelings of guilt; and that her curiosity was and is mine, and she struggled with the same ideas that I have explored in this book.

22. The translator was Heinz Riedt, a resident of East Berlin. Among the many things he shared with Levi was a common birth date, July 31, 1919.
23. Marchesi became the rector of the University of Padua on September 7, 1943, right after the armistice and before the formation of the Republic of Salò, and he was one of the architects of Italy's postwar constitution. Meneghetti, head of the pharmacological institute of the university, was a Socialist member of Justice and Liberty, the Italian anti-Fascist movement to whose military arm, the Action Party, Levi himself belonged. Pighin was an active member of the Resistance who was tortured and killed by the Fascist security irregulars on January 10, 1945.
24. Levi is referring to a peculiar use of the word "*Einer*," inflected by Yiddish, in an episode that he relates in the chapter "Kraus" of *If This Is a Man* and in "Communication" in the present volume (see page 2482).
25. Unless otherwise noted, the letters have been translated directly from the German originals, as reproduced in the German edition of the book, *Die Untergegangenen und die Geretteten*, trans. Moshe Kahn (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1990), pp. 175–209.
26. In 1956, the Hungarian people revolted against the Soviet-controlled government, but the USSR sent in troops and tanks and crushed the uprising.
27. Narses (c. 478–573) was the legendary Byzantine general under Justinian who led the emperor's forces in a series of victories against the Goths in Italy.
28. This letter was translated from Italian.
29. After the war, when national boundaries were redrawn, the province of East Prussia became mostly Polish territory, and its German inhabitants fled westward or were expelled.
30. In 1967, a trial was held in Frankfurt of doctors who carried out the Nazi program of killing the mentally and physically handicapped.
31. The two excerpts from this letter are translated from the Italian, both here and in the German edition.

Conclusion

The experience that we survivors of the Nazi concentration camps bear witness to is alien to the younger generations in the West, and becoming more so with each passing year. For the young people of the 1950s and ’60s, these matters belonged to their parents: they were talked about in the family, and the memories still preserved the freshness of things seen. For the young people of the 1980s, they belong to their grandparents: distant, blurry, “historical.” The young are assailed by current-day problems that are different and more pressing: the nuclear threat, unemployment, the depletion of natural resources, the population explosion, and frenetically renewed technologies to which they have to adapt. The configuration of the world has changed profoundly, and Europe is no longer the center of the planet. The colonial empires have ceded to the pressures of the peoples of Asia and Africa, who are thirsting for independence, and they have broken up, not without tragedies and conflicts among the new nations. Germany, split in two for an indefinite future, has become “respectable,” and in fact it holds the destinies of Europe. The United States–Soviet Union dyarchy, born of the Second World War, persists. But the ideologies that uphold the governments of the only two victors of the last conflict have lost much of their credibility and luster. A skeptical generation is approaching adulthood, short not on ideals but on certainties, and in fact distrustful of the great revealed truths, and ready instead to accept the small truths, changing from month to month on the feverish wave of cultural fads, masterminded or random.

For us it is becoming harder and harder to speak with young people. We see it as both a duty and a risk: the risk of appearing outdated, of not being

listened to. We have to be listened to: apart from our individual experiences, we were collective witnesses to a fundamental and unexpected event, fundamental precisely because it was unexpected, unforeseen by anyone. It happened contrary to every prediction. It took place in Europe. Incredibly, an entire civilian population that had just emerged from the fervid cultural flowering of Weimar followed a two-bit actor whom people find laughable today. But Adolf Hitler was obeyed and acclaimed until the catastrophe struck. It happened once and it can happen again. This is the heart of what we have to say.

It can happen, anywhere. I do not mean nor can I say that it will happen. As I've just noted, it's unlikely that all the factors that triggered the Nazi madness could occur again, and simultaneously. But some precursory signs are appearing. Violence, "useful" or "useless," is before our eyes. It is spreading, through sporadic private incidents and government lawlessness, in the two areas customarily known as the first and the second worlds, that is to say, in parliamentary democracies and Communist-bloc countries. In the Third World it is endemic or epidemic. All that is needed is a new two-bit actor (there is no shortage of candidates) to mobilize the violence, legalize it, declare that it is necessary and just, and infect the world with it. Few countries can be guaranteed immunity from a future wave of violence generated by intolerance, lust for power, economic claims, religious or political fanaticism, or racial friction. We thus need to sharpen our senses and distrust the prophets, the charismatics, the persons who speak and write "fancy words" without the backing of sound reasons.

An obscene thought has been voiced that we need conflict, that the human race cannot live without it. It has also been said that local conflicts, violence in the streets, in the factories, and in the stadiums, are comparable to an all-out war, and that, like petit mal, the epileptic equivalent, they protect us from a grand-mal seizure. It has been noted that Europe has never gone forty years without a war: such a long European peace would be an historical anomaly.

These are deceptive and questionable arguments. Satan is not necessary: there is no need, ever, for wars and violence. There are no problems that cannot be settled around a table, so long as there is goodwill and mutual trust: or even mutual fear, as the current interminable stalemate seems to prove, in which the great powers confront each other with a cordial or a grim face, but have no qualms about unleashing bloody wars between their

proxies (or allowing them to be unleashed), sending sophisticated weapons, spies, mercenaries, and military advisors rather than peace negotiators.

Nor is the theory of preventive violence acceptable: violence only begets violence, in a vicious cycle that accelerates over time rather than slowing down. In effect, many signs suggest a genealogy of contemporary violence that stems from the violence that reigned in Hitler's Germany. Obviously it existed before, in the distant and the recent past: nevertheless, even in the midst of the senseless bloodshed of the First World War, features of mutual respect survived among the contenders, along with a trace of humanity toward prisoners and defenseless civilians, and a tendency to respect agreements: a believer would say, "a certain fear of God." The adversary was neither a demon nor a worm. All that changed after the Nazis' "*Gott mit uns*." The Allies responded to Göring's terroristic air raids with carpet bombings. The destruction of a people and of a civilization proved to be possible and desirable both in itself and as an instrument of domination. Hitler had learned the mass exploitation of slave labor in the school of Stalin, but it returned to the Soviet Union in amplified form after the war. The exodus of brains from Germany and Italy, together with the fear of being surpassed by Nazi scientists, gave birth to the nuclear bomb. The desperate Jewish survivors, fleeing Europe after the great shipwreck, created in the heart of the Arab world an island of Western civilization, a miraculous palingenesis of Judaism, and a pretext for renewed hatred. After the defeat, the silent Nazi diaspora taught the arts of persecution and torture to soldiers and politicians in a dozen countries bordering the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific. Many new tyrants keep a copy of *Mein Kampf* in their drawer; it could still come in handy, maybe with some adjustments or the substitution of some names.

Hitler's example showed just how devastating a war fought in the industrial age can be, even without recourse to nuclear weapons. This has been confirmed in the past twenty years by the ill-fated Vietnam venture, the Falkland Islands conflict, the war between Iran and Iraq, and the events in Cambodia and Afghanistan. Yet it has also demonstrated (not, unfortunately, in the rigorous sense of mathematicians) that, at least sometimes, and at least in part, historical wrongs are punished. The mighty

leaders of the Third Reich ended up on the gallows or as suicides. Germany suffered a Biblical “massacre of first-born sons” that decimated a generation, and a partition that put an end to the venerable German pride. It is not absurd to assume that, if Nazism had not proved to be so ruthless from the beginning, the alliance among its adversaries would never have been established or would have fallen apart before the end of the conflict. The world war that the Nazis and the Japanese wanted was a suicidal war: all wars should be feared as such.

I would like to add one final stereotype to the ones listed in chapter 7. Young people ask us, more frequently and more insistently as that time grows more remote, what cloth our “torturers” were made of. By “torturers” they mean our former guardians, the SS, and in my opinion the term is inappropriate: it implies deformed individuals, born bad, sadistic, flawed at birth. Instead, they were made from the same cloth as us, average human beings, of average intelligence and average malice: with some exceptions, they were not monsters, they had the same faces as us, but had been brought up badly. For the most part, they were crude and diligent lackeys and functionaries; some were fanatic believers in the Nazi gospel, many were indifferent, or afraid of punishment, or eager to advance their careers, or overly obedient. All of them had received the appalling miseducation provided and imposed by school according to the dictates of Hitler and his collaborators, and with the SS drills as the finishing touch. Many men joined the SS because of the prestige it conferred, because of its omnipotence, or even simply to escape family woes. Some—very few, in truth—had second thoughts, and requested transfer to the front, provided cautious assistance to the prisoners, or chose suicide. Let there be no mistake that everyone, to a greater or lesser extent, was responsible but also that this responsibility encompasses the overwhelming majority of the German people. From the beginning—out of mental laziness, nearsighted calculation, stupidity, or national pride—they accepted the “fancy words” of Corporal Hitler, followed him as long as he was blessed by fate and a lack of scruples, were devastated by his downfall, ravaged by grief, misery, and remorse, and rehabilitated a few years later by unprincipled political gamesmanship.

Works Cited

While Levi occasionally provides bibliographic information about the Italian translations of the books he cites, there is no bibliography in the original or successive Italian editions of this book. Here I have listed the texts he mentions, marking with an asterisk the ones that were available in Italian translation at the time he was writing, and providing in parentheses the date of the first edition in the original language.

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Translator's Afterword

The Drowned and the Saved, which was first published in 1986, was written over a period of almost ten years. According to Marco Belpoliti, who prepared the two-volume critical edition of Levi's works (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), the genesis of the book can be traced back to Levi's translation of Jacob Presser's novel *The Night of the Girondists*, in 1975–76 (the original Dutch edition was published in 1957, and the work appeared in English one year later, as *Breaking Point*). In his foreward Levi touched on the themes he later developed in the chapter "The Gray Zone," namely, "to explore the space that separates the victims from the tormentors . . . and to do so with a lighter touch and a less troubled spirit than has been the case, for example, in certain movies" (he was referring to *The Night Porter*, directed by Liliana Cavani).

Earlier in 1975, Levi had written an appendix for a scholastic edition of *If This Is a Man*, designed to answer the questions most frequently raised by his student readers, and providing him with another opportunity to revisit the themes of his first work and the polemics it aroused. In November 1977, he published an essay in Turin's daily newspaper, *La Stampa*, entitled "Il re dei Giudei" ("The King of the Jews"), telling the story of Chaim Rumkowski, which he republished in *Lilith and Other Stories* (1981) and used to form the last part of "The Gray Zone." Belpoliti considers this chapter to be the oldest previously published part of the book, while also pointing out that the idea for the last chapter, "Letters from Germans," has a much earlier origin, the publication of the German translation of *If This Is a Man*, in 1961.

Levi was particularly active in 1979, when, between January and August, he published eleven newspaper articles and a story, all focused on the concentration camps and the extermination of the Jews. This activity was prompted by the attention being generated in Europe by Holocaust deniers, particularly two letters written to *Le Monde* by Robert Faurisson.

The Preface of *The Drowned and the Saved* is taken from a paper that Levi prepared for the 1982 Congress of Jewish Communities. “The Memory of the Offense” was first published under the title “Il Lager e la memoria” (“The Lager and Memory”) in the anthology *Il trauma della deportazione* (Milan: Mondadori, 1983). He also used this text for a paper at the conference “Il dovere di testimoniare” (“The Duty to Bear Witness”) held in Turin in October 1983.

Levi weaves these pieces into a sustained narrative not only through the thematic arrangement of the work but also on the strength of the moral authority of his voice and the emotional trajectory he builds. The Preface and opening chapter take up the questions underlying any history of the massacre of the European Jews. Who could believe that human beings were capable of such monstrosity? Can the memories of eyewitnesses and survivors be trusted? And always and insistently, how could this atrocity have been prevented? From there Levi proceeds to pick apart the various questions and objections that had been raised over the years to his earlier accounts of life and death in the Lagers, culminating in his indictment of the Germans in perhaps his most powerful and emotional essay, “Letters from Germans.”

The author’s shocking death in 1987, a few months after the publication of *The Drowned and the Saved*, turned this work—already a commentary in many respects on his writing as a whole—into his final statement. Levi seems to have sought out every written or oral document on the Holocaust he could find, whether in English, French, or German, and he reviews them in succession. “Works Cited” lists only the books that he mentions explicitly. I felt no need to include his cherished Italian literary classics, confining myself to an occasional footnote. But the text to which Levi returns most obsessively, especially in the final pages, is his own first work, *If This Is a Man*.

A few of the works he surveys, particularly the testimony of the Sonderkommandos, can make for uncomfortable reading, but Levi defies us to judge the authors for the gruesome actions that enabled them to survive. Their raw and brutal style could not be more different from Levi’s, however, and he could not resist an occasional tweak to his translations of quoted passages, such as his substitution of “*completo abbattimento*” (complete collapse or destruction) for Filip Müller’s “complete anticlimax,” to describe the experience of liberation. It is hard not to see this one word

and its departure from its English source as a window into Levi's own despondency at the time of writing. The realization that he was not always a dispassionate translator of the works he cites—whether such a stance is even feasible or desirable—guided my approach to the translation, leading me, for example, to translate the German letters directly from the original language, where available.

The greatest challenge in translating Levi's language is to locate the tipping point between the concrete and the abstract of which he is a master. His style is commonly described as "clinical" or "scientific," an observation that simply does not hold up to the sheer variety of his works or to the literary ambitions implicit in his emulation, direct and indirect, of the great Italian writers, from Dante to Leopardi to Manzoni. The most difficult words to translate were of course the simplest and the most recurrent. The term "*colpa*" in Italian can refer to a crime, a sin, a moral or material transgression, and their corollaries, fault and guilt. The *colpa* of the Germans and *senso di colpa* of the survivors are intrinsically linked, a bond that is broken when we translate into English. To my sensibility the attempted annihilation of European Jewry is an atrocity that cries out for a word louder than "crime" or "sin," but *colpa* is the term that Levi uses, with characteristic restraint, and I hope that my decision to translate it as the "wrongs" of the Germans conveys his moral authority.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the word *cultura* and its variants (primarily *colto*, *coltivato*, and *incolto*) present a different order of difficulty. In the Italian language, the notion of "culture" can be quite concrete, as a result of a century-old standardized school curriculum that prioritizes (some might say imposes) a shared artistic and literary heritage. A person "of culture" is someone who is educated, well spoken, versed in the classics, art, music, and even decorative, sartorial, and culinary delights. Levi, however, attacks this notion of culture in the chapter "The Intellectual in Auschwitz," in defense of the prestige of his own education in the sciences. The stakes are even higher with the opposite, the *incolto*, the uneducated or uncultured person. It is to this lack that Levi attributes the acquiescence of the German people in Hitler's monstrous design.

Finally, a word on the title. Levi had originally considered calling his first work *I sommersi e i salvati*, and eventually adopted it only as a chapter title. The Italian title echoes the *Inferno* of Dante, particularly the poet's puzzling use of the word *sommersi* in Canto XX, line 3. Robert Hollander,

in his translation of the *Inferno*, remarks on “the apparently strikingly inexact word *sommersi*, which has seemed to many commentators wrong, since the damned are not submerged in water but buried under earth” (New York: Doubleday; 2000; p. 340). Some critics of the previous translation of *I sommersi e i salvati* have argued for the more literal rendering, “submerged.” I have elected to keep the previous title, with its bitter paradox, for while the “submerged” are indeed the dead, the drowned, the survivors were never completely saved, as Levi attested in his life and work.

—MICHAEL F. MOORE

Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1981–1987

Translated by Alessandra Bastagli
and Francesco Bastagli

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Love on the Web
Calvino, Queneau, and the Sciences
Foreword to *Offended Life*
"Our Generation . . ."
Foreword to *Writings in Memory of Daniele Levi*
Foreword to *Broken Future* by Lidia Beccaria Rolfi and Bruno Maida

There Is No Other Adam in the Neighborhood

It's sad, but can be verified every day: the fact that the same assertion is made by many and for a long time does not prove its validity. For how many centuries did schools teach that worms come from rotted flesh? For how many centuries did doctors maintain that malaria is caused by foul air, and that bloodletting cures all diseases?

In the same way, the antiquity of the belief in "inhabited stars" does not prove anything about its truth. Both this opinion and its opposite—that life exists only on Earth—have been maintained for millennia with great vigor but with weak arguments. Possibly no other philosophical dilemma has given rise to a dispute of longer duration and hazier substance. The dispute continues still, and will for a long time, because it consists of the repetition of just two opposing arguments, which can be summarized as follows:

i) The Earth alone is inhabited, because the Earth is the center of the universe. We have reluctantly given up the belief that it is such physically—we have conceded that it orbits around the Sun, that the Sun is not the center of the Galaxy, that it does not make sense to speak of a geometrical center of the universe, yet we continue to believe that the Earth is a privileged place, since it is where we human beings live, and we are privileged because we know good and evil and are the recipients of divine revelation. Indeed, there are no sure signs of extraterrestrial life. It is evident that life does not exist: all the more reason that intelligent life does not exist.

ii) For reasons of symmetry and economy, other inhabited planets have to exist. Life alone, and in particular conscious life, can be the purpose of creation, and creation cannot be without purpose. A boundless universe in which only tiny Earth harbors life and consciousness would be illogical and wasted. For now, there are no signs of extraterrestrial life, but precursors have been found, if only on our neighbors in the solar system. All the more reason that they will be discovered in the stars, if and when we are able to explore them. Maybe the stars are not innumerable, but certainly they are so numerous that a billion planets could provide a favorable environment for life to take root in, and the progression of life is inexplicable and meaningless if it does not flow into consciousness. Thus it is evident that other forms of intelligence besides ours exist in the cosmos.

As a matter of fact, in this dispute only one thing is evident—and that is prejudice. Reduced to their true essence, the two arguments could be set forth as follows: “I, man, do not wish to have competitors in creation,” and “I, man, fear solitude and long for a companion and guide.” These viewpoints are subjective and therefore indisputable: they are wishes in the form of beliefs. Now, the leap forward in astronautics in recent years has led to breathtaking results; formulating metaphysical hypotheses on what is at last within reach of our instruments has become a vaguely irritating exercise. Man has stepped on the Moon, analyzed the soil of Mars and the hellish atmosphere of Venus, photographed the volcanoes of Io and the hydrocarbon rain on Titan. The sky has more imagination than we expected, but there are no signs of life either present or past. There is no other Adam, at least in our neighborhood, and not even his most rudimentary ancestor; there are only moderately complex carbon compounds—that is, the clay with which to make him.

We do not know what things are like farther away, in the stars close and distant, nor do we know whether we will ever know. For now we can say only that extraterrestrial life is possible, and variously probable and desirable according to the emotional and theological prejudices that all of us unconsciously harbor, but it is less evident to us than to our scientist and positivist forefathers.

Tuttolibri, *January 3, 1981 (published on the occasion of the launch into orbit of the satellites* Pioneer 10 *and* 11, *which carried information on the environment and the nature of man)*

Horseshoe Nails

A book that is unusual in many ways has just been published, and is for sale in the main bookshops: Luciano Gibelli's *Prima che scenda il buio–Dnans ch'a fàssa neuit (Before Darkness Falls)*. It's unusual because it's bilingual, and printed in parallel text, Italian and Piedmontese; because, in spite of its elegant editorial format, the author published it at his own expense; and above all because it has an unusual subject, which is expressed precisely in the subtitle, "*Tools, objects, and things of the past collected so that they will not be forgotten.*"

The book therefore fits into the theoretical frame of Material Culture, a link between anthropology and history, but it makes no claim to any doctrine, to any abstraction, or to any school.

The author, the fifty-five-year-old Luciano Gibelli, from Canelli, is a gentle enthusiast without academic qualifications. He is an inquiring and rigorous amateur, driven by the desire to ensure the survival, at least in memory, of a civilization that is about to die: the civilization contained in objects that only the oldest among us have had occasion to see, or have heard described by their fathers and grandfathers. Gibelli, resorting mainly to friendly interviews with the old people of towns and villages, rather than to library research, gives us a philologically complete portrait of each object, including its various names, its origin, and its use, along with drawings that he made himself, done carefully to scale, in millimeters.

Many of these objects he found in Gozzano's beloved country attics, "where age-old refuse sleeps";[1] others, which could no longer be found but which someone remembered, he reconstructed himself, out of old wood and metal, to see them, feel them in his hands, and try them out. It was an

almost religious work, a work of devout patience and refined manual skill; but in it one recognizes also the pious effort of the painter who paints a portrait from memory of a beloved person who has died.

Yet this rigor is coupled with an amusing freedom in the design of the book. It would be more correct to say that the book does not have a design: one subject arises from another, discursively, as when friends are gathered around a fireside. From the House we move on to Bricks, to Tiles, and by analogy to Braziers, Fire, and various ancient (but not too ancient!) methods of lighting fires. From Weights and Measures we move to certain remote bureaucratic customs, to equipment for writing, inks, seals, and so on. The author has no fear of digression; in fact he finds these his truest inspiration, in the affectionate descriptions of family rituals, holidays, obsolete traditions. See, for example, the pages where, from a technological description of bells, he goes on to speak, with anxious nostalgia, of the various ways they were rung, the Gaudietta, the Concent, the Melodia: extinguished voices, artificially revived.

Who today would know how to prepare a quill pen? One drawing illustrates the seven steps, and another demonstrates the Sharpener, a multipurpose tool that was used uniquely to cut the quills and sharpen them; we also learn that, because of their different curvature, the most valuable feathers were those taken from the left wing. Feathers from the right wing hampered writing, because their end came too close to the writer’s eyes. Immediately afterward are listed no fewer than ten indispensable accessories for the scribe, from the portable inkwell to the “dustbox,” the precursor of blotting paper; it, too, was rendered superfluous by the invasion of the ballpoint pen.

Browsing the six hundred entries in the book, we learn that in a not so distant time copper eyeglasses were used in cases of emergency. These were domes of copper with a tiny hole, which, reducing the light to the pupil, reduced in equal measure all the defects of vision: if the illumination was good, it allowed one at least to thread a needle. We can also find equipment and rules for games that have disappeared, like spinning a top, tipcat (*cirimela*), and peashooting.

We learn that the blacksmith had available at least three types of nails for horseshoes: normal nails, nails for climbing, and nails for ice. Often before setting off on a long uphill, the carter himself had to replace one with the other, as we do now with snow chains. We read with nostalgia and

curiosity hundreds of recipes for simple dishes, and of these no fewer than a dozen have to do with wafers (*Canëstrej*), in which the fundamental ingredient to be added to the flour ranges from chocolate to garlic; also described and illustrated is the wafer iron, an essential piece of equipment for making them.

Recipes, kitchen equipment, and edible plants occupy a hundred pages, and more than a hundred are described: it's interesting to see among them many "weeds," like plantains, and one thinks back to the skinny girl Manzoni mentions, who steals from the cows wild grasses, "on which hunger had taught her that men, too, could live." That was a time of famine, but there was almost always famine. A portrait of a time when the kitchen was the heart of the house and meals were a ritual emerges from these passages more vividly than from a direct description: a time when the rhythm of life was poorer than ours, more precarious, but also more convivial and more human.

It's fortunate that before the darkness of oblivion (of *dësmèntia*) descends, the shapes of oil lamps have been recorded, along with the belts for threshing, sundials, wine kegs, and hundreds of other objects molded by the experience of many centuries, which now have disappeared or are disappearing. Our hands reside not only in the illustrious works of individual creativity but also in these humble tools that were the companions of our forefathers on the road of life.

La Stampa, *March 22, 1981*

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1. From "La signorina Felicita ovvero la felicità," a poem by Guido Gozzano (1883–1916).

Bureau of Vital Statistics

There were four elevators, but one, as usual, was out of service. It wasn't always the same one and even the sign hanging on the door wasn't always the same. This one, for instance, said "Out of Service"; others might say "Not Working" or "Broken" or "Don't Touch" or even "Back Soon." Maybe it was the doorman, or the superintendent, who changed the signs according to some vaguely ironic whim. There were lines in front of the three other elevators, and this, too, happened every day, at the beginning and at the end of the workday. If his office hadn't been on the ninth floor, Arrigo would have taken the stairs; sometimes he did anyway, for the exercise, but that morning he felt a little tired.

The elevator finally arrived, and it was already full of employees coming from the basement and the subbasement. Arrigo made his way in energetically but without shoving. The elevator rose, stopping with a jerk at every floor, and people got on and off, greeting each other distractedly. On the ninth floor, Arrigo himself got off and punched his time card. For two years now there had been a time clock on every floor. It had been a sensible innovation. Previously, there had been only one, on the ground floor, which always caused a terrible bottleneck, partly because there was little discipline, and people tried to push in front of you. In the office, people were already at their desks. Arrigo sat at his post, pulled the color photograph of his wife and their little girl out of the top drawer, and from the second drawer took writing supplies and the index cards left over from the previous day. This was the result of one of the boss's obsessions: at the end of the day, all the desks had to be cleared. Who knows why, certainly

not for cleaning, because the desks were cleaned only two or three times a year: if you didn't want dust on your desk, you had to clean it yourself.

Arrigo's job was administrative in nature. Every day, he received a packet of index cards from the floor above. Each card contained the name of a human being and the date of his or her death; Arrigo had only to specify the cause. He would often get angry, for various reasons. The expiration date wasn't always the same: it could be years ahead, or months or days, for no apparent reason, and he felt that this was an injustice. Nor did it seem reasonable that there were no rules regarding age: some days he was handed hundreds of cards for newborns. Then, the boss complained if Arrigo kept to generic formulas: the man must be a sadist or a fan of crime news. It wasn't enough for Arrigo to write "accident." He wanted all the details and was never satisfied. He always demanded a correlation between the data on the cards and the cause of death, and this often embarrassed Arrigo.

The first index card of the day wasn't a problem. It bore the name of Yen Ch'ing-Hsu, fifty-eight years old, single, born in Han Tou, where he still resided, dockworker, no illnesses to speak of. Arrigo had no idea where Han Tou was: if he were to check the atlas every time, he'd never get anything done. Yen still had thirty-six days to live and Arrigo imagined him against the backdrop of an exotic sunset, sitting on a roll of cable before a turbid sea the color of a ripe banana; he was exhausted by his daily work, sad and alone. A man like this doesn't fear death and doesn't seek it, either, but he may act carelessly. Arrigo thought about it for a moment and then had him fall from a scaffold: he wouldn't suffer much.

Pedro Gonzales de Eslava didn't give him much trouble, either. In spite of the pompous name, he must have been a poor devil—he drank, had been involved in many fights among illegal immigrants, was forty-six years old, and had worked on half a dozen farms in the far south. He had five more months and would leave behind four children, who, however, lived with his wife and not with him. The wife was Puerto Rican, like Pedro; she was young, and she also worked. Arrigo consulted the medical encyclopedia and came up with hepatitis.

He was studying the third index card when Fernanda called him on the phone. She had seen in the paper that *Metropolis* was playing at some art house cinema; why not go see it tonight? Arrigo didn't like being interrupted at work and was noncommittal. The third index card was fairly

obvious; everyone knows what happens to a man who races motorbikes. No one was forcing him to do it; he had only to choose a different profession—in cases like this, there's no need to have scruples. But he felt obliged to provide the details of the fatal accident and the hospital record.

He had no sympathy for Pierre-Jean La Motte. He was born in Lyon, but at the age of thirty-two he was already a full professor of political science at the University of Rio: evidently he was a man with connections. He had only twenty days to live, though he was in excellent health and played tennis every morning. Arrigo was racking his brains for an appropriate cause of death for La Motte when Lorusso came by and invited him to go for coffee. Arrigo went down with him to the vending machines on the fourth floor. Lorusso was dull. He had a son who wasn't doing well in math, and Arrigo thought that, with a father like that, it would certainly be strange if the son were a prodigy. Then Lorusso started to complain about his wife, who spent too much money, and about the heat that didn't work.

The coffee machine didn't work well, either. Lorusso banged on it and at long last it spat out two cups of coffee, pale and insipid but boiling hot. As Arrigo forced himself to gulp down the coffee, scalding his throat, Lorusso talked on about the paycheck that always came late and the deductions that were always too high. Finally, back at his desk, Arrigo squashed Pierre-Jean like a worm: brain hemorrhage—that'll teach him.

At around ten, Arrigo was finished with the cards left over from the previous day, but the office boy had already put the new cards on his desk. The first was all crumpled, maybe by the dating machine: he could make out only that it was for a person of the female sex, by the name of Adelia. Arrigo put the card aside, so much the better for Adelia: it's always useful to gain time. At any rate, he might decide to write a report: more and more often it happens that the first card of each packet is damaged . . . a regrettable occurrence . . . will maintenance please take care of it . . . sincerely yours. Instead he paused over the next card. Karen Kvarna, age eight, born in Slidre, a mountain village in the heart of Norway. Karen, only child, illnesses N.A. (not available), student, was to die the following day. Arrigo was stuck. He imagined her flaxen-haired, kind, cheerful, serene, against the backdrop of solemn, immaculate mountains: if she had to die, then it would be without him, he would not take part in this. He grabbed the card and knocked on the boss's door: he heard a grumbled "Come in," entered, and said that it was a disgrace. That the work was poorly

organized, that the purchase of the randomizer had been an idiotic idea, that the cards were full of mistakes—for example, this one right here. That they were all sheep and careerists and no one dared protest and no one took the job seriously. That he had had enough, that he couldn’t care less about promotion, and that he wanted to be transferred.

The boss must have been expecting a scene from Arrigo for quite a while, because he gave no sign of surprise or indignation. Perhaps he was even glad to be rid of a programmer with such an unstable character. He told Arrigo to stop by again the next day. And the next day he gave him his transfer orders and made him sign two or three explanatory documents. Thus Arrigo found himself demoted from grade 7 to grade 6 and transferred to a small office in the attic of the building, in charge of determining the shape of the noses of newborns.

La Stampa*, June 21, 1981*

Let’s See What Has Come True

In my view, science fiction can and should invent everything. That is its vocation, and to impose limits on its truthfulness would mean trimming its wings. The only acceptable limits are those of the comic force of the inventions, not whether they are possible or realizable. In short: in the future science fiction can offer us anything—plants that learn to speak, machine-man hybrids (maybe even fertile ones), new ways in which word or thought is made flesh directly in a fact or an object, inversions of past and future, of folly and wisdom, of internal and external, and so forth—provided the subject is stimulating, pithy, and above all new, which is not a little to ask.

By way of comparison, and also of provocation, I would propose shifting the question to a neighboring terrain, and ask what science and technology, as opposed to science fiction, can still invent. Here we’re talking about serious prophecies, and prophecy is always a dangerous art. Thus prophets in all eras have prudently adopted two wise precautions: they have used obscure language (which gives them the further advantage of making them seem inspired), and they have placed their predictions not in the near future but, rather, in a distant or indefinite future, such that possible challenges will find them dead.

Years ago, and with the proper dose of humor, a very serious physicist and technician made an attempt at this sport: Arthur C. Clarke, who is also the author of some classics of science fiction. I cite here his predictions, formulated around 1960, along with a note on the state of the art in effect today.

Predicted for 1970:

Space laboratories. The first, Spacelab, may be launched into orbit in 1982.

Moon landing. This has happened, a year early.

Translation machines. They haven't yet been perfected; the ones in existence are rudimentary.

Efficient batteries. They exist, but for now are a little too expensive.

Language of cetaceans. As far as we know, the investigations stopped after Lilly's early results with dolphins. They have an intelligence comparable to that of dogs, and a language that seems quite evolved; but I don't think it has been deciphered yet.

Predicted for 1980:

Planetary landings. It hasn't happened, and doesn't seem close at hand; but planetary exploration at a distance is yielding surprising results.

Personal radio. I don't know what Clarke was thinking of; I imagine it's something that could be easily realized, but maybe it's better to leave it where it is.

Exobiology. This is the biology of extraterrestrial life-forms. For the moment we know nothing. Analysis of soil from Mars has been disappointing; on the other hand, large organic molecules have been identified in space, possible forerunners of life.

Gravity waves. Studies are under way, with controversial results.

As a curiosity, I would recall that Clarke situates around 1990 the production of energy from nuclear fusion. The world has a desperate need for this prediction to come true.

Tuttolibri, *January 3, 1982*

Our First Ancestors Weren’t Animals

Quest for Fire, by J. Rosny, is a novel of adventures that take place in prehistory, when man knew how to preserve fire but not yet how to light a fire. It’s a French book (*La guerre du feu*) from 1911, which when I was a boy seemed wonderful to me, and it still seems quite wonderful today. It’s almost a fable, without didactic presumptions: ingenuous, graceful, literarily skillful. Its characters, especially the three who set out to conquer fire, are intelligent and courageous, and loyal to their tribe, like Homeric heroes, although perhaps a little too monogamous, polite, and clean for their era.

The film that was made from it, and which I hurried to see, is guilty of the opposite sins. It’s not at all naïve. Of course, it’s hard to remain ingenuous when tens of millions of dollars are at stake, but it could have been polite, and the progenitors of this film were scarcely that; as for the characters, they appear surprisingly amazed and dirty. Our ancestors were not supposed to be gentlemen, and they certainly didn’t wash often, but, given that they had learned to wear the skins of the animals they killed, it’s not credible that they hadn’t also invented a way of fastening them around their hips: I don’t mean for purposes of modesty (though that must have been invented fairly soon) but for protection from the cold.

Garments like the ones we see in the film are pointless; they serve only to convey to the spectator the redundant notion that these savages were very savage. I think it’s likely that they possessed a certain physical nobility—precisely because they were animal-like. Here, instead, they are unpleasant and ridiculous ogres: they move with a clumsiness that doesn’t seem compatible with hunting; they hardly ever run, and when they do they are

slow and unsteady. But perhaps the fault lies with the actors, whom the scientific consultants have forced to go barefoot on all terrains without giving them sufficient training.

A few words should be said about the consultants. Anthony Burgess, who already has on his conscience *A Clockwork Orange*, was not ashamed to appear in the credits as the author of the dialogue: now, there is no dialogue—there are only shouts, grunts, and vague verbal cues from which a single clearly articulated word emerges, *atra*, evidently meaning "fire." Burgess didn't work too hard; but maybe he was paid by the piece. Nor was Desmond Morris ashamed to be cited as a consultant for the movements. Morris had already seemed a little dubious in his famous book *The Naked Ape* (which is man); and here his dubiousness is confirmed.

Of course, pornography is an art of all times and all places, and so we may think that it responds to a human need. It's silly and pointless to try to repress it. The way should be open to pornographic films and books, but both should be taken as such, for connoisseurs and experts. Normal commercial practice, and good sense, prohibits us from selling vinegar with a label that says oil and vice versa. Morris has done this, disappointing enthusiasts on both sides, anthropologists and lovers of porn.

Ultimately, the characters do not move in interesting ways: the only amusing gestural sequence may be the one in which the protagonist, returning from the victorious expedition, "recounts" his adventures sitting beside the fire that he himself has recaptured. He encountered mammoths, and he imitates their curved tusks by holding under his chin the skull of a goat with twisted horns; with his hand and forearm he imitates the movements of the proboscis. His listeners understand and laugh. But Morris, in keeping with the vocation mentioned above, has introduced another gestural theme: there is a woman, a little less prehistoric than the other characters, who teaches the foreigner the "correct" position for coupling: these foreigners, it seems, had never thought of it. He learns rapidly and, in so doing, becomes civilized.

How many wasted opportunities! With a little more taste and imagination, the filmmakers might have told the story of (or let us understand) the laborious means by which man learned to make fire, through countless centuries of attempts, through trial and error, but certainly intelligent trial and error: nothing indicates that those Vichian beasts were stupider than we are. It would have been, cinematographically as well, a

good story. Instead, we get from the film the notion that the crucial stratagem in making fire by rotating a stick is to spit on one's hands in advance: the girl demonstrates this to the stranger, and, lo and behold, the fire is kindled.

The same, or worse, can be said of the nonaggression pact with the mammals; one could choose between a fablelike, Kiplingesque tone, such as is found in the book, and a seriously educational one; but in the second case the viewer would have to be given the impression of the span of time required by this fundamental phase of humanity, the domestication of animals. The film has chosen neither version: the episode is over in a few seconds, and the elephants disguised as mammoths cooperate reluctantly, encumbered by the enormous tusk-shaped prostheses sticking out of their mouths.

We know that making a book into a film involves risks, that the film is always of another species compared to the book, and generally worse, for the obvious reason that its distinctive quality is diminished. It's a pity, however; here we are able to watch only one event *des âges farouches* (of prehistoric times, as the original subtitle of the book had it). Of the future *Homo sapiens* there are only a few traces: these ancestors of ours really are poor naked apes.

La Stampa*, March 14, 1982*

Who Has Courage in Jerusalem?

The news of the Israeli attack in Lebanon[1] happened to coincide for me with a return to Auschwitz, as a guide for a group of visitors. The two experiences were superimposed in an agonizing way, and I'm still trying to untangle the reasons for my distress.

The signs of the slaughter of forty years ago in the place where it occurred are still present: they hit you like a hammer. It's not surprising that Hitler's massacre solidified the bonds between those who escaped, making them potentially a nation, and that it bestowed on them a prodigious will thanks to which, within a few years, they defeated the coalition of Arab nations and British hostility, miraculously constructing a new state. The terrible violence that was suffered legimatized to a certain extent the violence practiced; in fact, Israel was immediately recognized by all the great powers, by the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern bloc first among all. In Israel the Jews of the Diaspora recognized and identified themselves to a greater or lesser degree: it was the country of the Bible, the heir to all the strains of Jewish culture, the redeeming land, the ideal homeland of all Jews.

The decades that followed have eroded and distorted this image. The Arab world, which has been defeated in battle many times, has accumulated toward Israel an intense hatred, perceiving in the new state the cause of its age-old ills, and hardening in its position of denial. As happens, denial has responded to denial; Israel, less and less the Holy Land, more and more the military state, is starting to act like the other countries of the Middle East, with their radicalism, their distrust of negotiation.

The current attack on Lebanon was not unmotivated; the PLO has provoked Israel over a long period of time, it has never agreed to negotiate, it persists in not recognizing Israel (which it continues to call “the Zionist entity”); but the violence with which the attack was carried out frightened the world. I’m not ashamed to admit my own wrenching sorrow. I have a bond with this country, and in a certain sense feel it as a second homeland. I would like it to be different from all other countries, and for that very reason I feel distress and shame for this undertaking. I distrust success achieved with an unprincipled use of arms. I feel indignant toward those who hastily compare the Israeli generals with the Nazi generals, and yet I have to admit that Begin draws such judgments on himself. With dismay I observe the solidarity of the countries of Europe weakening. I fear that this undertaking, with its frightening cost in lives, will inflict on Judaism a degradation difficult to cure, and will damage its image. I sense in myself, not without surprise, a profound emotional link with Israel, but not with this Israel.

The Palestinian problem exists: it can’t be denied. It can’t be resolved in the Arafat manner, by denying Israel the right to exist, but it cannot be resolved in the Begin manner, either. Anwar Sadat was neither a genius nor a saint; he was only a man endowed with imagination, common sense, and courage, and he was killed because he had opened up a pathway. Is there no one, in Israel or elsewhere, who is capable of continuing it?

La Stampa, *June 24, 1982*

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1. On June 6, 1982, Israel, under Prime Minister Menachem Begin, sent troops to invade Lebanon, with the goal of expelling Yasir Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization.

The Difficult Journey of Truth

Forty years have passed since the start of Hitler's slaughter, which devastated European Judaism. It was in 1942 that the facilities of all the Polish extermination camps began operating, and the massacre of the Jews, until then a sporadic activity, became a system.

Certainly much remains to be discovered and explained about the motivations for the slaughter, about the assigning of responsibility, and about the paralysis of conscience that characterized Nazi Germany. The facts, on the other hand, are sufficiently clear by now, although the path that had to be traveled was difficult, for various reasons that are worth examining.

The first information about the extermination camps began circulating even before the end of the conflict. It was grim but vague, and yet consistent; it outlined a massacre of such vast proportions and such extreme cruelty that the public tended to reject it precisely because of its enormity. It is significant that this rejection was foreseen well in advance by the perpetrators themselves; many survivors (among others, Simon Wiesenthal) recall that SS soldiers liked to cynically warn their prisoners, "No matter how this war ends, the war against you has been won by us. Not one of you will be left to bear witness, but, even if someone were to escape, the world will not believe him. There will be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but no certainty, because we will destroy the evidence along with you. Even if some evidence were to remain, and some of you were to survive, people will say that your testimony is too monstrous to be believed. They will say that these are exaggerations of Allied propaganda, and will believe us, not you. We will be the ones who dictate history."

Surprisingly, the same thought (“Even if we were to talk, no one would believe us”) emerged from the prisoners’ despair in the form of dreams. Almost all the survivors, either orally or in written memoirs, recall a dream that recurred frequently during their imprisonment, varying in its details but unchanging in its substance: to miraculously return home, to relate with emotion and relief their past sufferings to a loved one, and not to be believed. More than that, not even to be listened to. In the most typical form of this dream, the interlocutor turns and goes away without a word. Thus, both sides, the oppressors and the victims, were well aware of the enormity, and therefore the unbelievableness, of what was happening in the camps, and, one might add, not only in the camps but also in the ghettos, behind the lines of the Eastern front, in the homes for the mentally handicapped, in the police stations.

However, things did not turn out the way the victims feared and Hitler’s men hoped. Even the most perfect organization has shortcomings, and Nazi Germany, especially in the last months before the collapse, was far from being a perfect machine. Much evidence of the extermination was suppressed, or a more or less thorough effort was made to suppress it. In the fall of 1944 the Nazis blew up the gas chambers and crematoriums of Auschwitz, but the ruins are still there, and it is difficult to explain their purpose as being different from what it was. After the uprising of spring 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto was razed, but the superhuman dedication of a few fighter-historians (historians of themselves!) made it possible for other historians to recover from the rubble, several meters deep, the chronicles of how, day by day, that ghetto lived and died. All the archives of the camps were burned during the last days of the war. This was a truly irreparable loss, so much so that to this day we are debating whether the victims of the camps were four or six or eight million—but always in the millions. Before the Germans began using the gigantic multiple crematoriums, the corpses of the innumerable victims, whether killed by force or by privation, could constitute evidence and had to be disposed of. The first solution, atrociously grotesque, was simply to pile up the bodies, by the hundreds of thousands, in big mass graves. This was done in Treblinka and in other, smaller camps. It was a temporary solution, chosen with bestial carelessness when the German armies were triumphant on all fronts and the final victory seemed certain. What to do would be decided later. At any rate, the victor also owns the truth, and can manipulate it as he pleases: the terrible graves would be

explained, or denied, or attributed to the Allies. However, after the turning point of Stalingrad there was a change of plan; better make everything disappear right away. The prisoners themselves were forced to disinter those pitiful remains and burn them on open-air fires, as if an undertaking of such proportions, and so unusual, could go totally unnoticed.

Afterward, the SS authorities and the security services did their utmost to ensure that no witness would survive. This was the intent (it would be difficult to conjure a different one) of the murderous and apparently senseless transfers that, in the spring of 1945, concluded the story of the Nazi camps. Having operated effectively as centers of political terror, then as factories of death, and subsequently (or simultaneously) as a bottomless, constantly replenished reservoir of slave labor, the camps had become a danger for a dying Germany because they held the secret of the camps. The army of ghosts that still vegetated there consisted of *Geheimnisträger*, bearers of secrets; it was necessary to get rid of them. Since by then the extermination plants had been destroyed, it was decided to transfer these people into the heart of the country, with the absurd hope of locking them up again, in camps that were less threatened by the advancing front, and taking advantage of their remaining capacity for work. There was another, less absurd hope—that the hardship of those Biblical marches would reduce their number. And indeed the number was dreadfully reduced, but a few were lucky and strong enough to survive, and remained to bear witness.

A fact that is less well-known and has been less carefully studied is that many bearers of secrets were to be found also on the other side, on the side of the oppressors, although not all of them knew much, and only a few knew everything. No one will ever be able to determine precisely how many people, in the Nazi organization, could not have not known of the existence of the death factories; how many knew but were able to feign ignorance; how many more had the opportunity to know everything, but chose the safer path of keeping their eyes and ears (and, above all, their mouths) shut tight, deluding themselves that this deliberate ignorance could cleanse their conscience. At any rate, it is certain that the silence about the camps is one of the greatest collective sins of the German people, and the most obvious demonstration of the cowardice to which they were driven by Hitlerite terror, a cowardice that became a habit so ingrained as to keep husbands from talking to their wives, and parents to their children. Without such cowardice the greatest excesses would not have been possible.

Deliberate ignorance and fear also reduced to silence many potential "civilian" witnesses of atrocities in the camps. They made up a large and complex system; some have rightly spoken of a concentration-camp universe, but it was not a closed universe, because the camps were an integral part of the economy of the Third Reich. Industrial enterprises large and small took advantage of the almost free labor provided by the camps. Some were merciless in exploiting the prisoners, others tried to alleviate their sufferings. Other companies, or maybe the same ones, made a profit by supplying the Lagers themselves. The crematoriums were designed, built, and tested by the firm Topf, in Wiesbaden (still in business, at least until a few years ago; it makes crematoriums for civilian use). It's unlikely that the employees of these enterprises were unaware of the purpose of the unusual equipment commissioned by the SS leadership. The same can be said—and has been—of supplying the poison for the gas chambers. Zyklon B, basically hydrogen cyanide, was produced by the same gigantic trust (I.G. Farbenindustrie) that "owned" the Buna-Monowitz Lager and exploited its ten thousand prisoners. The gas had been in use for several years to disinfest ships' holds, but the sudden increase in orders, beginning in 1942, could not have gone unnoticed. It should have given rise to doubts, and certainly it did, but those doubts were suffocated by fear, by the desire for profits, by the blindness and deliberate stupidity mentioned earlier, and in some cases (probably not many) by fanatic Nazi obedience.

The most substantial contribution to the reconstruction of the truth about the camps comes, naturally, from the recollections of survivors. Beyond the compassion and indignation they arouse, they have to be read with a critical eye. For knowledge of the camps, the camps themselves were not good observatories. In those inhuman circumstances, it was rare for the prisoners to acquire an overview of the universe they inhabited. It was not unusual, especially among those who did not understand German, for a prisoner not even to know where in Europe his camp was situated, for he had arrived there after a murderous and meandering journey in a sealed railway car. He did not know of the existence of other camps, even if they were nearby. He did not know for whom he was working. He did not understand the meaning of certain sudden changes in his circumstances or of mass transfers. Surrounded by death, he was often incapable of assessing the extent of the slaughter taking place under his eyes. He felt, in other words, overwhelmed by a huge, obscure structure of violence and

intimidation, but he could not construct an image of it; his constant needs kept his eyes glued to the ground.

A better observation post was available to those privileged prisoners who, owing to luck or cunning, or even just physical strength, had been entrusted with a position within the camp, thus securing somewhat better living conditions. A relatively greater number of these prisoners survived and their testimony is precious but limited; they understood more, but did not plumb the depths. Those who did so did not return, or their capacity to observe was paralyzed by suffering.

For all these reasons, the truth about the Lagers came to light over a long road and through a narrow door, and some aspects of the concentration-camp universe have not yet been closely examined. The forty years that have elapsed since the Wannsee Conference, where perhaps for the first time the program for the so-called final solution of the Jewish question was officially endorsed, have brought conflicting conclusions.

Certainly, there has been a settling, a normal and desirable process whereby historical events acquire shadings and perspective only some decades after their occurrence. At the end of the Second World War, the quantitative data on the deportations and the Nazi massacres, in the camps and elsewhere, were not known, nor was it easy to measure their significance and impact. Only in the past few years have we understood the Nazi massacre as a tremendous example; unless something worse happens, it will be remembered as a blot on the twentieth century. Already today it must be seen as a warning for centuries to come.

On the other hand, as the camps grow distant in time, there are other, historically negative consequences. Most of the witnesses, for both the defense and the prosecution, have by now died. Those who are left, and who (overcoming their remorse or, respectively, their wounds) agree to testify, have memories that are increasingly out of focus and stereotyped, often influenced (without their realizing it) by things that they learned later. Obviously, in some cases the lack of memory is simulated, but the many years that have elapsed make it credible, even in court. The “I don’t knows” and “I didn’t knows” uttered today by many Germans are no longer shocking. They were shocking, or should have been, when the memory of events was fresh.

Out of this inevitable fading of memories an unexpected phenomenon has developed recently that deserves careful consideration. In several

countries—significantly, not in Germany but, rather, with its epicenter in France—a movement has been under way to revise history. To readers of Orwell this expression will not sound new. In countries where human rights and basic freedoms are suffocated, history, too, belongs to the ruling class: not just current history but also past history. It can be obliterated, turned upside down, made up; what is true today can become false tomorrow, encyclopedia entries and schoolbooks are rewritten, and the individual memories of loyal citizens are required to be equally submissive. It is no great surprise that this practice, described in the grim utopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was followed in Hitler's Germany and is still followed in the Soviet Union. It is surprising, or should be, that the same is attempted today in France, in the United Kingdom, in the United States. Maybe also in Germany, but with less audacity: why? We can attempt an explanation. The history to be revised is German history, the history of the German land and the German people, and only forty years have elapsed between the events and their revision, time enough for many memories to fade, but not enough for them all to be wiped out. In today's Germany—rather, in the two Germanys—there remain too many witnesses of the atrocities committed in the camps, on the battlefields, in all the occupied countries, and in the homeland itself. Those responsible, if only by omission or complicity, still number in the hundreds of thousands. They may wish that past events not be talked about, but they would be surprised if such events were denied; and indeed in the great trials of Nuremberg, Frankfurt, and Jerusalem the guilty tried in various ways to prove their innocence, but they did not deny the facts.

The French revisionists, on the other hand, deny the facts. Their arrogance and impudence are astounding, but their arguments, which are extremely verbose, boil down to little: all the testimony of the survivors—Jews, Russians, Poles, and Communists—must be rejected, because it is "obviously" biased; all material proofs are forgeries; all the confessions of the guilty were extorted through torture, blackmail, or drugs. It is frightening to think about what could happen in twenty years, when all the eyewitnesses will be gone. Then the forgers will have a free hand; they will be able to assert or deny anything. If convenient, they will demonstrate that the Second World War never took place: the Siegfried and Maginot lines never existed; their still visible ruins were built a few years ago by specialized firms, based on the drawings of obliging set designers, and the

same applies to war cemeteries. All pictures from the time are photomontages. All statistics about casualties are falsified, the product of self-serving propaganda. Nobody died in the war because there was no war. All diaries and memoirs are lies, or the work of lunatics, or the result of corruption and violence. War widows and orphans are salaried extras.

Until now, the sacrilegious audacity of the revisionists has not turned, for example, to the Nazis' exploits on the war's fronts or their acts of retaliation on the home fronts; even for revisionists it would be difficult to whitewash Marzabotto or the Ardeatine Caves or Lodz or the slaughters committed by the Einsatzkommandos behind the vast Russian front. Whole countries would have risen up to restore the truth. It has been easier, and more advantageous, to stick to the camps: more advantageous because the camps were the gravest crime of the Third Reich; and easier because there were only a few survivors, a few witnesses, and because the Jews, who were the main victims of the camps, were not a single nation but came from dozens of different countries, from North Africa to Norway and from Belgium to Ukraine. However, there is no doubt that if the vigilance of historians, of the public, and of democratic institutions were to slacken, the whole monstrous Nazi machinery would be exonerated, and the revulsion that all Europe continues to feel toward totalitarian regimes would tend to disappear. For this reason it is an important task for us—Jews, survivors, democratic and anti-Fascist Europeans—to prevent this outrage. If the world could be convinced that Auschwitz did not exist, it would be easier to build a second Auschwitz, and there is no guarantee that it would devour only Jews.

Lecture written in June 1982 for a 1983 meeting of the Italian Jewish Communities that was later canceled; part of the text was merged in the Preface to The Drowned and the Saved. *In Guido Lopez, ed.,* Se non lui, chi (If Not Him, Who) *(Rome: Center for Jewish Culture of the Israelite Community of Rome, 1987)*

A Rebirth

Old photographs are cruel: they stir up sediments, cause pointless regrets. Yet I keep them, for reasons that I do not understand well—maybe sheer narcissism, maybe a vague expectation that they may interest someone or could bear witness to an epoch. I looked again at the pictures taken at the Campiello Prize ceremony in 1963 with mixed feelings, sad and happy, but with the definite impression that they portray what in my former profession is called a color change.

I had written and published my first book, *If This Is a Man*, in 1947, and nothing further for fourteen years. I did not feel the urge to write, and it seemed to me that nobody needed my writings. I was a chemist in a factory; my daily work was hard but almost never boring. It was concrete and gave me security. It also brought me worries, but it was my job, the trade that I had chosen and for which I had studied, I had grown up inside it, I had been educated in it, it had shaped my way of living and of looking at the world—maybe even my language. It gave me my bread, and the notion of leaving it and devoting myself to writing was far from my mind. I thought about it occasionally, on the bad days that occur in any job, but not seriously, just as we dream of islands. It was not a plan but a daydream; the Turinese do not leave certainty for uncertainty, the old ways for the new ones. After all, work is the human condition, and to work, by definition, means to get up early in the morning, to negotiate the city traffic.

The desire to write returned toward the end of 1961, unexpectedly, the way a love is born; maybe it was because the Italian economic miracle that had blossomed a little earlier had relaxed factory life somewhat. I realized that I still had a lot to say: in just one year of work (yes, this, too, was work,

but light, festive, autonomous, my own) I wrote *The Truce*, the story of my return from prison. Unlike its older brother, this second book immediately appeared to be lively, born under a benign star, so much so that it took *If This Is a Man* by the hand and put it back into circulation. Nevertheless, I continued to refuse the designation of writer. I was a chemist, an expert in insulating varnishes who happened to have written two books by working overtime evenings and Sundays. I had no more doubts; with *The Truce* I had exhausted my reservoir of memories—I had completed the tale of my basic experience, the experience of Auschwitz and of the return from Auschwitz.

My publisher's proposal to compete for a literary prize fell like a meteorite on my settled and orderly existence. The competition in question was the first year of the Campiello, a literary prize that was serious and important but newly launched; and it was like sloughing my skin. I felt acknowledged and flattered. At the same time I felt, within my new skin, the tickle of self-irony—you, in Venice, among career men of letters and descendants of the Doges, maybe in evening dress, still with the smell of paint on you! I remember that the crucial announcement that I was on the short list and had a good chance to win reached me at the test desk.

I was wrong to be so afraid, but I was right to guess that the Campiello was a decisive step. It was a second graduation at an age when many lower their sails; it was the entrance into a new world, full of provocations and risks—and I had not yet lost, at the age of forty-four, my taste for risk. I did not relinquish right away the security of factory work, but I accepted the label of writer and drew up for myself a different future. At a yet unspecified time I would abandon my job as a shaper of matter and undertake a new one. It was like preparing to be born a second time.

Il Gazzettino, *July 25, 1982 (written on the occasion of the twentieth presentation of the Campiello Prize, which in 1982 was awarded to* If Not Now, When?*)*

The Daring People of the Ghetto

To the hurried visitor, today's Warsaw does not reveal the deep malaise that is eating away at the country. It is a clean, tidy, modern city, brightened by green spaces, with modest and functional housing, with beautiful avenues crisscrossed by efficient means of public transportation and a few cars (as a matter of fact, many citizens envy the chaotic traffic of our cities).

It is, however, an artificial city. The Warsaw of the thirties was almost completely destroyed: by the barbaric aerial bombardments with which the Germans, in 1939, launched, without warning, their invasion of the country and, later, to a terrible extent, during the nationalist insurrection of August 1944. The shredded urban fabric was rebuilt after the peace with financial help from the Soviets, who, stopping on the other side of the Vistula, had left to the Germans the dirty work of liquidating the Polish national armed forces, whom the Soviets themselves disliked.

In this new city there is a singular place. In the Muranów neighborhood, in a humble open space, and against the anonymous background of public housing, stands the monument to the heroes of the ghetto: a truncated pyramid with rather naïve and rhetorical high-relief decorations. But rhetoric is an integral part of monuments; there is no monument that does not seem rhetorical after one or two generations.

Yet the visitor's mood changes suddenly when he ponders the facts evoked by that monument. In a city that was repeatedly destroyed, Muranów was more than destroyed; it was literally razed to the ground, turned into a wasteland of crushed stones, rubble, and brick.

The German talent for destruction was unleashed against this neighborhood because the ghetto was there, and because there, exactly forty

years ago, something happened that should have amazed the world—had the world known about it. In April 1943, on the first day of Passover, a band of Jews walled up in the ghetto declared war on Great Germany, took up arms, incredibly won the first battle, and then were exterminated.

In the mosaic of European resistance movements, the struggle of the Warsaw Ghetto has a unique place. Those insurgents had no territory behind them, did not expect help either by land or by air, had no allies; for years they had been living in miserable conditions. All Christian Poles had been forced out of the small area of the ghetto, which was surrounded by a high wall. The 140,000 Warsaw Jews were moved there in their stead, to be gradually followed by other Jews, from other cities. In January 1941, the boundaries of the ghetto were further reduced, while the number of its inhabitants exceeded half a million.

The overcrowding was terrifying: from seven to ten people in a room, later as many as fifteen. The streets themselves were permanently filled with a crowd that was desperate, restless, and above all hungry. Food rations were less than half of the vital minimum, even lower than the rations in the camps. Those who climbed over the wall were shot, yet many, especially children, risked their lives every day to smuggle into the ghetto food bought on the black market in the Christian part of the city.

Nevertheless, in this citadel, polluted by the stench of the corpses that every morning lay by the hundreds in the streets, infested by rats and epidemics, terrorized by SS raids, schools, libraries, synagogues, infirmaries, mutual aid societies functioned. Factories that produced goods for the German Army were also functioning. Laborers, men and women, were compelled to work exhausting hours for paltry pay, yet the work was sought after, as it was the only (temporary!) protection from deportation “to the east.”

Signs posted at street corners spoke of farmwork in the fields, but people soon learned that that meant the total extermination camps, Treblinka and Belzec. There also existed, in spite of German inspections, reprisals, and spies, an embryonic military structure made up almost entirely of young Zionists.

Their combat experience was almost nonexistent and their weaponry laughable: a few pistols, rifles, and machine guns, in part obtained from the Polish underground, in part bought at exorbitant prices on the black market, in part taken from the Germans in daring attacks, in part, again, built piece

by piece with insane patience, in the workshop-barracks that labored for the Germans.

And they lacked above all what gave strength to other resistance movements: a solid hope of overcoming the enemy and surviving—if not all of them, at least a few—to build a better world. But the defenders of the ghetto had no chance of saving themselves, and they knew it. Their only choice was between two ways of dying.

On April 18, 1943, it was learned that the Germans were preparing a mass deportation. The next day, about a thousand SS soldiers who had entered the ghetto were met by gunshots and incendiary bombs, and they retreated in disarray. The German commander was replaced immediately, and from the reports of his successor, General Jürgen Stroop, one can measure the moral gap between the adversaries. Every line drips with an a priori contempt for the desperate heroism of the Jews.

That Jews know how to fight, and in those conditions, goes beyond Stroop's mental capacity; for him, his adversaries are nothing more than "assassins and bandits." Stroop describes, without a hint of shame, in his bureaucratic prose, Jews who hurl themselves from balconies rather than surrender, women who "wielded guns with both hands." He could not understand that, while his men fought in blind obedience to orders, each of his enemies had made a superhuman individual choice.

The unequal fight went on for more than a month, to the growing surprise of the Germans and the boundless fury of Hitler and Goebbels. On May 16, Stroop declared that the "great operation" had ended. In reality, however, hidden among the ruins, concealed in the sewer network, in the cellars, in the attics, about a hundred Jews continued to fight, on and off, until December. A very few among the defenders of the ghetto survived by joining partisan groups.

Forty years later, and in an ever more restless world, we do not want the sacrifice of the insurgents of the Warsaw Ghetto to be forgotten. They showed us that, even where all is lost, man can save, together with his own dignity, the dignity of future generations.

La Stampa, *April 17, 1983*

Barbarians of the Swastika

By 1943 many, if not all, Italians knew that Hitler's Germany was fighting the war by the most unorthodox means. The magazine *Signal*, with the entire Fascist press in tow, depicted the National Socialist fighter in an idealized and heroic manner: handsome, athletic, splendidly armed, proud, noble, gallant. But those who had seen the Germans in action (first and foremost, the Italian soldiers returning from the Russian and Baltic fronts) knew how harsh they could be. Still, the way the German military in Italy reacted to Badoglio's September 8 armistice was astonishing, and caught everyone unprepared.[1]

People had expected bloody acts of reprisal in response to the Italian "betrayal," and, as we know, reprisals did indeed take place. But they had not expected the swift determination with which the Nazis resorted to the mass deportation of all those who were considered hostile or potentially dangerous. Within days, or even hours, the Italian armed forces, whether within the country or in the occupied territories, were disarmed and loaded on trains heading north. It was immediately evident—and the long months of German occupation of northern Italy confirmed this—that the train, this nineteenth-century symbol of progress and civilization, in Nazi hands had become a sophisticated instrument of persecution, humiliation, and death.

Partisans, real or suspected political opponents, Jews, striking workers, men and women, ordinary people surprised in their homes or in the street by a roundup: for all of them, the sinister trains of boxcars sealed from the outside, the windows (when there were windows) screened by barbed wire, were the first chapter of a new ordeal—deportation. It is no accident that for the deportees the journey toward an unknown destination, during which

they were packed like cheap merchandise into a few square meters of wooden floor, without air, often without food or water, is engraved in indelible characters in their memory.

For all of them, the journey was a tragic revelation: a passage from home and country toward nothingness; from civilization toward barbarism. The very way in which the journey was organized and carried out demonstrated openly, even to the most optimistic, that in the Nazi universe there was no place for humanity.

In Notizie della Regione Piemonte, *April 1983 (special issue on the resistance and deportation)*

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1. On September 8, 1943, an armistice was announced between the government led by Marshal Pietro Badoglio and Allied forces in Italy.

A Mysterious Sensibility

Few writers have shared Kafka's fate. As the decades passed after his untimely death, he did not go out of fashion, nor was he forgotten or judged to be merely a reflection of his era. Rather, he gradually emerged as a harbinger, as if he had possessed that mysterious sensibility which enables some creatures to predict earthquakes. Undoubtedly, even in his time, there were warning signs, but they were mixed up with different or opposite ones. The West had emerged from the bloodbath of the First World War wounded, but not without hope for the future, restless, yet confident in its strength. Now, in that background noise, Kafka was able to distinguish significant "harmonics." This is why his books are best read in this time of "vanishing" confidence: they anticipate many of the ailments that afflict us today.

Which ailments? The crisis of the idea of progress and the prevalence of the opposite perception—of a regression imposed by an obscure force, by an absurd and anonymous network of power. The cruelty of man ennobled by reasons of state (how can we forget the calligraphic machine of *In the Penal Colony*?). The hermetic universe, impervious to our reason, a labyrinth without Ariadne's thread. The individual innocent-impotent, convicted without judgment by a foul yet unknowable court for a crime that is never revealed to him.

For me, a survivor of Auschwitz, reading Kafka again was a profound experience: a denial of my Enlightenment optimism and a singular way of reliving that distant time of my life.

Il Tempo, *July 3, 1983*

The Pharaoh with the Swastika

In 1943 I had a degree in chemistry and was working in Milan. I lived in a sort of commune (back then they were not yet called that) of young Jews who were financially self-sufficient. We shared lively intellectual interests and an ironic rather than violent dislike for fascism.

Four years earlier, the Fascist racial laws had expelled us from society and had branded us as biologically inferior; not a day went by without newspapers and magazines calling us alien to the country's traditions, different, harmful, vile, enemies.

Jews had been driven out of all state employment, teaching, public administration, the armed forces; Jewish doctors and lawyers could not have "Aryan" clients; no Jew could own a radio, employ a Christian maid, manage an industry, own land, publish books.

The trickle of slanders and prohibitions, some cruel, others absurd—all painful and damaging—intensified from month to month. How to defend ourselves? Sticking together, cultivating the friendship of the many Aryans who were anti-Fascist or not Fascist, making an effort to laugh and ignore the future.

We all came from bourgeois families; none of us had inherited the seed of active resistance and rebellion; none of us knew how to use a weapon. In retrospect, we were irresponsible, inept, and poorly informed; on the other hand, so were the vast majority of Italians.

I am amazed to recall that, in that August of 1943, so laden with tragedy, we went to the mountains for the holidays without much concern for the future. We did not believe we could influence the future in any way; we felt a shadow of indolent resentment, of spite toward Fascist Italy. Italy

had rejected us? All right, let it meet its destiny, whatever that might be, but without us.

Besides, we had spoken with anti-Fascist friends who were older and more experienced, and they had reassured us. Badoglio was not naïve, there were first-class armored divisions at the Brenner and the other mountain passes; even if Italy were to ask the Allies for an armistice, the Germans could not get in, and those who were already in Italy would be trapped. Nothing to fear, there would be a separate peace and the Allies would reach the Alps in the blink of an eye. We left Milan during a heavy bombardment, and went on holiday with the clear conscience of fatalists. By September 8 we had already returned to the city. The news of the armistice filled us with foolish delight. That was it, peace, and with peace the return to just laws, to equality, to fraternity; not even Hitler, confronted by the enormous leak that had opened on his southern front, could hold out for long.

So the war was almost over, and, with it, fascism and Nazism, discrimination, humiliation, and servitude would end. We shared the mood of our remote ancestors after the flight from Egypt, after the waters of the Red Sea had closed over Pharaoh's chariots. Some among us hastened to make plans; we could resume our studies, we could seek to enter professions we had been excluded from.

Our joy and our plans were short-lived. News items followed one another at a frantic pace: the King and Badoglio had fled Rome without giving any orders to the armed forces; Italian soldiers were disarmed by the Germans, loaded by the hundreds of thousands onto sealed trains and deported to Germany; Mussolini was freed with mocking ease from his detention in the Gran Sasso.

Germany was neither dead nor dying; three days after the armistice, the green-gray snake of Nazi divisions had already invaded the streets of Milan and Turin. The show was over, Italy was an occupied country like Poland, like Yugoslavia, like Norway.

During the forty-five days of the Badoglio government, some of us had tenuous political contacts with the Action Party, which had just emerged from the underground but had not had time to organize a network of political and military resistance. Without a clear plan, I left Milan and joined my family, who had fled to the hills near Turin; later I went up the Valle d'Aosta to stay with friends.

The situation was hopeless, and the sight unforgettable. The shreds of the Italian forces that had occupied southern France were flooding back in disarray into Italy through all the mountain passes; only a few soldiers had been able or had wanted to keep their weapons, and all were looking anxiously for civilian clothes. Avoiding the railway and the roads at the bottom of the valley, they marched endlessly on the high mule tracks, from hamlet to hamlet, like a flock with no shepherd. They were tired, demoralized, hungry; they asked for bread, milk, polenta, and wanted nothing but to return home, walking over the entire arc of the Alps if necessary. They had had enough of the uniform they were still wearing: What good was it? Good for nothing, only for falling into German hands.

I spent some weeks unable to make up my mind. Contributing to the fight against the Nazis was an absolute obligation: they were my enemies, the enemies of humanity, now also the enemies of Italy—and Italy, Fascist or not, was my country, after all. On the other hand, my experience as conspirator and soldier was nil. I was not prepared to fight, shoot, kill; no one had taught me—these actions were far removed from anything I had done or thought until then. But then I met other young people, scarcely more experienced than I but more determined. We had few weapons, no money, and hardly any contacts with organized, experienced groups, yet we declared ourselves partisans *in pectore*. We would find weapons and money, too, and experience we would gain through action.

In wartime, inexperience and imprudence cost dearly. In the valley people were talking about our small group much more than we deserved. Clearly the Fascists of the newborn republic must have overestimated us, since some three hundred of them came looking for us, while we were only eleven, and practically unarmed. We did not even try to defend ourselves, and my story as a partisan ended prematurely on a hillside buried by the first winter snow. From there, I was taken prisoner to Aosta, and from Aosta, identified as a Jew, to the Lager in Auschwitz.

La Stampa, *September 9, 1983*

Remembrance of a Righteous Man

I would like to contribute to the memory of a man who was close to me for a long time, who shared my harshest experiences, who helped many and sought help from few, who once saved my life, and who died in silence a few days ago, aged eighty-five. He was a doctor. Over the half century of his practice, his patients must have numbered in the thousands. They all remember him with gratitude and fondness, as you do someone who does his best to help you, without self-importance and without intrusiveness, but who sympathizes fully with your problems (not just those related to health), to help you overcome them.

He was not handsome, but was cheerfully aware of the fact that his ugliness was charming. He made the most of it, as a comedian would a mask. He had a large, crooked nose, big bushy blond eyebrows, and, between nose and eyebrows, bright, sky blue eyes, never sad, almost childlike. In recent years he had become deaf, but this did not bother him at all. Even before that, he had his own way of joining a conversation. If it interested him, he would take part with tact and common sense, never raising his voice (which had been feeble and quivering since the time of his youth, anyway). If the conversation did not interest him, or ceased to interest him, he would become visibly distracted, without even trying to hide it. He would withdraw into his shell like a turtle, leaf through a book, gaze at the ceiling, or wander around the room as if he were alone.

He was never distracted—in fact, he was extremely attentive—with his patients. On the other hand, his absentmindedness during vacations was legendary, and he would tell about his misadventures afterward with pride. Indeed, he often boasted about his weaknesses, which were few, and never

about his virtues, which were patience, love, and a quiet courage. Fragile in appearance, he possessed an unusual strength of character that manifested itself through endurance rather than through action and was a precious gift to those near him.

I do not know much about him before 1943; thereafter he did not have a happy life. He was Jewish, and in the fall of that year, to avoid capture by the Germans, he had tried to cross into Switzerland with a large group of relatives. They all made it across the border, but the Swiss guards were inflexible and allowed only old people, children, and their parents to enter. The others were taken back to the Italian border: in fact, into Fascist and German hands. He and I met in the Italian transit camp of Fòssoli, were deported together, and from then on were not separated until we returned to Italy, in October 1945.

His wife, who was kind, defenseless, and always ready, like him, to defend others, was killed immediately upon entering the Lager. He had identified himself as a doctor, but he didn't know German, so he had to share our common destiny: to toil in the mud and the snow, push wagons, shovel coal, dirt, and gravel. It was crushing work for anybody; for him, physically weak, out of shape, and no longer young, it was deadly. After a few days at the worksite, his shoes damaged his feet, they swelled up, and he had to be admitted to the infirmary.

There the SS doctors carried out frequent inspections. They would judge him unfit for work and add his name to the list of those to be gassed. Then, by the skin of his teeth, he would be saved by the intervention of his colleagues in charge, the French or Polish prisoner-doctors at the infirmary. Four times they managed to have his name taken off the list. In the intervals between the convictions and the temporary acquittals he continued to be himself: fragile but not spoiled by the inhumanity of the Lager, gently and serenely aware, friendly with everybody, incapable of rancor, without anguish or fear.

We were liberated together; together we traveled for thousands of kilometers in faraway lands. During this endless and indescribable journey as well, his kind and indomitable personality, his contagious capacity for hope, and his zeal as a doctor without medicine were invaluable not only to us, the few Auschwitz survivors, but to a thousand other Italians, men and women, on the uncertain road of return from exile.

Finally back in Turin, he distinguished himself among all the survivors by his steadfast commitment to the network of support among his fellow prisoners, even those who were far away, even foreigners. Since then, for almost forty years, he had lived a life that only a man like him could have built for himself. With no immediate family, yet in fact surrounded by myriad friends, old and new, all of whom felt indebted to him for something: many for their health, others for a wise piece of advice, others simply for his presence, and for his smile, which was childlike but never oblivious or pained, and which made our hearts lighter.

La Stampa, *October 21, 1983 (remembrance written on the occasion of the death of Leonardo De Benedetti)*

Leonardo De Benedetti

On October 16, Dr. Leonardo De Benedetti died suddenly in the Jewish nursing home where he had been living for many years. He was eighty-five years old; a former district doctor in Rivoli, he was arrested in 1943 while trying to leave the country and deported to Auschwitz, where he lost his wife. In the Lager, his abilities as a medical doctor were not recognized; he spent almost a year there, enduring hunger, cold, exhaustion, and alienation with an unusual serenity and strength of mind that spread to anyone who happened to talk to him. Freed in January 1945 by the Soviet Army, he was given the task of organizing an infirmary in the transit camp of Katowice. The means were scant, but his zeal was great, and the news of the Italian doctor who listened to everyone and treated everyone free of charge spread far and wide, so that it was not just former Italian prisoners who came to him but also other former prisoners, many Polish citizens, and even some Soviet soldiers.

After a long and adventurous journey back home, he settled in Turin and resumed his practice. His patience, experience, and humanity were such that every client soon became his friend and turned to him for advice and assistance. He did not like solitude, and lived first with some relatives, then with a family of friends, Dr. Arrigo Vita and his two sisters. They passed away, one by one, and Dr. De Benedetti was left alone again. Until he turned eighty, when he retired from his profession, he was the diligent and highly appreciated doctor in the nursing home, where he had decided to settle with the serene resignation of those who know they have not lived in vain. But he was never alone there. Every day until his last, he received visits and invitations from loving relatives, from friends, colleagues, and

fellow prisoners. He also received a lot of mail, even from faraway countries, because those who had known him did not forget him, and he answered them all, even the annoying ones, with scrupulous care.

Last spring, he had some signs of the illness that he ultimately succumbed to. He treated himself with the wisdom of his long experience, and continued to live with a tranquil mind, prudently but fearlessly. Death was sudden and merciful, he didn’t suffer. He was a courageous and gentle man who gave invaluable help to many and never sought help from anyone.

Ha Keillah, *December 1983*

A Mighty River That Sins by Excess

There's no doubt about it, I will seize the opportunity and read *Les Misérables* again, just as, in adulthood, we may revisit a garden or valley of our youth. I read the novel when I was about eighteen, forming a vibrant and dense impression that did not fade as the years went by. That impression was strengthened by a movie version in the thirties that I can't identify more precisely. I will read the novel again with reverence and with distrust, so to speak, as a negative model, as an example of a kind of writing to be respected but not imitated. I remember and acknowledge its edifying purpose and shining good faith, but I also remember the overflowing course of the book, its lack of restraint, the Manichaeism that deprives characters of humanity and turns them into emblems, the baroque emphasis, the primitive and one-sided psychology.

In my recollections from that time, it is a book that sins by excess, seizing every opportunity, good and less good, to rise up and take off into digressions and literary raptures: a mighty and turbid river that overflows its banks. At its source, however, is an integrity of life and of writing which is rare today; a culture that is Francocentric but broad and carefully thought out; a love of justice that you feel was paid for with an entire life. No one would write like that now, yet it is a book to which every European is indebted.

Tuttolibri, *December 17, 1983*

Collectors of Tortures

No exhibit ever seemed to me so clumsy and pointless as this one. Absurdly extended—goodness knows why and until when—it clutters the small building of the esteemed Società Promotrice delle Belle Arti in Turin. It is entitled, without pretenses, “Cruel Torture Machines Throughout History.” Not that the exhibition does not keep its promise; the machines are there, authentic or reconstructed, and they are horrible enough. Everything else, however, is exploitative and false.

False—or rather deceitful—is the tone of the labels; fortunately, they are displayed at bad angles, so that the glare of the lights makes many of them illegible. The tone oscillates between roguish complacency and schoolboy humor; in this context, it sets one’s teeth on edge. Some of the machines built to inflict pain are praised for their “output [sic] in terms of death agonies,” the cat-o’-nine-tails is exalted for its “remarkable merits,” and another kind of whip is called “amusing.”

It seems to me that we see here the origin of this traveling exhibition: it arose from the joint efforts of a number of Italian and foreign collectors in the field. I confess to a certain distrust of collectors—unless they are motivated by a specific cultural interest, have avowed profit motives, or are under fourteen years old (or the equivalent mental age).

If none of these conditions are present, a collector is essentially someone who does not know what to do with his time—and there’s nothing wrong with that. But if his curiosity is directed toward weapons or, worse, toward the “atrocious” etc., my distrust deepens. Such a collector can’t but have an *esprit mal tourné*;[1] if he pursues his mania as a private citizen, at home, it is exclusively his business, or at most his psychoanalyst’s. But if

he joins forces with his peers and thrusts his goods in our path, then it becomes everybody's business.

The cultural gloss of the exhibition is also false. I do not trust the education of those who write "tithe" for "tight," speak about Catalan guerrillas, say that "the executioner doesn't give a damn" about the condemned man, mix up informatics with information, and do not know the proper use of the subjunctive. I trust it even less when they simulate a philological rigor that they do not possess and that, on a subject as obscene as torture, would be out of place anyway.

Equally out of place is the feminist tirade about the male chauvinism of the torturers, and the indignation at the use, past or present, of these devices seems feigned and inauthentic. Those who are truly incensed neither collect nor exhibit them. Rather, they ponder them and try to evoke a time when the criminal, confirmed or presumed, was a condemned man, and therefore deserving of the torments of hell. These machines, ostentatious, redundant, some even decorated, were meant to highlight the theatrical aspect of the punishment and to strengthen faith in and obedience to the earthly or heavenly order by reducing the transgressor from human being to "thing."

Here we come to the point. Most false and hypocritical are the alleged reasons for the exhibit. For a crusade against torture, this jumble is more of a handicap than an asset. The resurgence of torture in our century, in the wake of Hitler's and Stalin's regimes, has little to do with these machines.

Modern torture, unfortunately present almost everywhere (maybe less in Italy than in other places), has a merely nominal relation to them. It is not theatrical but secretive; it has political rather than theological or cosmic ends; it is, sadly, "rational," and it must be fought by rational means. It is the highest evil, even worse than the death penalty; it destroys the body of the tortured and the soul of the torturer. But what purpose can this vulgar display of past barbarity serve in driving it away? We can be sure that not one potential torturer will walk out of the exhibition a changed person. Rather, it will only revive that sadistic seed which lies hidden within many among us.

La Stampa, *December 28, 1983*

1. In French in the original: “a dirty mind.”

The Brute Power

Death is the one thing
Fate gave our kind.
Disdain yourself now, nature, the brute
hidden power that rules to common harm,
And the boundless vanity of all.[1]

These are the words that Giacomo Leopardi, age thirty-five, addressed to his weary heart in the most desperate of his poems. Not everyone shares this despair, and those who do don't share it all the time. The infinite vanity of all—which can hardly be questioned—weighs on us only at times of clear-sightedness, and such moments, in a normal life, are not frequent. Besides, if we have the impression (true or false) that our actions are not useless, and that they help to, say, alleviate pain or give pleasure, usually we do not feel unhappy. Further, luckily for us, or our "bright illusion," there are on this earth dawns, forests, starry skies, friendly faces, and precious encounters, which seem not to be subjected to the brute power.

Yet this power appears indisputable and evident (in other words, not "hidden") to anyone who has found himself fighting the old human battle against matter. Those who have done so have been able to observe through their own senses that, if not the universe, at least this planet is governed by a force that is not invincible but perverse, that prefers disorder to order, jumble to purity, a tangle to parallelism, rust to iron, a pile to a wall, and stupidity to reason. Against this power (who has not felt it?), which works also within us, we need defenses. Our main defense is the brain, which must therefore be maintained in good condition, but we also possess lesser

defenses, entrusted with simpler tasks, that we share with the lower animals and maybe even plants. We don’t need a brain to sweat when it is hot or to contract our pupils before a glaring light; in fact, these are operations that the brain is incapable of performing.

When all these mechanisms—whether or not they are dependent on the brain—work properly, we can preserve the status quo. This happens fairly easily on the scale of days and months, but less successfully on the scale of years and decades, such that we grow old and die. This quality, of self-preservation against the brute power of degradation and death, is typical of living matter and its more or less crude imitations, and it is called homeostasis. It enables us to resist the thousands of changes, internal and external, that threaten to break our balance with the environment.

Of course, it hasn’t been demonstrated nor is it demonstrable that becoming other, relinquishing our identity, is always a bad thing. Whether it is or not depends on the initial quality of that identity, and on how it is subjectively perceived. There are individuals who spend their entire lives obsessed and saddened by the desire to change their skin, because (maybe wrongly) they are not satisfied with the skin they live in, and who can’t change because of an excessive homeostasis. This, however, is a rare occurrence. In general, in the long run, homeostasis fails: “life” makes sure that we become someone else—fearful, idle, stingy, corrupted, or hypochondriac. By gnawing away at our defenses, it destroys them. In most cases, “life” changes us for the worse, and so homeostasis, although essentially conservative, is a good thing. Naturally, progress, reforms, innovations, inventions are also good things, but their pursuit is not for everyone, while self-preservation is a minimum requirement for all living beings.

Not only living beings. It is important to note that the devices intended to keep constant one or more variables of a process originated with the industrial age, and, more precisely, with the engine. As early as 1787 James Watt had added a centrifugal governor to ensure a constant speed for his first steam engines. It was a small vertical shaft connected to the engine by a pair of conical gears. Two opposing, rigid pendulums were suspended from it; joined to them was a system of tie-rods that controlled the steam valve. The faster the rotation speed, the higher the pendulums rose, owing to centrifugal force, and the more constricted the valve became. Thus an equilibrium was reached—that is, a steady speed regardless of the load. In

this manner, long before the concept of homeostasis was theorized, Watt had achieved what two centuries later was to be called a “feedback loop”: it is a “loop” because it has to do with powering the system. A classic example of feedback is the simple one of water heaters. The heater includes a thermometer that not only measures the water temperature but compares it with a temperature set by the user; it interrupts the current supply if the first temperature is higher than the second. In this way we obtain an “all or nothing” adjustment that is rather rudimentary; inertia within the system is such that the temperature, rather than remaining uniform, varies within four or five degrees. This is acceptable for bathwater (which, moreover, may be mixed at will with cold water), but it is not acceptable in many other circumstances requiring deviations of less than one degree, or even one hundredth of a degree—for instance, when we have to measure with precision a chemical or physical property that depends heavily on temperature.

In these cases, we rely on refinements very similar to what happens in living organisms and to what empirical experience has suggested to man from time immemorial. An adjustment can be modulated—that is, the correction can be proportional to the observed variation. The thermostat of the water heater can be compared to a helmsman who can hold the rudder only in its two extreme positions, hard left or hard right. A good helmsman would not act this way; rather, consciously or not, he would adjust the rudder in accordance with the deviation from the course shown by the steering compass. The first helmsman will follow a winding line; the second, a line that is almost straight.

We can rely on even subtler expedients. The adjustment can be achieved not through the attainment of the prescribed target value but through the speed at which that target value is pursued. In the case of the thermostat, the trigger is the speed at which temperature increases or decreases. *Principiis obsta*, the instrument intervenes at the beginning; it has been taught to look ahead and take action “like a good father.” If the temperature rises rapidly, the thermostat “foresees” that the maximum target value will soon be exceeded and interrupts the energy supply before this happens.

There are other cases where the target value (highest or lowest admissible) of the parameter to be regulated depends on its duration. For instance, a sick person can withstand a fever of 105 degrees Fahrenheit for some minutes, 104 degrees for a few hours, and 103 degrees for a few days.

Similar situations (where “what cannot be achieved by heat is achieved by time”) are frequent in chemistry and also in cooking, which is a more complicated and less transparent sort of chemistry. For this reason there are controls that take into account the time that passes and what happened earlier. In fact, the most advanced instruments can be programmed to work in the “all or nothing” mode, in the modular mode, to react to the speed of change, to its progression over time, or in various combinations of these four modes. It is even more surprising, perhaps, that the workmen who are in charge of controls often learn how to program their instruments in the most suitable way for the required activity, even though they have no understanding of how such instruments function. In the same way, we learn to ride a bicycle even if we do not know the theory of the gyroscope.

It has been the dream of politicians of all eras to devise tools for homeostasis that would enable them to maintain the health, or at least the survival, of the regime they believe in. However, human societies are so complex, the parameters in play so many, that this dream will never come true. Fifty years ago it used to be said that too much freedom leads to tyranny, and that a tyranny too harsh leads back to freedom. If this assertion were applicable in general, one could recognize in it a fluctuation around a point of equilibrium—that is, a rudimentary regulatory mechanism, however cruel, costly in human lives, and unbearably slow. Unfortunately, what happens in today’s world persuades us to conclude that the assertion is false. Today’s tyrannies tend to hold on indefinitely, like a sort of sclerosis, and surrender only if upset by military intervention or overcome by another tyranny. Too much freedom, that is, license, does not breed tyranny but becomes gangrenous. Our current malaise originates in this: we no longer perceive restraining forces, homeostasis, and feedback loops. The world seems to be moving forward toward an unspecified catastrophe and we can only hope that its progress is slow.

Notiziario della Banca Popolare di Sondrio, *no. 33, December 1983*

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1. Giacomo Leopardi, “A se stesso” (“To Himself”), translated by Jonathan Galassi.

Note on Kafka's *The Trial*[1]

Reading *The Trial*, a book filled with misery and poetry, leaves us changed—sadder and more aware. So this is it, this is the destiny of mankind: we can be persecuted and punished for an unknown crime that we did not commit, that "the court" will never disclose to us. Yet we can be ashamed of that crime until death and perhaps even beyond. Now, translating is more than reading, and I emerged from this translation as if from an illness. Translating is to examine under a microscope the fabric of the book, to penetrate it, to become entangled and involved with it. You take on this distorted world, where all logical expectations are in vain. You travel with Josef K. through dark mazes, on twisting paths that never lead where you expect.

From the first sentence, you are plunged into the nightmare of the unknowable, on every page confronted with haunting passages. K. is followed and persecuted by alien presences, by tiresome busybodies who spy on him from near and far, and in front of whom he feels stripped naked. There is a constant impression of physical constraint: ceilings are low, the rooms crammed with a jumble of furniture, the air is always gloomy, sultry, stale, dark. Paradoxically but significantly, the sky is clear only in the merciless final scene of the execution. K. is afflicted by unnecessary and irritating physical contacts; by avalanches of vague words, which are supposed to clarify his fate but confuse him instead; by pointless gestures; by desperately bleak backgrounds. His dignity as a man is compromised from the very beginning, and then relentlessly demolished day after day. Only women can, or could, provide salvation: they are motherly, loving, but inaccessible. Only Leni allows K. near her, but he despises her, he wants to

be rejected; he does not seek safety. K. is afraid of punishment and at the same time wants it.

I do not believe that Kafka is very similar to me. Often, during this work of translation, I felt a collision, a conflict, an immodest temptation to untangle in my own way the knots in the text: in short, to correct, to tamper with the choice of words, to superimpose my writing style on Kafka's. I tried to resist this temptation. Since I know that there is no "right way" to translate, I relied more on instinct than on reason. I followed a line of interpretative correctness, as honest as possible, although maybe not always consistent from page to page, as not all the pages posed the same problems. I had Alberto Spaini's 1933 translation in front of me, and I seemed to recognize in it the reasonable propensity to smooth what was rough, to render comprehensible what was incomprehensible. The more recent (1973) translation by Giorgio Zampa follows the opposite approach: it is philologically rigorous, extremely respectful, even with the punctuation; it is parallel, interlinear. It is a translation, and presents itself as such, openly; it does not disguise itself as an original text. It does not help the reader, it does not ease the way for him, it courageously preserves the syntactical density of the German.

I believe I followed a middle course between these two. For instance, while recognizing the obsessional impact (maybe deliberate) of the speech by the defending counsel Huld, which goes on relentlessly for ten pages without a new paragraph, I had mercy on the Italian reader and introduced a few breaks. To retain the agility of the language, I did away with a few restrictive adverbs (almost, much, a little, about, maybe, etc.) that are more apt in German than in Italian. On the other hand, I made no attempt to weed out the proliferation of expressions of the "to seem" family: likely, probable, to see indistinctly, to perceive, as if, apparently, similar, and so on. They seemed to me typical, rather, absolutely indispensable, in this tale of tirelessly unraveling events where nothing is as it appears. For the rest, I made a determined effort to balance faithfulness to the text with the flow of expression. Whenever the text—notoriously tormented and controversial—contained contradictions and repetitions, I left it unchanged.

Note on the translation of The Trial*, by Franz Kafka (Turin: Einaudi, 1983)*

1. Levi translated *The Trial* from German for his publisher, Einaudi.

A Park Dedicated to Emanuele Artom

Tomorrow morning at nine thirty, in a simple ceremony at the intersection of Via Artom and Via Candiolo, in Turin, Emanuele Artom will be commemorated forty years after his death. The ex-partisans of the Mirafiori section of ANPI (National Association of Partisans of Italy), the Jewish community of Turin, and the Christian congregation of San Andrea will honor him. A small park, funded by students and partisans, will be dedicated in his name; Giorgina Arian Levi and Giuseppe Reburdo will speak.

Emanuele was born in 1915, into a family in which education was considered the supreme good in life. His father and mother were esteemed teachers, he and his younger brother, Ennio, were precociously mature students and then scholars. Four people bound by a quiet, intense affection, but respectful of one another's intellectual independence: a family that in normal times might seem destined for a tranquil future.

But the times were not normal. The racial laws went into effect in 1938, and the Artoms, anti-Fascist by culture and by nature, reacted with dignity and courage. Shortly afterward, in 1940, Ennio died in an absurd mountain-climbing accident, and a shadow began to spread over the family. Emanuele responded to grief with a renewed spiritual tension. He translated Polybius, he applied himself to study and to teaching, but he didn't withdraw: he felt the hour of decision was near, what he had learned from the classics and from the Bible must not lie inert, must lead him to understand, to choose.

On September 8, 1943, the Nazis invaded northern Italy, and Emanuele didn't hesitate: though he had no military experience, and was a stranger to violence, he joined the partisans, in the mountains. He endured discomforts

and dangers with cheerful pride, he became quick and daring; in January 1944, he was the political representative for the Action Party in Val Pellice. He was captured in a roundup, tortured atrociously for days, and humiliated, but he found in his frail body the strength to be silent: he didn't name names. He died on April 7, racked by torture; his parents, twice bereaved, were denied the consolation of knowing where his remains lie.

Fichte's maxim fits him as it does few others: the educated man requires not only knowledge but also virtue, which is the highest degree of morality.

La Stampa, *April 11, 1984*

The Path of a Jewish Writer

By now, readers and critics—both in Italy and abroad—consider me a "Jewish writer." I accepted this definition gladly, but not immediately and not without resistance; in fact, I didn't accept it in its entirety until quite late in life, and late in my journey as a writer. I adjusted to the condition of Jew only as a consequence of the racial laws issued in Italy in 1938, when I was nineteen, and of my deportation to Auschwitz, in 1944. I adapted to the condition of writer even later, when I was over forty-five and had already published two books, and when the profession of writer (which nonetheless I have never considered a true profession) had begun to overshadow my "official" profession of chemist. In both cases, it was more a matter of destiny than of deliberate and informed choice. No matter, I will review here my works as a "Jewish writer," dwelling in particular on my books of autobiography or memoir, or on those otherwise relevant to the subject of this conference. I will follow the actual sequence of events rather than the sequence reflected in my writings; in other words, I will follow a biographical rather than a bibliographical order.

Like most Jews of ancient Italian descent, my parents and grandparents belonged to the middle class and were fully integrated into the country in terms of language, habits, and moral values. In my family, religion mattered little; I think that this can be explained by the fact that equal rights, obtained by non-Catholic Italians only around the middle of the last century, were a consequence of the largely secular nature of the Italian Risorgimento. Participation in the struggles of the Risorgimento included, if not an obligation, at least strong encouragement toward secularism. Nevertheless,

in my family—as among most Italian Jews—awareness of our Jewishness had not died out. It manifested itself in the preservation of certain family rituals (especially the celebrations for Rosh Hashanah, Passover, and Purim), in the importance attached to study and education, and in a modest but interesting linguistic differentiation. As with the famously hybrid structure of Yiddish, in the Jewish families of the various Italian provinces odd variations of the dialects had developed, with Hebrew insertions that were more or less adapted to conform to local phonetics. Since early childhood, I had been fascinated, and also moved, by this touching survival of the language of the Bible in family jargon and in our dialect. This inspired, many years after my literary debut, the first chapter of *The Periodic Table.*

At first glance, the book is a summary of my life as a chemist. Indeed, at the end of my professional career, I felt the need to explain what I owed to my job—almost manual, often tiring and dirty, at times even dangerous. It seemed right that, so to speak, the man of letters should give thanks to the chemist who had opened a pathway for him. On closer scrutiny, however, critics recognized in the book a range wider than pure autobiography. It holds the history of a generation. Many of its pages reflect the traumatic experience of the segregation of Jews in Fascist and National Socialist Europe, the blind rush to war and slaughter, and also the renewed pride that fatally accompanies every separation and act of discrimination. The book is divided into twenty-one "moments," each taking its subject and title from one of the chemical elements. For the purpose of this conference, the chapters titled "Argon," "Zinc," and "Gold" are especially relevant, as they relate to circumstances and events that preceded my deportation, and reflect my condition as a Jew, assimilated and integrated—but not Fascist—in Mussolini's Italy. Argon is a gas that does not react with other gasses. It is present in a tiny quantity in the air we breathe. In the chapter with that title I proposed a humorous analogy between this "rare" and "noble" gas and our ancestors in the small rural Jewish communities of Piedmont, isolated in small groups, at times single families, aloof, still mindful of long-ago persecutions, never much loved or much hated, at times the object of contempt or mistrust. No trace remains of these odd and remote characters, except for some funny anecdotes, some "sayings" that were handed down, almost a parody of the famous rabbinical "sayings" collected in the Talmud. In these pages, with ironic and gentle affection, I tried, for instance, to bring

to life again the story of a legendary uncle from Chieri, near Turin, who had fallen in love with the Christian maid of the house. As his parents opposed the marriage, the uncle went to bed and stayed there for twenty-two years, until his parents died and he could marry the girl. In relating these amusing and unusual family tales, I also tried to record that hybrid language I mentioned earlier, basically a minor, Mediterranean Yiddish, more local and less renowned, in which I nevertheless recognized my domestic roots:

> Its historical interest is small, because it was never spoken by more than a few thousand people, but its human interest is great, like that of all fluid border languages. It has a marvelous comic force, arising from the contrast between the fabric of the speech, which is the rough, sober, and laconic Piedmontese dialect, never written except on a bet, and the Hebrew framework, plucked from the remote language of the fathers, sacred and solemn, geologic, smoothed by the millennia like a riverbed by the glaciers. But this contrast mirrors another, that essential conflict of the Jews of the Diaspora, scattered among "the peoples" (the *gôjím*, that is), and stretched between divine vocation and the daily misery of exile; and still another, more general, and innate in the human condition, for man is a centaur, a tangle of flesh and mind, of divine breath and dust. The Hebrew people, after the dispersal, lived this conflict long and painfully, and drew from it not only its wisdom but its laughter, which is missing from the Bible and the Prophets. Yiddish is pervaded by it, and, within modest limits, so was the strange speech of our fathers in this land, which I want to recall here before it disappears: a skeptical, good-natured speech that might upon superficial examination appear blasphemous, but in fact has a richly affectionate and decorous intimacy with God.

The chemical analogy, still subtly ironic, changes focus in the chapter "Zinc." It is 1938, the racial laws have not yet been promulgated in Italy, but they can be felt in the air. Newspapers and magazines, orchestrated by the totalitarian regime, write insistently about the Jews as different, as potential (or current) enemies of fascism, as damaging "impurities" in the pure body of the Italian nation; they cite as an example to be followed the Nuremberg Laws and repeat the arguments of Dr. Goebbels's fanatical propaganda. The Jew, represented in cartoons with stereotypical Semitic features, is at the same time the capitalist who starves the "Aryan" peoples and the bloodthirsty Bolshevik, destroyer of Western civilization. It should be recalled that zinc reacts with acids only if it contains certain impurities: if it is extremely pure, it does not react. The young self whom I describe here is in a confused way proud to be "an impurity":

> For the wheel to turn, for life to live, impurities are needed. . . . We need dissent, difference, the grain of salt, the mustard seed. Fascism doesn't want them, forbids them, and so you're not a Fascist; it wants everyone to be the same, and you are not the same.

And a little further on:

> I am the impurity that makes the zinc react, I am the grain of salt, the mustard seed. Impurity, certainly: since *La Difesa della Razza*[1] had just begun publication in those months, and there was a lot of talk about purity, and I was starting to be proud of being impure. The truth is that until then being Jewish hadn't much mattered to me: privately, and with my Christian friends, I had always considered my origin as a nearly negligible but curious fact, a small, cheerful anomaly, like having a crooked nose or freckles; a Jew is someone who doesn't have a Christmas tree, who shouldn't eat salami but eats it anyway, who learned a little Hebrew at the age of thirteen and then forgot it. According to the periodical cited above, a Jew is miserly and clever: but I was not especially miserly or clever, nor was my father.

It seems to me that this last passage closely reflects the state of mind and the circumstances of the majority of Italian Jews on the eve of the racial laws.

In the chapter "Gold," things have come to a head. The Second World War is raging, in 1943 the Allies landed in Italy, fascism fell, and the German Army invaded northern Italy. Although unprepared, both politically and militarily, I considered that the only proper choice was to join the anti-German resistance. This was what many of my friends, both Jewish and Christian, had done. Indeed, Jewish participation in the Italian resistance was relatively substantial in terms of both numbers and leadership. But my partisan activity was destined to be short-lived. Owing to an informer, on December 13, 1943, I was captured by the Fascists in the mountains of Valle d'Aosta. Under questioning, I admitted to being Jewish. This was due in part to exhaustion but in part also to a resurgence of that pride I mentioned earlier, which is a product of persecution, and whose intensity is proportionate to the harshness of the persecution itself.

In February 1944, the Fascists handed me over to the Germans, who deported me to Auschwitz. The convoy that transported us to the Lager contained 650 people; 525 of them were killed right away; 29 women were interned in Birkenau; 96 men, including me, were sent to Auschwitz-Monowitz, a "Nebenlager" owned by I.G. Farbenindustrie. Of these, only about 20 men and women returned home. I survived imprisonment because of a combination of lucky circumstances: I never fell ill, I was helped by an Italian bricklayer, I was able to work for two months as a chemist in an I.G. Farbenindustrie laboratory. I was liberated, thanks to the rapid advance of the Red Army, in January 1945.

Already during captivity, in spite of the hunger, the cold, the beatings, the exhaustion, in spite of the gradual death of my comrades and the crowded living together at all times, I had felt the urgency to relate my experience. I knew that my chances of survival were very small, but I also knew that, if I survived, I would *have to* tell the story, I could not avoid it. Further, I knew that telling the story, bearing witness, was a purpose worth surviving for. Not surviving *and* telling the story but surviving *in order to* tell the story. In Auschwitz, I was already aware that I was living the fundamental experience of my life.

Indeed, as soon as I returned to Italy (in October 1945), I began writing, with no plan, with no concern about style, giving precedence to events that were fresher in my memory, or that seemed important in themselves, or charged with symbolic meaning. I was not aware, nor did I have the intention, of writing a book. Rather, I felt I was fulfilling a duty, paying a debt to dead comrades, and at the same time answering a need of my own. I must add that neither in this book nor in the subsequent ones did I ever face language problems. My education was exclusively Italian, Italian is the only language I know well, and I could not imagine using any other.

I was alerted to the fact that I was writing a book by friends who were reading my pages. They suggested that I organize these pages and finish them. This is how *If This Is a Man,* published in 1947, originated. Later, the book showed its vitality: it has been translated into nine languages and adapted for radio and the theater in various countries. Excerpts appear in many anthologies; the book is reprinted frequently; and to this day young people read it, as confirmed by the many letters I receive.

It is not a book purely of testimony. Reading it after many years, I recognize many intertwined themes: the effort to understand “how could it have happened,” the almost scientific study of human behavior (of myself and others) under those extreme circumstances, the painful and daily comparison with life as a free man, the reappearance (sometimes intentional, sometimes unconscious and spontaneous) of literary reminiscences from Dante’s *Inferno*. But among these themes there is one in particular that I would like to highlight here: the evocation of the Bible.

For the first time in my life, starting in the Italian transit camp of Fòssoli, I found myself segregated from the “normal” world and forcibly plunged into an exclusively Jewish environment. It was a brutal confirmation of my condition as a Jew: a sentence, a relapse, a revival of

the Biblical tales of exile and migration. A tragic return, in which, however, alongside the despair stood the surprise and pride of a recovered identity. The following passage refers to the evening of our departure for Auschwitz from Fòssoli:

> In Barrack 6A old Gattegno lived with his wife and numerous children and grandchildren and his sons-in-law and hardworking daughters-in-law. All the men were carpenters; they had come from Tripoli after many long journeys, and had always carried with them the tools of their trade, their kitchen utensils, and their accordions and violins, so they could play and dance after the day's work. They were happy and pious folk. Their women, working silently and quickly, were the first to finish the preparations for the journey, in order to have time for mourning. When all was ready, the food cooked, the bundles tied up, they loosened their hair, took off their shoes, placed the funeral candles on the ground, and, lighting them according to the customs of their fathers, sat on the bare soil in a circle for the lamentations, praying and weeping through the night. We gathered in a group before their door, and experienced within ourselves a grief that was new to us, the ancient grief of a people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus, renewed in every century.

This theme and the Biblical tone reappear often as the months of captivity go by. At times, what emerges is the perception of a fate decided far above man by an incomprehensible God:

> On the march to work, limping in our clumsy wooden clogs on the icy snow, we exchanged a few words, and I found out that Resnyk is Polish; he lived in Paris for twenty years but still speaks an implausible French. He is thirty, but, like all of us, could be taken for anywhere from seventeen to fifty. He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but it was certainly a sorrowful, cruel, and moving story; because such are all our stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, shocking necessity. We tell them to one another in the evening, and they take place in Norway, Italy, Algeria, Ukraine—simple and incomprehensible, like the stories in the Bible. But are not they, too, stories in a new Bible?

The confusion of languages as a punishment for man's hubris is a theme that recurs frequently. Here, however, the legend is transformed; the hubris is that of Hitler's Germany forcing its slaves with a hundred languages to build its bold towers. For this, it will be punished:

> The Carbide Tower, which rises in the middle of Buna and whose top is rarely visible in the fog, was built by us. Its bricks were called *Ziegel, briques, tegula, cegli, kamenny, mattoni, téglak*, and they were cemented by hate, hate and discord, like the Tower of Babel; and that is what we call it, *Babelturm, Bobelturm*; and we hate it as our masters' insane dream of grandeur, their contempt for God and men, for us men.

And finally, at the moment of liberation, the memory of Biblical rescues returns but with utter ambivalence:

> The Germans were not there. The towers were empty.

> Today I think that if only because an Auschwitz existed no one in our age should speak of Providence. But in that hour the memory of Biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity undoubtedly passed like a wind through the mind of each one of us.

After writing *If This Is a Man* and seeing it published, I felt at peace with myself, like someone who has fulfilled his duty. I had borne witness, whoever wanted could read it. As a matter of fact, not many people did, because the book had been brought out by a small publisher, in a printing of only 2500 copies. Reviews were positive, and every now and then I would receive a letter expressing solidarity and praise, or would meet someone who had read the book; but there was no mention of reprints or translations and two years later the book was forgotten. I had committed myself wholeheartedly to my work as a chemist, I had married, I had been classified among "single book" authors, and I was hardly thinking of this one little book, although sometimes I dared to believe that the descent into hell had given me, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, a "strange power of speech."

Almost ten years later, I began thinking about the book again, on the occasion of an exhibit on the deportation that was held in Turin and elicited extraordinary interest, particularly among the young. I had contributed to the commentary on the exhibit, and young people (I was also relatively young) were crowding around me, asking questions, showing that they knew my book almost by heart, asking whether I didn't have other stories to tell. I offered the book to the publisher Einaudi, which published it again, in 1958. Since then, the reprints have never ceased.

Yes, I had other stories to tell. My liberation was not followed by a speedy return home. Instead of being repatriated by the shortest route, along with tens of thousands of other former prisoners of the Germans, military and civilians, Christians and Jews, French, English, Americans, Greeks, etc., I was sent to the interior of the Soviet Union, where I spent the entire summer of 1945. We were not treated badly, but we were suspicious. The excuses of the Soviet authorities (that there were no trains, that the war with Japan was not over yet) were not convincing. We were terrorized by the thought of a new imprisonment, knew nothing of the fate of our loved ones, and were tormented by homesickness.

Encouraged by the success of the new edition of my first book, in 1961 I began writing a memoir of my return: in the evenings, on Sundays, during the breaks in my job as a paint technician. The moment was favorable for

two reasons: in Italy, a wave of optimism and relative prosperity prevailed after the hardship of the postwar period; internationally, the cold war had been followed by détente between the United States and the USSR. This made it easier to talk objectively about the latter country without being accused of either anti-communism or subservience to the Italian Communist Party. In this second book, *The Truce*, I tried to depict the Soviets as I had seen them, "from below," and living among them, especially among the soldiers of the Red Army, tired of war, intoxicated by victory, totally unaware of the Western world.

That journey home was not pleasant, but it proved to be a remarkable observatory for realities normally inaccessible to an Italian. Among them, I must mention here the direct contact with Ashkenazi Judaism. The image of it that I had acquired in the Lager was distorted (everything in the Lager was distorted) and, above all, schematic. There were millions of Jews in Russia and Poland, and the Nazis had sent them to the Lager to be exterminated. The endless journey imposed on us by the Russians added details and nuance to this image. I was passing through countries very different from Italy, barren and wild, primitive and violent. Hostility toward the Jews long preceded the German invasion; it was endemic and constant. For centuries, Jews had been living in a state of segregation, linguistically as well. Wandering through Ukraine, then in White Russia, we encountered Jewish soldiers of the Red Army; young people who had fought with the partisans; families that had escaped the Einsatzkommandos by hiding in faraway places and who were now returning home by whatever means possible; villages deep in the forests whose once flourishing yeshivas were now destroyed—shreds of an exploded, mortally wounded Jewish world that was now seeking a new equlibrium. A few years later I drew inspiration from it to write this short poem:

Our fathers on this earth,
Merchants of many gifts,
Shrewd wise men whose fertile progeny
God sowed across the world
As mad Ulysses sowed salt in the furrows:
I have found you everywhere,
As many as the sands of the sea,
You stiff-necked people,

Poor tenacious human seed.

I will not devote much space here to the two books of short stories, *Natural Histories* and *Flaw of Form*, as they are little known abroad and are less committed, and the Jewish theme appears only intermittently. The stories vary in content, some bordering on science fiction, and they were written at different times and with different motivations. Yet some of them relate (maybe unconsciously) to the midrashic tradition of the moral tale. For instance, "Angelic Butterfly" imagines that a Nazi scientist discovers that man is merely the larva of a different animal, just as the caterpillar is of the butterfly. However, man never undergoes mutation because he dies too early. Would mutation transform man into an angel, or maybe a superman? The scientist gives a group of prisoners in a Lager medicines intended to speed up mutation. Rather than angels, however, they become huge, monstrous, flightless birds that are devoured by the starving inhabitants in the days of the battle of Berlin. "The Servant," an ironic reinterpretation of the Golem legend, imagines that Rabbi Loew of Prague knew the secrets of genetics and informatics, and so the Golem, his creature, is nothing other than a robot. Elsewhere I assume that, on the sixth day of Creation, a technical commission discusses in strictly business terms "Project Man." It decides to create a man-bird, but God the Father intervenes, with his full authority, and instantly creates a mammalian man, vaguely apelike, making the woman from his rib.

I've already mentioned passages of *The Periodic Table* that touch upon Jewish themes. The following book, *The Wrench,* is my only work that does not have Jewish references. The central message of this novel is the dignity of work, especially the artisan's work, as today's substitute for adventure and original research. This is a topic that I consider relevant in any time, place, or social structure. However, as I was writing the book, I was not unaware of the many references to the nobility of work, and its necessity, which are scattered throughout the Talmud.

The volume *Lilith and Other Stories* includes thirty-six short stories, most of them first published in newspapers or magazines. The first twelve, which have earned more attention from the critics, contain (in my own words, taken from one of the stories) "what was left out of my first two books." After approximately thirty years, I felt that the patrimony of memories from the Lager had not yet been entirely expended and that it was

worth going back to it. Obviously, the perspective had changed. I no longer felt the urge to bear witness and liberate my inner self; I thought I had said everything about the sociology of the Lager, its essential horror, its nature as a distorted reflection of today's world, its laws. In a fairly serene mood, I wished instead to study again from close up certain individuals from that time, victims, survivors, and oppressors, who stood out in my memory against the gray, collective, and impersonal background of the "drowned." In *If This Is a Man*, I described the latter as follows:

> Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always the same, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death—in the face of it they have no fear, because they are too tired to understand.
>
> They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could encompass all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image, which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, head bowed and shoulders bent, on whose face and in whose eyes no trace of thought can be seen.

Among these "revisited" characters there is an honest and gentle fellow prisoner whom I tried to convince of the necessity of stealing from the Germans in order to survive; another comrade, a practicing Jew, who on the eve of Yom Kippur refused to eat his soup; a third who told me the troubling legend of Lilith, the first wife of Adam and God's concubine. One of these stories—in my view, the most important—summarizes in a few pages the tale of Chaim Rumkowski, the president of the Jewish council in the Lodz Ghetto. It's well-known that this man accepted all kinds of compromises in order to preserve the pitiable authority vested in him by the Germans. He adopted without hesitation, and without feeling ridiculous, all the exterior, "royal" symbols of power, bravely defending it against the Germans themselves. According to a rumor circulating at the time in Poland, when the ghetto was liquidated and he was to be deported to a Lager like everyone else, Rumkowski requested and was allowed to make his last journey in a special railway car. In this grotesque and tragic tale, with its Shakespearean flavor, I recognized a metaphor of our civilization: especially of the imbalance we experience, and are used to, between the enormous amount of time and energy invested in the pursuit of power and prestige and the basic futility of these goals. We tend to "forget that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that outside the fence are the lords of death, and a little way off the train is waiting."

I still have to talk about my latest book, *If Not Now, When?*, which was published last April. It is a novel, and its origins go far back in time. The seeds of its development are basically two. The more remote is the almost photographic memory of an episode of our adventurous return from deportation. In October 1945, at the Italian border, we realized that the very long freight train that was taking us home no longer had sixty cars but sixty-one. In *The Truce*, I described the event thus:

> At the tail end of the train, traveling with us toward Italy, was a new car, crowded with young Jews, boys and girls from all the countries of Eastern Europe. None of them looked more than twenty, but they were extremely determined and confident; they were young Zionists, they were going to Israel, taking any route they could and by any means they could. A ship awaited them in Bari. They had bought the train car and to hook it up to our train had been the simplest thing in the world, they hadn't asked permission from anyone—they had simply hooked it up. I was amazed, but they laughed at my amazement. "Is Hitler not dead?" their leader asked me, with the intense gaze of a hawk. They felt immensely free and strong, masters of the world and of their destiny.

The more recent seed of the book is a story I was told by a friend in 1971. In the summer of 1945 my friend, a former refugee in Switzerland, had volunteered to assist foreign Jews who were flocking in disarray to Italy from Central Europe. They were miserable, traumatized people, who had lost relatives, home, homeland, money, health—everything but the hope of building a future for themselves somewhere else. Arriving in Milan along with them, however, were a few small groups of refugees of a different kind. These men and women refused the designation of "displaced persons." They called themselves partisans and spoke about their years of guerrilla operations and sabotage against the German troops.

These two seeds remained dormant for a long time. They were revived by the intergenerational controversy that arose a few years ago (in Israel and elsewhere) over the behavior of the Jews in response to the Nazi massacre. Had they truly let themselves be led to the slaughter without any resistance? If so, why? If not, how many had resisted and when, where, how? In my opinion, this debate flies in the face of history and is tainted by prejudice. As a former partisan and former deportee, I know well that there are political and psychological circumstances when resistance is possible, and others when it is not. It was not my intention to join the discussion, but I believed I had enough narrative energy to extract from those seeds a story worth reading. Obviously, it would be a historical novel; maybe also, in a more nuanced way, a novel with a message. Most of all, however, it would

be a wide-ranging action novel. Further, I wanted to pay homage to those Jews, whether a few or many, who in despair had found the strength to oppose the Nazis and in that unequal struggle had recovered dignity and freedom.

The topic suited me well. My ordeal in the concentration camp, my reading of Yiddish authors, business trips to the Soviet Union had left me with a lively interest in the culture of Eastern Jews, a fabulously rich and vibrant culture, yet destined to be transplanted or to die out. But it wasn't my culture: my experiences and knowledge were not enough, and a period of study was indispensable. Before I began to write, I devoted almost a year to collecting and reading documents and books. While I wanted to write a novel, I did not want in any way to be at odds with historical events or to diverge from reality. I consulted documentation from Allied, Soviet, and Italian sources, and even a chronicle of the Jewish partisan war (*Di milchamà fun di Jiddische Partisaner in Mizrach-Europe*; *The War of the Jewish Partisans of Eastern Europe*) written by Moshe Kaganovich, a partisan commander, and published in Yiddish in Buenos Aires in 1956. Since it's difficult to depict a social environment and to have characters speak if you do not know their language, I studied some Yiddish grammar and vocabulary. And since Yiddish culture, like all preindustrial and patriarchal cultures, is imbued with popular wisdom and proverbs, I also studied collections of sayings and proverbs and the "Yiddishe Witze" compilations. It is no accident that the very title of the book is taken from a well-known verse of the Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot).

This may be the only occasion when I had to confront a real (but unusual) linguistic challenge. I had to give the reader the impression that the dialogues between my characters, obviously in standard Italian, were translated from Yiddish, a language that I do not know well and that the average Italian reader does not know at all. I can't tell whether the challenge was met; the verdict is left to those future readers who actually know Yiddish.

I did not set out to write a true story. Rather, I wanted to reconstruct the hypothetical but plausible itinerary of one of the groups described in the texts that I had read and which indicated that, within the vast network of European resistance, the Jewish presence was more important than is commonly believed.

The characters of *If Not Now, When?* are about thirty Russian and Polish Jews, men and women. Soldiers separated from the Red Army, survivors of the ghettos and of the massacres of the Einsatzkommandos, they do not initially have a definite political or ideological education. Only one of them —a woman—professes herself to be at once Communist, Zionist, and feminist. The others are driven mostly by the necessity of defending themselves and by a vague longing for revenge, rehabilitation, and freedom. They meet and join together "like drops of mercury," individually or in groups, in the forests of White Russia and in the swamps of the Pripet Marshes, sometimes accepted, sometimes rejected, by the Soviet partisan units:

> Each one, man or woman, carried a different history, as heavy and scalding as molten lead; each would have been grieving over a hundred dead if the war and three terrible winters had left the time and the leisure to do so. They were weary, penniless, and filthy, but not beaten; the children of merchants, tailors, rabbis, and cantors, they had armed themselves with weapons taken from the Germans, they had won the right to wear those tattered uniforms without insignia or rank, and they had tasted more than once the bitter food of killing. . . . In each day's new adventure in the *partizanka*, on the frozen steppe, in the snow and in the mud, they had found a new freedom, unknown to their fathers and their grandfathers, a contact with other men, both friends and enemies, with nature and with action that intoxicated them like the wine at Purim, when it is customary to abandon the usual sobriety and drink until you can no longer tell the difference between a blessing and a curse. They were cheerful and ferocious, like animals released from a cage, like slaves rising up to take vengeance. . . . Many of [them] had never tasted freedom, and [they had] learned to appreciate it here, in the forests, in the marshes, and amid much danger, along with adventure and brotherhood.

Following orders from Moscow, they move westward in order to stay close behind the retreating Germans but also because they no longer have a homeland, a home, a family, and they hope to start a new life in the land of Israel, of which they have a millenary and mythical image. The harshness of the life forced upon them—endless marches, battles, round-up operations, escapes, hardships—makes them uncivilized and wild. Yet they haven't lost certain traits that make them different from the other partisans they meet: the creative imagination, the old Jewish self-irony that immunizes them against any rhetoric, the passion for dialectic discussion, the conflict between traditional gentleness and the necessity of killing. Accepted for a time by a unit of Soviet partisans, they participate in the diversion of German airdrops, seize and destroy a train, help Polish peasants with the harvest, kill the guards of a small German Lager and free the surviving prisoners. Overtaken by the war front, they are interned by the

Russians but escape in a stolen truck. The war ends, in Germany a sniper kills one of the women, and the group avenges her in a bloody reprisal. At last they cross the Italian border, in a railway car bought on the black market, and reach the Refugee Assistance Center in Milan, where one of the women delivers a baby. It is August 7, 1945, the day of Hiroshima. The story ends with this twofold, deliberately ambiguous message.

In Italy, the book has had an excellent reception from both critics and the general public. It was widely read during the summer season and was awarded two of the three most sought-after Italian literary prizes, the Viareggio and the Campiello. A French translation is under way. The fortuitous coincidence of the publication of the book with the war in Lebanon has helped its editorial success, and, at the same time, has distorted its meaning for some critics and readers, who have taken it for an "instant book." In fact, today there is no longer any need to prove that, under certain circumstances, the Jews, too, know how to fight.

In La Rassegna Mensile di Israel *50 (May–August 1984). (Originally presented at a conference on Jewish writing since the Second World War sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, held in Bellagio from November 29 to December 3, 1982.)*

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1. *La Difesa della Razza* (*Defense of the Race*) was a violently anti-Semitic biweekly that began publication in 1938.

The Summer for a Book

It seems to me that it is indispensable for every Jew, in fact for every civilized person, to read *The Terrible Secret*, by Walter Laqueur.

Let me be clear: it's not summer reading, and constitutes a duty rather than a pleasure. It does not at all mitigate the immeasurable sin of Nazism, but demonstrates how almost every country in Europe bears a quotient of responsibility for the slaughter of the Jews, ranging from open complicity, as in the case of Fascist Italy, to encouragement and to help denied.

The book completes and summarizes the various other books already published that contain partial treatments of this theme.

As an alternative I would propose *People in Auschwitz*, by Hermann Langbein, which is perhaps the most detailed book so far on the most well-known and notorious of the extermination camps.

The work is remarkable because it pays attention not only to the condition of the prisoners but also to "those on the other side": men, too, like us, but corrupted and overwhelmed by the fiendish power of the Nazi state.

Shalom, *no. 6, June 1984*

Asymmetry and Life

When I was a student, around 1940, chemists had a clear understanding of the nature of molecules—maybe even too clear. The molecule, “the smallest portion of matter that preserves the properties of the substance it belongs to,” was tangible and concrete, a small model. Physicists already knew a lot about the functions of the wave, the vibrations of atoms, the rotations and degrees of independence of the whole molecule and its component parts, the nature of the valence. Organic chemists, however, were reluctant to follow them into this terrain. They remained fascinated by stereochemistry, a relatively recent conquest. Stereochemistry is the branch of chemistry that studies precisely the properties of the molecule as an object, having thickness, bulges and recesses, bulk—in short, an object with a form.

It hadn’t been a short journey. The concept of molecular weight had been precisely defined since the middle of the nineteenth century: the weight of the molecule corresponded to the sum of the weights of its atoms and could be determined by simple techniques available to all laboratories. Elemental analysis also had a solid foundation, and so it was possible to know which and how many atoms made up the molecule. But we would not venture to represent the molecule’s structure: it was conceived as a bundle, a shapeless cluster. We already knew pairs of compounds, such as acetone and propionaldehyde, or diethyl ether and butanol, which had the same composition but entirely different chemical and physical properties. This phenomenon was given a beautiful Greek name (“isomerism”) long before the analytical methods of the time could explain it. We guessed that it must be a permutation, but our understanding of the spatial arrangement of the atoms within a molecule was still too vague.

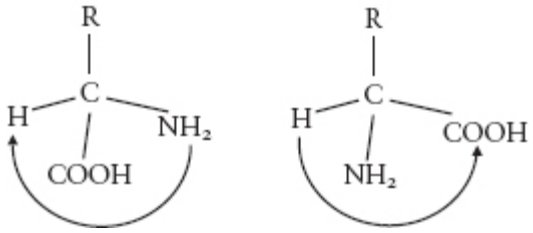
Then even more unusual pairs, or sets of three, were observed. Their members were identical not only in their composition but also in all their properties, except two. One member rotated the plane of polarized light to the right, the other to the left, and the third (sometimes) did not rotate it at all. For instance, in nature or in fermented products a right-handed lactic acid and a left-handed one were observed, while the acid obtained in the laboratory was always inactive. Moreover, the crystals of the right-left pairs often showed a strange asymmetry: one set could not be superimposed on the other, but was its mirror image, just as the right hand is the mirror image of the left.

The phenomenon whetted the robust scientific appetite of the young Pasteur. As a matter of fact, this man of genius, who was to revolutionize pathology, was not a medical doctor but a chemist. It was understandable that products made by synthetic processes were inactive in polarized light: optical activity depended on asymmetry, while in a laboratory, from symmetrical reagents, one could obtain only symmetrical products. However, how do we explain the asymmetry of natural products? No doubt it must come from a preceding asymmetry, but where was the original asymmetry?

Pasteur and all his interlocutors understood that this challenging problem was far from purely academic. Not all asymmetrical substances as described here belong to the living world (for instance, quartz crystals are asymmetrical); but all the main actors of the living world (proteins, cellulose, sugars, DNA) are asymmetrical. Right-left asymmetry is intrinsic to life; it coincides with life; it is unfailingly present in all organisms, from viruses to lichens and oak trees, from fish to man. This fact is neither obvious nor unimportant; it challenged the curiosity of three generations of chemists and biologists and it gave rise to two big questions.

To cite Aristotle, the first question is that of the final cause—that is, in modern terms, the question of the adaptive utility of asymmetry. Let’s confine ourselves to proteins, the life structures where the phenomenon is expressed in its clearest and most extensive form. As we know, the long protein molecule is linear; it’s a filament, a rosary of hundreds or thousands of beads. Not all the beads are the same; they consist of about twenty

relatively simple compounds, basically the same for all living beings, called amino acids. They can be compared to letters of an alphabet that are used to compose very long words of a hundred or a thousand letters. Each protein is one such word; the sequence of amino acids is unique for each protein, determining its properties, and also the way in which the filament can fold. Now, although all amino acids (with one exception) have an asymmetrical molecule, they can all be represented by just one of the two diagrams reproduced here and differ from each other only by the nature of the R group. They are all “left-handed,” as if they had all come out of the same mold, or as if something had discarded or destroyed their mirror images—that is to say, their right-handed twins. But each protein must possess a precise identity in every one of its beads; if just one of them were to change configuration, the protein would change form. Thus we can perceive an advantage in the fact that only one of the two mirror-image forms of each amino acid is available in the biosphere. If just one of the thousands of beads in a protein chain were to be replaced by its mirror image, many of the subtlest properties of the protein would change fundamentally—in particular, its immunogenic behavior.



But that asymmetry, so carefully transmitted by the living cell, is difficult to obtain and easy to lose. Whenever the chemist tries to synthesize an asymmetric compound, he obtains a mix of the two mirror images in exactly equal quantities, thus inactive in polarized light. It is possible to separate the mirror images, but only and always with instruments or devices that are asymmetrical. Conceptually, the simplest method goes back to Pasteur. The crystals of certain right-handed compounds can be distinguished by sight from their left-handed analogs in the same way that a moderately trained eye distinguishes a right-handed screw from a left-handed one, and they can be separated manually—but the human eye, and all that lies behind it, is asymmetrical. A second method, pertaining to chemists, consists in combining the mixture of mirror images with another

asymmetrical compound, for instance the mixture of the two lactic acids R and L with a natural alkaloid R (the alkaloids with asymmetrical molecules also are usually found in nature in just one of two forms). It is clear that the R-lactate of R-cinchonine is the mirror image of the L-lactate of L-cinchonine, and not of the L-lactate of R-cinchonine. In short, an RR compound is a mirror image of the LL compound; therefore, the two will have identical physical characteristics. However, the LR compound will have different properties and it will be easy to separate it from RR, for instance by fractional crystallization. Besides, it often happens that an R-acid agrees to combine with an R-base but not an L-base, in the same way that a right-handed screw does not fit into a left-handed nut.

The opposite path, that of canceling the asymmetry produced by nature instead of imitating it, is infinitely easier; from the point of view of energy, "it goes downward." Outside the living organism, asymmetry is fragile; prolonged heating or contact with certain substances with a catalytic effect is enough to destroy it. More or less rapidly, half of the asymmetrical compound is transformed into its mirror image; the order of asymmetry has turned into the disorder of symmetry (or counterbalanced asymmetry), just as when we shuffle a deck of cards arranged by suit or color. Extremely slowly (on a scale of millennia) this process also occurs spontaneously and at a normal temperature, so that it is used to date items that in the past were part of living organisms, such as bones, horns, wood, fibers, and the like; the more advanced the loss of asymmetry, the older the object.

In the face of life's maniacal preference for asymmetrical molecules, Stanley Miller's famous experiment, it seems to me, loses some of its impact. In 1953, Miller subjected a mixture of water, methane, ammonia, and hydrogen to electrical discharges for several days, trying to simulate the conditions of the primordial atmosphere jolted by lightning. He obtained several well-known amino acids, thus confirming that for their synthesis the complex and selective methods until then followed by chemists were not indispensable. The fundamental building blocks of proteins "are eager" to form; they form almost spontaneously from chaos provided they are given energy, even in a crude form. Amazingly, some complex DNA components are also formed along with them. However, Miller and his numerous

followers always obtained symmetrical products—i.e., balanced mixtures of the respective mirror images. The building blocks of life are eager to form, but asymmetry isn't.

I have not yet mentioned an odd and troubling fact. I do not know what fool first said that "the exception proves the rule." It does not prove it at all; it weakens it and calls it into question. Now, the rule according to which the amino acids of all living beings are in an optically active form (that is, are not mixtures of mirror images) knows no exception so far. There is, however, an exception to the rule according to which all these amino acids belong to the left-handed group. Amino acids of the right-handed group have been found in a few unusual, extremely marginal niches such as the skin of some exotic batrachians, in the cuticle of certain microorganisms, possibly (if confirmed, this finding should make us ponder) in some cancerous cells. But the right-handed amino acids of batrachians are not there by accident; they are part of substances carrying out intense physiological activity and if they are replaced by their normal—i.e., left-handed—mirror images, the activity ceases. Thus, they have a specific purpose, but we don't understand it. And why do they exist only in those tissues, and not elsewhere? Maybe "once upon a time" their presence was more widespread, maybe they are the remnants of a different biochemical era? The exception does not prove the rule; it just confuses one's ideas.

Thus, the asymmetry we are talking about is fragile. It is, however, unfailingly present in living matter, where it may be an evolutionary necessity to prevent spatial "errors" in the construction of proteins. We still have to consider the second, much more mysterious question, again with Aristotle: that of the efficient cause. Having recognized, or at least suspected, the usefulness of asymmetry (there are other asymmetries; the one under consideration here is called *chirality*—how easy it is to give Greek names to things we do not understand! Afterward, we feel we understand them better), we must ask ourselves where it could have originated. Evidently, in another asymmetry—but which one? Let's examine the different hypotheses that have been, or could be, put forward.

1. The Earth rotates, and the Sun appears to rotate around the Earth. In the Northern Hemisphere and north of the tropic (and, similarly, south of the Tropic of Capricorn) the asymmetry exists, and it is conspicuous. For those looking

southward, the Sun rises on the left and sets on the right. Certainly this has an impact, for example on the direction in which vine tendrils curl, and maybe also (I would kindly ask the experts to confirm or deny this) on the torsion of the trunks of many trees. It would be interesting to verify whether that direction is, at least as a trend, the same for all trees of a certain species in the Northern Hemisphere, and the opposite for the trees of the same species in the Southern Hemisphere. In fact, the "handedness" (the chirality, that is) of all phenomena related to the rotation of the Earth is reversed when we change hemisphere: the erosion of riverbanks, the preferred rotation of vortices, the direction of trade winds. This is a major obstacle to our first hypothesis; it would lead us to admit that life, or at least the asymmetry of life, regardless of how it originated, originated in only one of the two hemispheres and subsequently spread to the other when it was already linked. This is not impossible, but it is not appealing, either. It makes you think of a one-time phenomenon, a possibility that is not pleasing to many but very pleasing to a few. I will discuss it later.

2. Circularly polarized light is easily produced in a laboratory. It is less easy to explain in plain language what this light is; suffice it to say that it possesses the symmetry (or asymmetry) of the thread of the screw—that is, it's "chiral," and therefore can be right-handed or left-handed. This light, in suitable wavelengths, can be absorbed in different measure by one of the two mirror images of a pair, and can decompose it faster than the other; or it can act on the reaction mixture with which the chemist is trying to synthesize an asymmetrical compound. In both cases, the experiments have produced compounds that are unbalanced, and therefore optically active, although to a very small degree. Now, under certain conditions in nature the light reflected by water is circularly polarized. However, depending on the angle and the hour, there is an

equal probability of its being right-handed or left-handed. We encounter here a difficulty similar to the one of the first hypothesis: Is it admissible that life exists thanks to a single, precise event; that the light reflected at a certain point in time by a certain puddle of water was instantly captured?

3. As I mentioned earlier, we find this asymmetry in nature in some inorganic crystalline structures, including, among others, common quartz. There are right-handed and left-handed quartz crystals; in laboratory syntheses of asymmetrical compounds in the presence of quartz powder of homogeneous "handedness," the resulting product was optically active. But, again, both right-handed quartz and left-handed quartz are equally abundant in nature. Actually, some researchers have maintained that right-handed quartz is more abundant, while others have denied it. Even in scientific research it's easy to encounter individuals who replace what is with what they wish for.

4. The Earth's magnetic field, currently quite weak, possesses the required asymmetry, and possesses it at all points, without the reversals and the irregularity that weaken the previous hypotheses. Therefore it could have driven the same asymmetrical synthesis to the advantage of only one of the two opposites throughout the surface of the Earth. But here two other difficulties arise. First, as far as I know (but I have never had—nor do I have now, after so many years without practicing chemistry—any competence in this field; if anyone knows more, I will be glad to recant), there are no organic reactions sensitive to a magnetic field of reasonable intensity, except perhaps those involving iron, nickel, or cobalt atoms. Second, geologists are certain by now that the orientation of the Earth's magnetic field reverses itself every few tens of thousands of years. Is it conceivable that this field, in

remote ages, was vastly more intense, and constant for a sufficiently long time to incubate life?

5. The drama could have unfolded in different stages. A "primordial soup" like that obtained in vitro by Miller, made up in equal measure of right- and left-handed amino acids; then their aggregation into filaments, probably homogeneous, RRR . . . and LLL . . . ; the inception, according to one of the many hypotheses put forward, of life in a "two state" form, in which the two forms were unable to metabolize each other and were in competition; an extremely long Iliad, a silent contest lasting millions of years between right-handed life and left-handed life, which are enemies and incompatible; and, finally, in the absence of a reversion, the gradual prevailing of left-handed life up until the current situation, in which the enigmatic presence of right-handed amino acids in the skin of tree frogs may be just a minuscule survival. It is really a pity that fossils (except for the most recent ones, as I mentioned earlier) bear no trace of organic tissues; otherwise one could hope to find in them evidence of that old controversy, vaguely reminiscent of Zoroaster. Or maybe Radiolaria or Diatoma skeletons exist in chiral forms? This would be a good subject for a dissertation.

6. The hypothesis of the single event, of the *una tantum*, is not appealing and does not take us far, but it can't be ruled out. We saw it peeping out as a premise of some of the hypotheses I outlined. A germ (a DNA molecule, a spore, a protein fragment) containing the foundation of asymmetry and of life could have fallen from space. This time-honored proposal was recently revived by no less than Francis Crick, who discovered the genetic code. However, it merely shifts the problem to a place and a time that are not accessible to us. We are left with the option of a single terrestrial event, unique, spontaneous, and random: not impossible but extremely improbable.

You can’t build science upon single events, and so the discussion ends quickly, in an act of faith (or doubt). This option is made less irksome by a phenomenon studied by Giulio Natta (the 1963 Nobel Prize laureate) and described in his beautiful book *Stereochemistry*. If we build long chains of molecules—i.e., polymers—with no special precautions, we obviously obtain symmetrical and inactive products. On the other hand, if the polymerization is carried out in the presence of small quantities of an inert but highly asymmetrical substance, then the resulting polymer is also asymmetrical for its whole length. The inert substance acts as a sort of mold; from an asymmetrical mold we can obtain asymmetrical pieces in virtually unlimited quantities. Let’s resort to another comparison: by pressing dough on a perforated plate we obtain straight, very long spaghetti; but if the hole in the plate is crooked we obtain spaghetti that is equally long but curled, that is asymmetrical, leftward or rightward according to the shape of the hole. In other words, there exists, or we can imagine, a multiplying mechanism that could have magnified a local asymmetry, originating in one of the above-mentioned causes or in an infinitesimal fluctuation, and led it to the conquest of the world. Besides, hasn’t the recent discovery of isotropic and fossil radiation forced the majority of scientists to swallow, along with the Big Bang, the bitter philosophy of the unique event?

7. Chirality could have universal roots. I will not try to pretend, I will not expect to make you understand what I have not understood and what can’t be understood in the customary sense of the word, namely by resorting to visual models. Chirality might reside in the subatomic domain, where no other language is valid but the language of mathematics, where intuition does not reach and metaphors fail. One of the forces that link particles to each other, the weak interaction, is not symmetrical. The

> electrons emitted by certain radioactive disintegrations are unavoidably left-handed, without compensation. Therefore, all matter, even below the sensitivity of our measuring instruments, is optically active. The mirror images are never true mirror images; one of them, always the same, the left-handed one, is a bit more stable than its brother. The inactive mixtures obtained by the chemist are never exactly fifty-fifty; there is always an imbalance, in the range of one in a billion billion, but unfailing. It is small, but so is the key to a safe holding a ton of diamonds. If this is how things are (the debate is very recent, still hot) the entire universe would be pervaded by a slight chirality, and the deviations from parity would be only apparent; the "true" mirror image of the right-handed lactic acid, or of my right hand, would be not the left-handed acid or my earthly left hand but those in the distant realm of anti-matter. Later, through the eons, the magnifying mechanisms we spoke of would have acted on this infinitesimal inclination, on this tendentious whim. All right? For the moment, this is the answer we must settle for.

Maybe I should apologize; it's difficult to be clear about things that are not clear to us, to make oneself understandable to the layman without boring or shocking the experts. Moreover, I know I have strayed into a field that is not (any longer) mine. It was, however, the subject of my dissertation. I have returned to it with reverence, some regret, and the fear of having made mistakes; you pay a price for years of retirement.

I have tried to bring up to date a problem that remains current in spite of the innovative hypothesis that I attempted to describe last, with the reverence of the outsider, one who stops at the threshold of the temple. Maybe it is a "pointless" problem, even if it is not always pointless. If, for instance, pharmacologists had paid more attention to the question of optical isomerism, the tragedy of thalidomide could have been avoided. This product has an asymmetrical molecule; it was originally put on the market as a "raceme," that is, a balanced mixture of the two mirror images as obtained from synthesis. Subsequent research—such as by Blaschke et al.,

Arzneimittel-Forschung (1979)—on rats showed that only the left-handed mirror image was teratogenic; the right-handed one had a normal tranquilizer action. Had the two mirror images been separated and examined separately, nothing would have happened.

At any rate, this is a fine and fertile problem. Unlike philosophical problems, this one, I think, will not remain unresolved forever; even minor discoveries may help. Are the amino acids apparently found in meteorites optically active? Has anyone tried to synthesize in a magnetic field an asymmetrical molecule containing iron? To me, the discovery of the chirality of the universe, or just of our galaxy, seemed overwhelming—dramatic and enigmatic at the same time. Does it have a meaning? And if so, what meaning? How far does it take us? Is it not a "game of dice," the same that Einstein refused to attribute to God?

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Foreword to *Diary of a Jewish Boy During the Second World War* by Marek Herman

The diary of a European Jew that covers the years of the Second World War is dramatic by definition. The fact that the author survived to write it is in itself evidence of either an extreme determination to live or extraordinary luck. In this diary by Marek Herman, however, there is little room for luck. Marek, “born in L’viv—which was in Poland—on October 15, 1927,” owes his survival, and the well-deserved peace he enjoys today, much more to his own virtues than to good fortune. His virtues, which he never boasts of but which shine through every line of this unadorned account, are intelligence, courage, perseverance, and an unbelievable strength of mind in an adolescent.

This strong, enterprising man displays an unusual modesty. He describes the innumerable trials to which fate subjected him without ever raising his voice either in complaint or in hatred. At the young age of fifteen he had already lost everything a man can lose: family, country, home, language. Yet, stubbornly, systematically, Marek clings to that atavistic hope which has sustained and unified Israel through the millennia. From this standpoint we have here a truly exemplary text. Marek never yields to desperation or sorrow, he never stops to weep over the ruins, he never doubts that life is worth living. Paradoxically, in his painful journey, there is much more room for gratitude and love than for bitterness. Evil is present, it pervades everything, disrupts everything around him, but Marek does not allow it to corrupt him. He always sees a way forward for himself; yet he is not a believer, he has no political North Star, and he comes late even to the

Zionist creed, when the great tragedy of European Judaism is coming to an end.

Page after page, we follow him, starting in childhood—a childhood that, already before the war, unfolds in an atmosphere of Dickensian poverty, where bread (literally!) is won in a daily struggle against exhaustion, disease, and entrenched Polish anti-Semitism. There is a home, albeit limited to a single damp, crowded, and dreary room-workshop, and in this home there is the sweetness of family love. The war comes, the German invasion, and everything is swept away. One by one, family members disappear, and Marek learns precociously to live by his wits, until he is told that there is a barracks of Italians in L'viv. These soldiers are very different from the Germans, their formal allies. They are kindhearted and aren't particular about military discipline, permissions, and prohibitions. In their barracks they shelter a dozen other young orphans, Jews and Christians. The Italians make no differentiation, and this surprises Marek; prudently, however, he conceals his Jewish identity and secures false "Aryan" papers.

When the Italians are demobilized and return to Italy, Marek follows them, and here begins his great adventure. Compared with Poland, the tragic Italy of 1943 appears to him a great country, rich and generous; everybody helps him and nobody betrays him. A peasant family in the Canavese region takes him in and treats him like a son. They even enroll him in a Salesian school where he learns how to serve at Mass—and he is "no worse than the others" at it. But shortly thereafter he comes into contact with Czech partisans and has no hesitation: he knows where right and wrong lie, he has an account to settle, and he becomes a partisan, even if he is "just a few centimeters taller than his rifle." Within a short time, helped by his intelligence, eagerness, and knowledge of languages, he makes himself indispensable. He fights in the Orco, Lanzo, and Susa valleys, and is dazzled by the beauty of the mountains. He lives in an exciting new world filled with experiences that stir him and allow him to develop: the splendor of Creation, freedom, and faith in his fellow fighters. In the last few months, the American secret service entrusts Marek with a radio transmitter; on April 25 he is in Turin.

Thus ends Marek's first exploit. A naïve soldier of fortune, like many distant travelers from the north, he had discovered Italy with a virgin eye and fought for the freedom of all in a country that was not his. Although he is a fundamentally gentle soul, Marek joined other battles, which he

describes elsewhere—the battles that gave birth to the State of Israel, today his homeland. He now lives in the Lohamei Hagetaot kibbutz, which he helped establish. Every now and then, though, he comes back to Italy, to the Canavese, where everybody remembers him, and welcomes him like a brother. A polyglot, Marek no longer has a language that is truly his own. He wrote this memoir in Hebrew, the ancient language of the fathers, which was new to him, and which he didn't start learning until 1946, when his Italian adventure had ended.

Foreword to Marek Herman, Da Leopoli a Torino: Diario di un ragazzo ebreo nella seconda guerra mondiale *(*From L'viv to Turin: Diary of a Jewish Boy During the Second World War*) (Cuneo: L'Arciere, 1984)*

Foreword to *People in Auschwitz* by Hermann Langbein[1]

Literature about the National Socialist concentration camps can be broadly divided into three categories: diaries or memoirs of deportees, their literary interpretations, and sociological and historical works. This book belongs to the latter group, but it differs markedly from all other works published so far on the subject because of its extreme effort to be objective. It benefited from being written late (only in 1972), so that it could achieve a detachment and a serenity of judgment that would not have been possible immediately following the war, when, understandably, surprise, indignation, and horror prevailed.

The original title, *Menschen in Auschwitz*, is full of meaning. It sums up the subject and the specific nature of the work, as *Mensch* means, in German, "human being." A detail noted by the author in his introduction is revealing. The decisive incentive to write this long-planned book came to him from the comparison between Klehr the Auschwitz nurse and self-styled doctor—the "all-powerful terror of the hospital," whose horrible crimes are described in the text—and Klehr the aged detainee, crude and helpless, whom Hermann Langbein met on the occasion of the big Auschwitz trial that concluded in 1965. It is then that the vague plan acquired precise contours. Langbein, a former political fighter in Vienna and in Spain, a prisoner in Dachau, Auschwitz, and Neuengamme (but also active in the Lager in the Auschwitz Combat Group, a secret self-defense organization), a militant Communist who left the Party after the events of 1956 in Hungary, decides to tackle a terrifying problem. He won't just describe Auschwitz; rather, he will try to clarify for himself, his

contemporaries, and future generations the sources of Hitler's barbarity, and how the Germans were able to support it and follow it to its extreme consequences. Since Auschwitz is the work of man and not of the devil, he will move the Acheron: he will plumb the depths of human behavior in Auschwitz, that of the victims, that of the oppressors, and that of their accomplices, at the time of the Lager and afterward.

Thus the subject of the book is Auschwitz, *anus mundi*, the exemplary and total Lager, product of the expertise accumulated in almost ten years of Hitlerian terror. Indeed, the book contains everything one might wish to know about the Lager, drawn from the author's own memories and from numerous other sources: its history and geography, the number of inhabitants, its complex social relations, the death factories, the infirmaries, the rules, the exceptions to the rules, the few ways to survive and the many ways to die, the names of the commanders. Langbein's special "observatory" makes this a unique work in many respects and adds to its significance and universality.

It was a triple observatory. Langbein, a courageous and clever man, was at the same time a member of the clandestine resistance movement within Auschwitz and secretary to Dr. Wirths, one of the most powerful SS officers in the camp. Later, after the liberation, he had access to the proceedings of the most important trials of officials both high and low, many of whom he had known earlier, during the performance of their duties. Through these three channels he was able to obtain a vast amount of data, and he devoted the rest of his life to the study of man confined to extreme conditions. Such are the prisoners inside the barbed wire, but such, too, are the members of the constellation of jailers. They have also reached, willingly or not, the extreme limits of what a man can do or feel. Langbein bends over them with stern inquisitiveness not only to condemn or absolve but also in a desperate attempt to understand how man can go that far. Among contemporary historians, he may be the only one to devote so much attention to this subject. His conclusion is disturbing. Those who bear the greatest responsibility are *Menschen,* too; they are made of the same raw material we are, and it did not require a great effort or real coercion to make them into cold-blooded assassins of millions of other *Menschen*. A few years of perverse indoctrination and Dr. Goebbels's propaganda were sufficient. With some exceptions, they were not sadistic monsters; they were people like us, trapped by the regime because of their pettiness,

ignorance, or ambition. Nor were there many fanatical Nazis, since Langbein's time in Auschwitz coincided with the most "eventful" period, between 1942 and 1944, when, in the face of military defeats, Hitler's star was in decline.

Langbein studies the life of these ministers of death, before, during, and after their "service." The resulting image is quite different from that conveyed by the propaganda of the regime or by popular postwar historiography and sadistic-Nazi movies. The Lager SS were not supermen faithful to their loyalty oath, nor were they wild beasts in uniform. Rather, they were wretched, unfeeling, and corrupt individuals who much preferred guarding the Lagers to the "glory" of battle, who tried to become rich by stealing from warehouses, and who carried out their abominable work with obtuse indifference more than with conviction or satisfaction. National Socialism had a deep impact, stifling from a young age their natural moral impulses and giving them in exchange a power over life and death for which they were not prepared and which intoxicated them. Consciously or not, they had taken a dangerous road, the road of obedience and consent that has no return. Totalitarianism, all totalitarianism, is a broad path leading downward; German totalitarianism, Langbein tells us, was "a path on which every step made it harder to turn back and which eventually led to Auschwitz." And a little further on: "This is the lesson of Auschwitz: the very first step, the acceptance of a social system that aims at total control of human beings, is the most dangerous one. Once such a regime has conceived a plan to eradicate 'subhumans' (they need not be Jews or Gypsies) and a person wears its uniform (which can be adorned with symbols other than the runes of the SS and the death's-head), he has become a tool."

Another lesson, we might add, is that to judge is necessary but difficult. The enormity of the events described in this book drives us urgently to take sides against the great Nazi criminals and their collaborators, down to the gray zone of the Kapos and the prisoners who were given a rank and authority. Now, it is a characteristic of despotic regimes to coerce the individual's freedom of choice, making his behavior ambiguous and paralyzing our ability to judge. Who is guilty of the evil that is done (or allowed to be done)? Is it the individual who let himself be convinced or the regime that convinced him? Surely both are responsible: but the measure of guilt must be judged with extreme caution and on a case-by-case basis. This

is necessary precisely because we are not totalitarian, and generalizations, which are so loved by totalitarian regimes, are repugnant to us. This book is a rich anthology of complex human cases; it contains frequent reminders (one is rightly addressed to me) to reject easy stereotypes. At Auschwitz, not all "criminals" marked with the green triangle behaved like criminals; not all "political detainees" behaved like political prisoners; and not all Germans hoped for a German victory. It is no accident that the book opens with this quotation: "What Auschwitz was is known only to its inmates and to no one else." But Langbein, a careful and comprehensive investigator of many cases of conscience, is a rigorous and relentless prosecutor of confirmed crimes and a severe critic of the excuses and lies that the guilty put forward to justify themselves.

Foreword to Hermann Langbein, Uomini ad Auschwitz *(*People in Auschwitz*) (Milan: Mursia, 1984)*

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1. Published in English by the University of North Carolina Press, in 2004.

Homage to an Unknown Reporter

To seal the year 1984, which, out of mental laziness and a hunger for portents, we have been quick to call the Orwell year, I would like to place before this Almanac praise for the reporter, its collective and almost always unknown author. The reporter is the foot soldier of the paper, even if today he is rarely forced to walk. He is in the front line, oppressed by urgency, by the fear of missing a date with the deed or the misdeed.

He is denied the charitable (and egoistic) screen of ignorance: he has to stick his nose into the most cruel and sordid reality, which we ordinary folk repress. Furthermore, he has to track down, describe, and transcribe, within a few minutes, events that challenge the experience of the specialist, sociologist, criminologist, doctor, engineer, technician. The reader not only expects the pure “photograph” of the event but also wants the background, the setting, the why. How can it surprise us if he sometimes fails?

Let’s watch him in his daily activity, which is often a battle. He has to pick up signals on the fly, sniff them in the air, distinguish true trails from false. Hurry to the spot, vying with his colleagues from other papers; usually they are his friends, but at that moment they are competitors and rivals.

Cut through the crowd, bluntly interrogate witnesses or even victims of an accident, who have other things to think about, who in his eyes read only a voracious, cold curiosity, in him see the vulture and the hyena. Also: reconstruct as well as he can, on the basis of bits of information extorted from grim reticence, the multiple pileup in the fog, the factory disaster, the collapse, the tanker truck that crashes and spills its contents (with a chemical name never heard before, unpronounceable) whose properties,

use, destination he doesn't know. If he feels the temptation to judgment or comment, he has to repress it; that's not for him, it's for the one who comes afterward and has the right to the signature. He has to be objective! A lens, like that of his colleague and consort the photographer.

What more do we expect of him, we hurried, distracted readers, besieged by our own problems? We expect it all: we would like the reporter to be a 360-degree periscope, who sifts through the entire mass of news that develops in the world in twenty-four hours, throws out the chaff, and gives us the wheat: solid, nutritious, pure. In short, we ask too much, we are greedy.

And yet here I would like, if I may, in my personal capacity, to make some recommendations. He should never forget the power he holds: unlike what happened in Fascist times (when the regime forbade news of suicides and abortions), the reporter today has some discretionary faculties; since he can't recount everything, let him choose the essential, the news that is not fleeting, not useless. Don't tempt the reader's morbid curiosity; treat him as a responsible adult, even if he is not always that. Avoid the vagaries of the moment, which are dubious and immediately forgotten. Don't pretend to have understood what you haven't; it's pointless to put in quotes terms whose meaning you don't know—the reader will simply get an impression of confusion and obscurity. If space allows, don't leave out "the conclusions of the preceding chapters," especially when it comes to political news; not all readers read the daily daily, and not all have a good memory. And, most of all, remember that for most citizens "appearing in the paper" is unpleasant, harmful, or tragic: writing can be detrimental to legitimate interests, violate privacy, and wound sensibilities; but it can also right wrongs, and focus our attention on the most current matters. If, starting some ten years ago, public opinion has evolved, and if the citizen today perceives the problems of drugs, of urban decay, of organized crime as his own, in all their complexity and articulation, we owe it, in large part, to the "unknown reporter." A civilized and responsible reporter is at once a mirror and the basis of a civilized and responsible society.

Almanacco di Cronaca 1984, Gruppo Cronisti Piemonte e Valle d'Aosta

Foreword to *Jews in Turin*

On the occasion of the centennial of the inauguration of our synagogue, which took place on February 16, 1884, we, the Jews of Turin, have decided to forgo, for once, our traditional twofold reserve. There is the well-known Piedmontese reserve, which, rooted in geography and history, has led some to see us as the least Italian of Italians, and then there is, superimposed on this, the ancient reserve of the Diaspora Jew, who has been accustomed forever to live in silence and suspicion, to listen a lot and say little, not to draw attention to himself, because "you never know."

We were never many: scarcely more than four thousand in the thirties, the highest number we ever reached, and scarcely more than a thousand today. But I don't think it's too much to say that we counted for something, and continue to count, in the life of this city. Paradoxically, our humble and quiet community is linked to the history of the most important monument in Turin, which is certainly not humble, nor does it reflect our character. As Alberto Racheli tells us in detail in the following essay, we ran the serious risk of sharing with Alessandro Antonelli the responsibility for the presence, right in the city's center, of the Mole, that huge exclamation mark.[1] Of course, we, too, like all Turinese, have a certain affection for the Mole, but our affection is ironic and polemical, and we are not blinded by it. We love it as we love the walls of our houses, but we know it is ugly, pretentious, and of little use, that it involved a very bad use of public funds, and that, after the 1953 cyclone and the restoration of 1961, it still stands, thanks to a metal prosthesis. For some time, the Mole hasn't even had the right to be mentioned in the Guinness Book of Records: it is no longer, as we were taught in school, "the tallest brick building in Europe." And so we

feel posthumous gratitude for the municipal councillor Malvano, our coreligionist, who in 1875 had the good judgment to resell the building—a voracious money eater that had been commissioned but not completed—to the municipality. Had the transaction failed, we would witness a sorry sight today. The few hundred Jews who attend temple on formal holy days and the few dozen who go there for daily rites would be almost invisible within the enormous space of Antonelli's dome.

However, as I said, if we had not been here, the city would be different, and this exhibition intends to demonstrate that. When our fathers (for the most part not Turinese, but coming from small Piedmontese communities) moved to the city, toward the end of the nineteenth century, they brought with them the great, maybe the only, special talent that history bequeathed to the Jews: literacy, a secular and religious culture seen as a duty, a necessity, and a pleasure of life, at a time when most Italians were illiterate. Therefore, emancipation did not catch the Jews unprepared; as the stories of many of the families outlined in the displays indicate, within one or two generations Jews coming out of the ghetto moved easily from handicrafts and small trade to the nascent industries, administration, public offices, the military, and the universities. In fact, it is in the academic world that Turinese Jews have left an important mark, altogether disproportionate to their small number. Their university presence is still outstanding in both quantity and quality. This ascent, parallel to that of much of the Christian lower middle class, was also facilitated by a tolerant population. It has been said that each country has the Jews it deserves; post-Risorgimento Italy, a country of ancient civilization, ethnically homogeneous and immune to heavy xenophobic tensions, made its Jews into good, law-abiding citizens, loyal to the State and averse to corruption and violence.

From this perspective, the integration of Italian Judaism is unusual in the world. Even more unusual may be the balance achieved by Turinese-Piedmontese Judaism, which was easily integrated yet without giving up its identity. With the exception of rare and marginal cases, such as the centers in Yemen and the Caucasus, all the Jewish communities in the world carried (and carry) the scars of the tormented history of the people of Israel, interwoven with slaughters, expulsions, humiliating separations, exorbitant and arbitrary taxation, forced conversion, migration. Jews expelled from one country (from England in 1290, from France throughout the fourteenth century, from the Rhineland at the time of the Crusades, from Spain in

1492, up to the recent migration to the Americas) sought shelter elsewhere, joining existing communities or founding new ones. Thus they were doubly foreigners, because of their religion and because of their origins. This is why most communities are stratified and heterogeneous, with occasional tensions and divisions. Israel Zangwill gave a lively account of this in his renowned short novel *The King of Schnorrers*, where he describes the encounter-collision, in early-nineteenth-century London, between an arrogant beggar and a "German" Jew, assimilated, rich, and naïve. In Amsterdam the Jews, of German origin, welcomed the Jews expelled from the Iberian peninsula, but there was little blending between the two groups. In Venice there are still some five synagogues, originally intended for Jews of different backgrounds and rites. The current situation in Paris is similar, as Jews of old French stock live side by side with Algerian, Egyptian, Polish, Russian, German, etc., Jews. The most complex case, and of greater historical weight, is, of course, that of Israel, where the presence of Jews belonging to all branches of the Diaspora constitutes to this day an intricate problem of internal politics. The most recent development is in the Jewish community of Milan, where the great influx of refugees from the Arab states and Iran is causing upheaval and friction, along with an unexpected increase in numbers.

On the other hand, the Turinese Jewish community, which has remote French-Provençal and Spanish origins, never experienced sizable incursions from other regions. At different times there were infiltrations—as attested to by some family names of evident German origin (Ottolenghi, Diena, Luzzati, Morpurgo, and, obviously, Tedeschi[2]) and by the single dialectal and liturgical expression *ij ursài*—the anniversary of a death, that is, the corruption of the Yiddish *yahrzeit*, "time of year." However, these influences were quickly absorbed into a social fabric that remained ethnically stable up to the forty-year period (1880–1920) covered by this exhibition, in fact even up to now, in striking contrast to what happened in the city of Turin, which, during the economic boom, took in five or six hundred thousand immigrants in the space of two or three years, with profound changes for all its structures and infrastructures.

The prevailing endogamy, rarely extended outside the boundaries of the region, confirms that this was a small tribe, aware of its identity and with well-established features, almost like a village embedded in the Savoyard capital. Further confirmation is found in the odd Jewish-Piedmontese

dialect, today a subject of research for linguists and sociologists, but earlier described by Alberto Viriglio, a keen observer of Piedmontese life. For this linguistic hybrid to be born and to survive, a deep assimilation with the majority population was indispensable, along with an adequate recollection of the language of the liturgy (the only pathway by which Hebrew and Aramaic followed the currents of the Diaspora), and an environment in which there were no strong tensions between majority and minority. When such tensions exist, no hybrid languages are formed. Thus, for instance, a Jewish-Polish dialect never developed, nor did Italian-German hybrids in Alto Adige, while Italian immigrants in the United States, in spite of the limited phonetic compatibility, developed from the outset their own way of speaking, which was adroitly used by Pascoli in a famous short poem.[3]

Our fathers, and above all our mothers, used Jewish-Piedmontese every day and unaffectedly; it was the language of home and family. Yet they were aware of the intrinsic humor that emerged from the contrast between the fabric of the speech, the unrefined and laconic Piedmontese dialect, and the Hebrew inserts, taken from the language of the Patriarchs, remote but revitalized every day by public and private prayers and the reading of the Holy Books, a language made smooth by the ages like a riverbed by the glaciers. But this mirrored another, essential contrast of Judaism, which, scattered among *le genti*, or peoples—the Gentiles—is torn between its divine calling and its daily tribulations; and yet another, much broader contrast, the one inherent in the human condition, since man is bipartite, a mixture of heavenly spirit and earthly dust. The Jewish people, after the Diaspora, experienced this conflict painfully, and derived from it, alongside their wisdom, their laughter, which is absent from the Bible and the Prophets.

This exhibition is dedicated to these honest, hardworking, and witty forefathers. They were neither heroes nor saints or martyrs; they are not too far from us in time and space. We are aware of the limits of the exhibition, which were deliberately restricted. Other things could be said, and of quite different weight, about the history of the Turinese Jews in the following decades: their early anti-Fascist militancy, originating in that craving for freedom and justice that runs through Jewish history and paid for with long years of imprisonment and internment; the exemplary lives of such men as Umberto Terracini, Leone Ginzburg, Emanuele and Ennio Artom, Giuseppe, Mario, and Alberto Levi, and the fallen partisans Sergio, Paolo,

and Franco Diena; Jewish participation in the Resistance, again much greater than the size of our community warranted; the eight hundred people deported, of whom nothing is left but a plaque in our cemetery. But on this occasion we do not want to talk about victories, defeats, struggles, and massacres. Today we want to remember, invite others to remember, and make ourselves known before it is too late. Indeed, for every human group there is a critical mass below which stability ends: then it diminishes ever more rapidly, heading toward decline, and a silent and painless dissolution. Barring unforeseeable developments, our community seems to be moving down this road. With this exhibition we intend an act of filial piety, to show our Turinese friends, and our children, who we are and where we come from.

From the exhibition catalog Ebrei a Torino: Ricerche per il Centenario della Sinagoga (1884–1984) *(*Jews in Turin: Studies for the Centenary of the Synagogue [1884–1984]*) (Turin: Allemandi, 1984)*

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1. The Mole Antonelliana is a major Turin landmark. Originally conceived as a synagogue, it was designed by Alessandro Antonelli and constructed between 1863 and 1889.
2. Tedesco is the Italian word for “German.”
3. “Italy,” from the collection *Poemetti* (1904), by Giovanni Pascoli (1865–1912).

The Last Christmas of the War

Our Lager, Monowitz, near Auschwitz, was in many ways anomalous. The barrier that separated us from the world, symbolized by a double barbed-wire fence, was not as impenetrable as it was elsewhere. Because of our work requirements, we came into daily contact with people who were "free," or at least less enslaved than we were: technicians, German engineers and foremen, Russian and Polish workers, British, American, French, and Italian prisoners of war. Officially, they were not allowed to talk to us, the KZ (Konzentrations-Zentrum) pariahs, but this prohibition was constantly ignored, and, besides, news of the free world reached us through thousands of channels. In the factory dumps we could find copies of daily papers, maybe two or three days old and soaked with rain, and there we read with trepidation the German war bulletins; they were incomplete, censored, euphemistic, yet revealing. The Allied prisoners of war listened to Radio London in secret and, in even greater secrecy, relayed the exciting news to us. In December 1944, the Russians had entered Hungary and Poland, the British were in Romagna, the Americans were engaged in a hard fight in the Ardennes but were winning against Japan in the Pacific.

On the other hand, to know how the war was going, we didn't really need to secure news from faraway places. At night, when all the camp noises died out, we could hear the thunder of approaching artillery: the front was no farther than a hundred kilometers; there were rumors that the Red Army had already reached the Beskids. The huge factory where we worked had been bombed several times with scientific and malevolent precision. One bomb, only one, was dropped on the heating system, disabling it for

two weeks. As soon as the damage was repaired and the chimney began to smoke again, another bomb would fall—and so on. It was clear that the Russians, or the Allies in agreement with the Russians, wanted to halt production but not destroy the plant. They planned to take it over, intact, at the end of the war, and so they did; today it is the biggest synthetic-rubber factory in Poland. The antiaircraft defense was nonexistent, there were no fighter planes in sight, there were batteries on the roofs but they didn't fire; maybe they had run out of ammunition.

In other words, Germany was near death, but the Germans did not seem to realize it. After the attempt on Hitler's life, in July, the country lived in terror: an accusation, an absence from work, a careless word was enough for someone to end up in the Gestapo's hands as a defeatist. Thus, both the military and the civilians continued to carry out their tasks as always, driven both by fear and by their inbred sense of discipline. A fanatic and suicidal Germany was terrorizing a Germany that was discouraged and inwardly vanquished.

Shortly before that, toward the end of October, we had the opportunity to observe "close up" a singular school of fanaticism, a typical example of National Socialist education. A camp for Hitler Youth had been set up on barren land adjoining our Lager. There were maybe two hundred teenagers, still almost children; in the morning they raised the flag, sang fierce anthems, and carried out marching and shooting drills, armed with ancient muskets. We understood later that they were being trained to join the Volkssturm, that randomly assembled army of old men and children that according to the Führer's insane plans was to mount the final defense against the advancing Russians. But in the afternoon their instructors, who were SS veterans, would lead them among us, who were busy removing the rubble left by the bombings or hastily building, with bricks or sandbags, low, useless protection walls.

They led the youths among us on a "guided tour," teaching them, in loud voices, as if we had neither ears to hear nor wits to understand. "These you see here are the Reich's enemies, your enemies. Look at them carefully: can you call them men? They are *Untermenschen*, subhumans! They stink because they don't wash; they are in rags because they don't take care of themselves. Many of them don't even understand German. They are subversives, outlaws, thieves from the four corners of Europe, but we have made them harmless. Now they work for us, but they're only good for the

most rudimentary tasks. Besides, it's right that they should toil to repair the damage of war: they're the ones who wanted it—them, the Jews, the Communists, the agents of plutocracies." The child-soldiers listened, credulous and dumbfounded. Seen up close, they inspired compassion and revulsion at the same time. They were emaciated and frightened, but looked at us with intense hatred: so we were the ones responsible for all evils, for the cities in ruins, for the famine, for their fathers' deaths on the Russian front. The Führer was harsh but just; it was just to serve him.

At the time, I was working as a "specialist" in a chemical laboratory inside the plant. I have already told the story elsewhere; oddly, however, as the years go by, those memories neither fade nor disappear. On the contrary, they are enriched by details that I thought forgotten, and that sometimes gain meaning in the light of someone else's memories, letters I receive or books I read. It was snowing, the weather was very cold, and working in the laboratory was far from easy. At times, the heating system wasn't working and at night the cold would burst the bottles of reagents and the big flask of distilled water.

Often, the raw material or the reagents for the analyses were not available. Then we would have to make do with surrogates or manufacture them on the spot. When we didn't have ethyl acetate for a colorimetric measurement, the head of the lab told me to produce a liter of it and procured the necessary acetic acid and ethyl alcohol. The procedure is simple, and I knew it almost by heart: I had carried it out in Turin in 1941 for some organic preparation. Three years earlier, but it felt like three thousand. Everything went smoothly until the final distillation; at that point, the water suddenly stopped coming out of the faucets.

The situation could have turned into a minor disaster, since I was using a glass cooler: had the water come back, the cooler pipe, heated inside by the chemical vapors, would certainly have broken upon contact with the ice-cold water. I turned off the faucet, found a bucket, filled it with distilled water, and dipped into it the small pump of a Höppler thermostat: the pump pushed the water into the cooler, and the warm water coming out dropped back into the bucket. There were no problems for a few minutes, but then I realized that the ethyl acetate was no longer condensing: it was emerging from the pipe almost entirely as vapor. This was because the distilled water (no other water was available) that I had found wasn't much, and was too warm by now. What to do? There was plenty of snow on the windowsills; I

made some snowballs and put them in the bucket one by one. While I was busy with my balls of gray snow, Dr. Pannwitz walked into the lab. He was the German chemist who had subjected me to an odd “state examination” to determine whether my professional knowledge was adequate. He was a fanatical Nazi. He looked suspiciously at my makeshift equipment and the cloudy water that could have damaged his beloved pump, but said nothing and left.

A few days later, around mid-December, the sink under one of the aspiration hoods clogged up. The foreman told me to unclog it; it seemed natural to him that this dirty job was for me to do and not for the lab technician, who was a girl called Frau Mayer; and after all this seemed natural to me, too. I was the only one who could lie down easily on the floor with no fear of getting dirty: my striped clothes were already so filthy. . . . I was standing up after screwing the trap back into place, when I saw Frau Mayer next to me. She spoke in a low voice, looking guilty; among the eight or ten girls in the laboratory, who were German, Polish, and Ukrainian, she was the only one who did not show contempt toward me. As my hands were already dirty, could I perhaps fix the flat tire on her bicycle? Of course, she would compensate me.

This apparently innocent request was full of sociological implications. She had said “please,” in itself a breach of the upside-down code of conduct that governed the Germans’ relations with us; she had spoken to me for reasons unrelated to work; she had made a sort of contract with me, and a contract is made between equals; she had expressed, or at least implied, gratitude for fixing the sink in her place. However, the girl was also asking me to commit a violation, something that could be very dangerous for me: I was there as a chemist and in fixing her bike I would take time away from my professional obligations. In short, she was proposing a risky but potentially useful complicity. To have human relations with someone from “the other side” involved danger, social promotion, and also extra food for today and tomorrow. In an instant I did the algebraic sum of the three addends, hunger prevailed by far, and I accepted the proposal.

Frau Mayer handed me the key to the lock; I should go fetch the bicycle, which was in the courtyard. This was unthinkable; I did my best to explain that either she had to go or she had to send someone else. “We” were by definition thieves and liars; there would be trouble if someone saw me with a bicycle! A similar problem arose when I saw the vehicle. It had a

little pocket with adhesive, rubber patches, and small levers to remove the tire, but there was no pump, and without a pump I couldn't find the hole in the inner tube. Incidentally, I should add that in those days bicycles, and related punctures, were much more common than they are now, and that almost all Europeans, especially the young, knew how to patch a tire. A pump? No problem, said Frau Mayer, I could borrow one from Meister Grubach, her colleague next door. No, this was not so simple; not without embarrassment I had to ask her to write and sign for me a note "*Bitte um die Fahrradpumpe*."

I fixed the bicycle, and Frau Mayer gave me, in great secrecy, a hard-boiled egg and four lumps of sugar. Let it be clear: given the circumstances and the going rates, this payment was more than generous. While furtively handing me the bundle, Frau Mayer whispered a sentence that gave me much to think about: "Soon it will be Christmas." Obvious words, or, rather, absurd addressed to a Jewish prisoner; they were certainly intended to mean something else, something that at that time no German would have dared to convey openly.

Relating this episode forty years later, I do not intend to defend Nazi Germany. One humane German does not whitewash the innumerable inhuman or indifferent Germans, but it does have the merit of breaking a stereotype.

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It was a memorable Christmas for the world at war; it was memorable for me as well, because it was marked by a miracle. At Auschwitz, the different categories of prisoners (political prisoners, common criminals, asocial individuals, homosexuals, etc.) could receive gift packages from home, but not the Jews. On the other hand, from whom would they have been able to receive such presents? From families who had been exterminated or were held captive in the ghettos that still survived? From the very few who had escaped the raids, hidden in basements or attics, frightened and without any money? And who knew our address? In every respect, we were dead to the world.

And yet a parcel sent by my sister and my mother, who were hiding in Italy, reached me through a chain of friends. The last link in the chain was

Lorenzo Perrone, the bricklayer from Fossano whom I wrote about in *If This Is a Man*, and whose poignant end is described in *Lilith*. The parcel contained Italian-made chocolate, cookies, and dried milk. However, ordinary language is inadequate to convey the true value of that parcel, the impact it had on me and on my friend Alberto. Eating, food, hunger were words that in the Lager had meanings totally different from the usual ones. That unexpected, improbable, impossible package was like a meteorite, a heavenly object, loaded with symbols. Its value was immense and it carried an immense living force.

We were no longer alone: a link had been established with the outside world. And there were delicious treats to eat for many days. But there were also serious practical problems, to be solved immediately: we were like a passerby presented with a gold ingot in the middle of the street. Where to put it? How to preserve it? How to protect it from the greed of others? How to invest it? Our year-old hunger was pushing us toward the worst solution: to eat everything right away. We had to resist temptation; our weakened stomachs would not stand up to the challenge, within an hour we would end up with indigestion or worse.

We had no safe hiding place. We distributed the food among all sanctioned pockets in our clothes; we also stitched illicit pockets on the backs of our jackets so that, even in the case of a search, something could be saved. However, to carry everything with us, to work, to the washhouse, to the latrines, was inconvenient and awkward. Alberto and I discussed the matter at length in the evening, after the curfew. We were bound by a strict pact: everything one of us managed to secure, apart from the regular ration, was to be divided into two absolutely equal parts. In these exploits Alberto was always more successful and I had often asked him why he continued his partnership with someone as inefficient as I was. Alberto always replied: “One never knows; I’m quicker, but you’re luckier.” For once, he had been proved right.

Alberto made an ingenious proposal. The cookies were the most cumbersome item and we had them hidden all over. I even kept some inside the lining of my cap and had to be careful not to crush them whenever I had to take the cap off in a hurry to salute passing SS. The cookies weren’t very tasty, but they looked good; we could divide them into two packs and give them as presents to the Kapo and to the oldest prisoner of our barrack. According to Alberto, that would be the most profitable investment: we

would gain prestige and the two “prominents,” even without a formal agreement, would reward us with a variety of favors. We would consume the rest of the parcel ourselves, in small daily rations and in the greatest possible secrecy.

But in the Lager the crowding, the close living, the gossip, and the confusion were such that the secret was short-lived. We realized this within a few days: companions and Kapos were looking at us with different eyes. Indeed, they were looking at us the way you look at something or someone who stands out from the ordinary, who is no longer part of the background but is in the limelight. Depending on the degree of sympathy they felt for “the two Italians,” they would look at us with envy, with tacit understanding, with satisfaction, with open desire. Mendi, a Slovak rabbi who was a friend of mine, said to me with a wink: “*Mazel tov*” (“good luck”), the beautiful Yiddish and Jewish expression used to congratulate someone on a happy occasion. We were both relieved and worried by the fact that many knew or had guessed our luck: we had to be on our guard. At any rate, we agreed to speed up the pace of consumption: what is eaten cannot be stolen.

On Christmas Day, we worked as usual. Rather, since the lab was closed, I was sent with the others to clear away rubble and transport bags of chemicals from a storehouse that had been bombed to an undamaged one. Returning to the camp in the evening, I went to the washhouse. As I still carried in my pockets a good amount of chocolate and dried milk, I waited until a spot became free in the farthest corner from the entrance. I hung my jacket on a nail right behind me; no one could come close without my seeing him. As I started to wash, I saw out of the corner of my eye that the jacket was rising. I turned around, but it was already too late; the jacket, with all its contents, and with my matriculation number stitched on its breast, was now out of reach. Someone had lowered a string and a hook from the small window above the nail. I ran outside, half naked as I was, but no one was there. No one had seen anything; no one knew anything. On top of it all, I was left without my jacket. I had to go to the quartermaster of the barracks to confess my fault, because in the Lager to be robbed was a fault. He gave me another jacket, but instructed me to find a needle and thread, no matter how; I was to unstitch the matriculation number from my trousers and stitch it right away on the new jacket, otherwise “*bekommst du fünfundzwanzig*,” I would get twenty-five blows with a stick.

We redivided the contents of Alberto’s pockets; he was unruffled, and he pulled out his best philosophical repertoire. We had consumed more than half of the parcel, hadn’t we? And the rest wasn’t totally wasted; some other hungry inmate was celebrating Christmas at our expense, maybe blessing us. Besides, we could be sure of one thing: it was our last Christmas of war and prison.

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Can Poetry Get Along with the Computer?

Poetry undoubtedly existed before writing, and we are struck by a reverent emotion in observing the close kinship between the poetry of our civilization and the poetry of civilizations far removed from us in time and space: Aztec poetry, Indian poetry, the poetry of ancient Egypt. Thus poetry passed through tens of centuries and was clothed in as many writing techniques—from engraving on stone or clay to parchment, papyrus, the Chinese brush, the wax tablet, the goose quill, the fountain pen or the ballpoint pen, the typewriter. It does not seem to be affected by manual skill: the poetic image originates someplace in our brain and in order to be "recorded" works its way through different obstacles—all of them scarcely relevant. So if we confine ourselves to using the computer as a writing tool —that is, to the various systems of word processing—there is no incompatibility. On the contrary, the ease with which one can erase, correct, add, and replace facilitates the flow from mind to paper. Maybe it even makes things too easy; the absence of barriers (writing on a screen is much less laborious than by any other means) can lead to verbosity and be harmful to content. However, the opposite is also true: erasing is instantaneous and leaves no scars on the paper; carving out from a solid block is easy and painless.

As we all know, however, the computer can do much more. It has already proved valuable in so-called quantitative linguistics, saving the researchers work by counting the frequency of use of a given word by a certain author or in a certain epoch. There is hope, I don't know how well founded, that in this way it will be possible to determine accurately the authorship of controversial texts; here the psychoanalysts lurk, patiently

waiting for their feeding time, to learn, that is, how many times, respectively, Dante, Leopardi, and Montale used the word “water,” and whether this frequency is related to their birth or early childhood traumas. The computer is ideally suited for this sorry job. Poetry cannot be made by such methods—but, rather, the autopsy, the postmortem, of poetry.

During the creative process, the computer can point out rhymes, repetitions, alliterations, and anaphoras, whether intended or not; in a text, it can transform a word immediately into its synonym or its opposite, or correct its spelling; it can also serve as a storehouse of ideas, a bridge between ideas, and perhaps perform other miracles that a novice like me (I bought a computer only recently, for word processing) can’t even imagine. In my view, however, all these functions are just extras; they will never turn a layman into a poet nor will they enhance a poet’s inspiration, though they won’t pollute it, either. I believe that the mild itch many feel when they hear poetry and computers mentioned in the same sentence is due to the ugly sound of “computer” in Italian: computers, accounting, invoices, VAT, statements of account, debts, credits, bank loans—conscious or subconscious, the association of ideas is immediate. Nor is the more specific term “word processor” more appealing. But these are issues of nomenclature. Clearly, the question that I am trying to answer has a false bottom, a trap. The computer is almost forty years old and its progress has been faster and more surprising than that of any other invention; it has successfully replaced the human brain in computation, planning, memorization, filing of data. Today it plays chess and bridge, although not with much elegance; it simulates piloting a plane or a car; it guides spaceships in search of “difficult-to-accept truths”[1] and missiles in search of planetary troubles. By now, there isn’t a bar where dozens of teenagers aren’t playing videogames. Therefore, the computer can do anything; therefore, it can even write poetry.

I’m well aware that making negative forecasts isn’t prudent; distinguished scientists declared that testing flying machines “heavier than air” was absurd only ten years before their triumph; others, only a generation ago, predicted that a computer, assuming it could be built, would be as tall as a cathedral, would consume the energy of Niagara Falls, and would cost as much as an aircraft carrier. However, while knowing next to nothing about computer theory or poetic theories, and hoping not to say something foolish, I venture to state that a computer that can produce *motu*

proprio original and worthy poetry will never be built. Bad poetry, certainly: the moment will come (it could very well be today, if only someone would spend time on such a futile undertaking) when it will compose hendecasyllables correctly accented and not without meaning, or maybe even hexameters in conformity with the rules of Latin prosody. They may provoke surprise and/or laughter for their resemblance to human verse, but no poetry in the true sense of the word will be generated in this way.

Why? I can't provide a rigorous explanation, but I believe that computers can only carry out logical activities, or, when so programmed, make random ("randomized," to use their language) choices, and poetry is more than logic and chance; it may contain both, but it's broader. It contains other things: deep or subtle but necessarily new associations; references to archetypes; hard-to-define connections between expression and meaning, between music and vision and words. Poetry can evoke, deliberately or spontaneously, illustrious precedents, such that, drawing on a beautiful title by the French poet Paul Éluard, one can speak of "poetry uninterrupted" by the centuries and by geographical boundaries, an essentially unitary poetic patrimony that has accompanied humankind through its history and its travails.

The computer seems to me to be an excellent tool for clear and distinct tasks. Poetry isn't one of them: it is fluid, oblique, continuous, surrounded by halos and shadows. It is no accident that, while poems have been written for thousands of years, no definition has yet been formulated, no "list of specifications" has been universally accepted. In short: poetry is compatible with the computer, but has little to gain from it and nothing to fear.

POST SCRIPTUM: I answered like an oracle; now I begin to suspect that I spoke out of jealousy and fear. Like a Luddite, in the same spirit in which, in the early nineteenth century, the followers of Ned Ludd, afraid that their jobs would be lost, destroyed the new weaving machines. Well, then, I say it loud and clear: if I ever witness the birth of a machine for writing poetry that guarantees an output of reasonable quality and quantity and is not too expensive—I will buy one. But first I will seek the advice of a lawyer, human or electronic, to find out whether I am authorized to sign the poems composed by the machine—and who gets the royalties.

Answer to the question “La poesia può andare d’accordo col computer?” *(“Can poetry get along with the computer?”), in* Genius, *January 1985*

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1. Dante, *Paradise* X:136.

Why Revisit These Images

We survivors of the Nazi concentration camps have had many occasions to realize that words are of little use in describing our experience. They do not work well owing to “bad reception,” since we now live in the era of recorded, multiplied, telecast images, and the public, especially the young, is less and less inclined to rely on written information. However, there is another reason that words do not work well, and that is “bad transmission.” In our oral or written accounts we frequently use expressions such as “indescribable,” “beyond words,” “words can’t tell . . . ,” “a new language is needed.” Indeed, this was how we felt every day in the camps. If we were ever to return home and wanted to tell our story, we wouldn’t be able to find the words: everyday language can describe everyday experiences, but this was a different world, here we would need a language “from this other world,” a language born here.

With this exhibit, we have tried to adopt the language of images, aware of its power. As you can see, the images here are revealing but not touched up, not “artistic”; they show the Lagers, in particular Auschwitz, Birkenau, and the sinister rice mill of San Sabba, as they appear today. It seems to me that these images confirm what information theory says: an image “tells” twenty, a hundred times as much as a written page of the same size. Moreover, it is accessible to all, even to the illiterate and to the foreigner; it’s the best Esperanto. These observations aren’t new; they were formulated by Leonardo in his treatise on painting; yet, applied to the unspeakable universe of the Lagers, they acquire a stronger meaning. More and better than words, these images reflect the impact that the camps have on the visitor, whether they are well or poorly preserved, whether or not

they have been transformed into different places or sanctuaries. And, surprisingly, this impact is more profound and more disturbing on those who were never there than it is on us, the few survivors.

Even today, for many of us compassion and respect are overcome by the old trauma, the scalding memories, and hence the need to repress. Had we been asked at the time of liberation: "What do you want to do with these infected barracks, these nightmarish barbed-wire fences, these rows of latrines, the ovens, the gallows?" I think most of us would have answered: "Get rid of everything. Level everything, raze it to the ground along with Nazism and all that is German." We would have answered like that (many answered like that in deeds, pulling down the barbed-wire fences and burning the barracks), and we would have been wrong. Such horrors should not be erased. As years and decades go by, these remains do not lose their significance as monuments-admonishments; on the contrary, they increase it. They show us better than any treatise or memorial how inhuman Hitler's regime was, even in its scenographic and architectural choices. At the entrance to the Birkenau camp, so well portrayed here in the bleakness of the snow and the timeless bareness of the landscape, we can read a Dantesque "abandon all hope." Nothing conveys better than this image the repetitive obsession of the lights that shine on the no-man's-land between the electric fence and the barbed wire. Different, but no less striking, are the pictures of San Sabba. It was in fact only a rice mill, a plant for processing rice that had been built when much of the grain imported from the Far East was unloaded in Trieste. In the conversion of that plant into a place of torture we can see a theatrical and malign imagination. The choice of those high, massive, blind walls was not an accident. Visiting San Sabba today, or seeing it in the images that are reproduced here, reminds us that, besides being a fanatical megalomaniac, Hitler was also a failed architect. The scenography of the huge parades was an essential part of Nazi ritual (and of its appeal to the German people). Speer, the equivocal genius of management and the official architect of the Thousand Year Reich, was the Führer's closest confidant and the organizer of the cruel exploitation of the free labor provided by the Lagers.

Triangolo Rosso*, no. 3–4, March–April 1985*

Tell Me If This Is a Fortunate Jew

Memoirs of a Fortunate Jew:[1] the title of this intelligent and thoroughly considered book is subtly ironic. Is it enough to escape slaughter and avoid suffering and grief to call yourself lucky? In relative terms, certainly yes. In absolute terms, I leave the judgment to the reader, especially the author's counterpart, that is, the young Italian of today, his life safe and his identity secure.

As a matter of fact, this is what almost every page of the book is about: a constant, and unfinished, search for identity. Its author, Vittorio Segre, is a well-known academic, diplomat, and journalist with broad personal and political experience; yet the book shows how much it cost him. Atypical within atypical Italian Judaism, he was born in Turin in 1922, "a month after the March on Rome." His father, a veteran of the First World War and a wealthy landowner, joins triumphant fascism without any difficulty; Vittorio knows no alternatives, and in fascism he sees "the only natural form of existence."

In the family, there are only faint remnants of Judaism: some prayers on the holy days, some dietary traditions. The mother, very beautiful and pale, was brought up in a convent and is constantly wavering between the two religions—both of them appeal to her romantic soul. There is no trace of Jewish culture; Vittorio finds it "more convenient" to be a Jew rather than a Christian, as this spares him the nuisance of Sunday Mass.

Vittorio, too, is childishly romantic. He likes skiing and horseback riding; he has inherited his father's love of action and his mother's contemplative fragility. The 1938 racial laws have the violent impact of a hurricane on this totally assimilated family. Vittorio has never been a

Zionist; he barely knows the meaning of the word. Yet adventure appeals to him, and at the age of fifteen he tries and fails to volunteer in the Foreign Legion, and then he leaves for Palestine, at the time under the British Mandate; he is one of the first Italian Jews to do so.

Here the book becomes tense and enlightening. The country where the young man disembarks is not "the land flowing with milk and honey." It is poor and divided; it is suffocatingly hot and full of flies, sand, and wind. Traces of the disastrous Ottoman government, ancient Arab poverty, the heritage of the Crusades, the arrogant (but efficient and fair) British administration, and the indomitable persistence of the Zionist settlers of Russian, Polish, and German origin coexist there. At times we recognize in the book the richly varied environment and the impartiality of judgment that characterize Forster's *A Passage to India*.

The young Italian, indifferent to politics, a Jew with no roots and a former member of the Fascist youth group, speaks little English and knows neither Hebrew nor Arabic; but even the best polyglot would feel lost in that Babel of languages, ethnicities, and religions. He joins a kibbutz and takes agronomy classes, yet he finds it difficult to put up with the discomforts and, most of all, the inaction: the world is at war, the Jews of Europe are being sentenced to death. It's their fault, the Zionists tell him: they should have made up their minds earlier and "come out" to the land of Israel as we did. Vittorio doesn't share these certainties; he feels guilty.

Even in Israel Judaism, held together by frantic activism, is hopelessly fragmented at the ideological level. There are Orthodox Jews, who reject the secular state of the majority Zionists; socialists, who see the kibbutz as the first, exciting egalitarian experiment; nationalists, Communists, and revisionists, who preach violence against both the Arabs and the British; princes and servants, false philosophers and true holy men.

Vittorio is alone, uprooted, and disoriented. He longs for action but realizes that in action he is only seeking compensation for his cultural deficiency. In that jumbled country, the British are a solid link: he admires them because they represent law and order, he loathes them because they have blocked Jewish immigration, he envies them because they are fighting a fierce and stubborn war against the Satan of Berlin. Vittorio is not yet twenty years old, he is afraid, but he is also afraid to be afraid; in 1941 he fulfills his dreams of glory by enlisting in the clandestine Jewish army and, shortly afterward, under cover, in the British Army.

It’s a disappointment. His status is that of a “colonial volunteer”; the discipline is not inhuman, but the uniform is ridiculous, the service demanding, the British refuse to deploy the “native” troops in combat, and his feeling of guilt increases. Maybe it is only at this point that the “fortune” mentioned in the title comes into play: Vittorio speaks Italian well and the Intelligence Service selects him as a radio announcer. He is authorized to move out of the barracks and rent a room in Jerusalem.

This is a decisive step, and even more decisive is the encounter with a woman, the first one in his life. Berenika stands out among the thousands of scalene characters that make this a memorable book; she is described with a delicate and steady hand and the sober elegance of a great writer. She is twenty, but adult, and in fact mature. She was nourished on Freud and Marx, rejects sentiment, and has sex with the aseptic ease of a nurse: she offers her body to those in need as if she were dispensing medicine. There is no love: love is “a sort of spiritual crime” at a time when entire nations are dying. Only at the end of the episode do we learn that Berenika, a German Jew, was raped by the Nazis in Germany in 1937. For this reason she is “unable to love, only to render some service.”

With this, and with another vivid, grieving female character, the story ends at the dawn of freedom, in 1945, against a Yugoslav backdrop of unspeakable horror. But there is no conclusion; rather, we are left wondering about the future and reflecting on the past. Israel is probably the most complex and dramatic country in the world. This book, written with the modesty of one who confesses and the honesty of one who bears witness, is an essential aid to understanding its excesses, its achievements, and its problems.

Tuttolibri, *June 15, 1985*

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1. *Memoirs of a Fortunate Jew: An Italian Story*, by Dan Vittorio Segre (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

With the Key of Science

We don't choose our relatives but we do choose our friends and traveling companions. I was bound to Italo Calvino by a subtle yet deep tie. We were almost the same age, and, having both emerged from the defining experience of the Resistance, were first recognized as writers at the same time, in the same (for us memorable) review by Arrigo Cajumi, in these columns, which paired his *Path to the Spiders' Nest* with my *If This Is a Man*. We were both naturally shy, and never spoke at length: it wasn't necessary. A hint, a brief reference to our respective "works in progress," and the understanding was immediate.

Not just understanding: I owe a lot to Italo. When he was an editor at the Einaudi offices in Turin, it was natural for me to turn to him. To me he was like a brother, more than that, like an older brother, although he was four years younger. In contrast to me, he was an expert at his job: he had it in his blood. A spiritual son of Pavese, he had inherited his editorial expertise, his rigor, and his quick and vigorous judgment. Italo's tips and his advice were never vague or superfluous.

We had other ties as well. With two scientists for parents, Italo, alone in the Italian environment, had an appetite for science. He cultivated it; he fed on it as a learned and inquisitive amateur, and relied on it for his later books. Nature and science were for him one and the same thing: science as a lens by means of which to see nature more clearly, as a key to get to its heart, as a code to decipher it. Nothing in his character is lyrical or idyllic, and yet he was a great poet of nature, sometimes in the negative, as when he described its absence from cities. Only half ironic, he would say that he envied my decades of experience as a chemist, in laboratories and factories.

We discussed and shared vague and ambitious projects for a mediating and revealing literature, straddling the “two cultures,” sharing in both. He came closer than I did to this goal, endowed as he was with a wide and varied culture and an acquaintance with many of the greatest intellectuals of our time. An admirer and student, in Paris, of Raymond Queneau, he recently invited me to review with him some difficult passages of the Italian translation of *Petite cosmogonie portative*.[1] For me, that turned out to be a spiritual feast: I was fascinated by his acumen as a philologist, to which my modest technical experience could add very little.

His premature death leaves a painful void. He was at the height of his powers, and had too many things to say, things that were his and his alone, and which nobody else will ever be able to express in that way of his, so difficult to imitate: both nimble and sharp, never predictable, never gratuitous; sometimes playful, never easy, never content with the surface of things.

La Stampa, *September 20, 1985*

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1. Published in English, in part, as *A Pocket Cosmogony*.

Foreword to *Commandant of Auschwitz* by Rudolf Höss[1]

Usually, those who agree to write the foreword for a book do so because they like the book: it is pleasant to read, of a high literary quality, elicits sympathy, or at least admiration, for its author. This book stands at the opposite extreme. It is filled with atrocities described with shocking bureaucratic obtuseness. Reading it is oppressive, its literary quality is inferior, and its author, in spite of his efforts to defend himself, appears as he is, a foolish thug, verbose, uncouth, arrogant, and at times a plain liar. Yet this autobiography of the commandant of Auschwitz is one of the most instructive books ever published. It describes with precision a human journey that, in its own way, is illustrative. In an environment different from the one where he happened to grow up, Rudolf Höss would have become a gray, ordinary civil servant, dutiful and order-loving—at most a careerist with modest ambitions. Instead, step by step, he became one of the greatest criminals in history.

We survivors of the National Socialist Lagers are often asked, especially by young people, a characteristic question: Who were “those on the other side,” what were they like? Is it possible that they were all evil, that one could never see a spark of humanity in their eyes? This book gives a clear answer to this question. It shows how easy it is for goodness to yield to evil, first besieged and then submerged by it, while surviving in grotesque little islands: a normal family life, love of nature, a Victorian morality. Precisely because the author is uncultured, he can’t be suspected of a colossal and skillful falsification of history: he wouldn’t be capable of it. Indeed, although in his pages mechanical reversions to Nazi rhetoric surface, along

with lies large and small and attempts at self-justification and embellishment, they are so naïve and transparent that even the most clueless reader can recognize them without difficulty. They stand out in the fabric of the story like flies in milk.

In short, this book is a largely truthful autobiography. It is the autobiography of a man who was not a monster, nor did he become one even at the peak of his career, when by his orders thousands of innocents were killed at Auschwitz every day. I mean that we can believe him when he says that he never took pleasure in inflicting pain and death: he was not a sadist; there is nothing Satanic in him. (On the other hand, we can recognize some Satanic traits in his portrait of Eichmann, his peer and friend. Eichmann, however, was much more intelligent than Höss, and we get the impression that Höss believed some of Eichmann's boasts that don't stand up to serious scrutiny.) Höss was one of the worst criminals ever, but he was made of the same substance as any bourgeois from any country. His fault, which was embedded neither in his genetic makeup nor in his German birth, lies in his inability to resist the pressure put on him by a violent environment, even before Hitler's rise to power.

To be fair, we must admit that the young man had a bad start. His father, a tradesman, is a "fanatical Catholic" (but beware: in Höss's vocabulary, and generally in the Nazi vocabulary, this adjective always has positive connotations) and wants him to become a priest. At the same time, however, he imposes on Höss a strict military-style education, without any consideration for his talents or inclinations. It is understandable that Höss feels no love for his parents and grows up aloof and introverted. Orphaned at an early age, he goes through a religious crisis, and at the outset of the Great War has no hesitation, as his moral universe is by now reduced to a single constellation: Duty, Fatherland, Comradeship, Bravery. He joins as a volunteer, and at the age of seventeen is dispatched to the wild Iraqi front. He kills, is wounded, and feels he has become a man, which is to say a soldier: to him the terms are synonymous.

War (everywhere, but especially in a defeated and humiliated Germany) is a very bad school. Höss does not even try to return to a normal life; in the terrible climate of postwar Germany he enlists in one of the many Volunteer Corps, whose duties are essentially repressive, is involved in a political assassination, and is sentenced to ten years in jail. Prison life is harsh, but suits him well. He is no rebel; he likes discipline and order, and he even

likes serving his sentence; he is an exemplary prisoner. He displays proper feelings: he accepted the violence of war because it had been ordered by Authority, but he is disgusted by the spontaneous acts of violence of his fellow inmates. This is one of his recurrent themes: order is necessary, in everything; directives must come from above, are good by definition, and must be followed without question but conscientiously; initiative is permitted only for the purpose of carrying out orders more efficiently. Friendship, love, and sex are suspect; Höss is a loner.

After six years, he is granted an amnesty and finds work in an agricultural community. He marries, but admits that he never succeeded, either then or later, when he would have most needed it, to communicate intimately with his wife. This is when the trap opens before him: he receives an offer to join the SS, and he accepts, lured by the "prospect of a career that advances rapidly" and by the "financial advantages that go with it." And this is the point where he lies to the reader for the first time: "Reading Himmler's call to join the SS and serve in the concentration camps, I had not thought for a moment about the true nature of these camps. . . . It was a completely unknown concept, and I had no idea of it." Come on, Commandant Höss, lying requires greater mental agility. We are in 1934, Hitler is already in power, and has always spoken plainly. The new meaning of the word "Lager" is already familiar; only a few know exactly what happens there, but everybody knows that they are places of terror, and horror—and much more is known in SS circles. The "concept" is anything but "unknown," it is already cynically exploited by the propaganda of the regime: "If you don't behave, you'll end up in the Lager" is an almost proverbial saying.

In fact, Höss's career advances rapidly. His prison experience is an asset. His superiors rightly consider him a specialist and reject his halfhearted requests to be sent back among the troops. One service is as good as the other, the enemy is everywhere, at the borders and within; Höss should not feel demeaned. He consents; if his duty is to be a torturer, he will be a diligent torturer: "I must confess that I fulfilled my duties conscientiously and carefully, without any regard for the prisoners, that I was strict and often harsh." No one doubts that he was harsh. But to say, as he does, that behind his "mask of stone" an aching heart was concealed is an indecent and childish lie.

On the other hand, his repeated assertion that, once you were inside the system, it was difficult to get out is not a lie. There was no risk of death or even harsh punishment, but getting out was objectively difficult. Serving in the SS included an intensive and skillful "reeducation" that flattered the recruits' ambition. These, mostly ignorant, frustrated outcasts felt valued and exalted. The uniform was elegant, the pay was good, the power almost limitless, impunity guaranteed; today they were the masters of Germany and tomorrow (according to one of their hymns) of the entire world. At the outset of the Second World War, Höss is already *Schutzhaftlagerführer* at Sachsenhausen, which is no small thing, yet he deserves a promotion and accepts with surprise and delight the appointment to commandant. He is going to a new camp, still under construction, far from Germany, near a small Polish town called Auschwitz.

Höss is truly an expert; I say this without irony. At this point his pages become frenzied and passionate. As he writes, a Polish court has already sentenced him to death; this punishment, too, comes from an authority and must therefore be accepted, but that is no reason to forgo describing his finest hour. Höss writes a real treatise on city planning; he lectures us, for his knowledge must not be lost, his legacy must not be wasted. He teaches us how to plan, build, manage a concentration camp so that it works well, *reibungslos*, notwithstanding the ineptitude of subordinates and the blindness of superiors, disagreeing with one another, who send him more trains than the camp can take in. Isn't he the commander? Well then, let him find a solution. Here Höss becomes heroic. He seeks the reader's admiration, praise, even sympathy: he sacrificed everything for *his* Lager, days and nights of rest, family love. The Inspectorate does not support him, does not send him the necessary supplies, to the point that Höss, the model civil servant, must "literally steal the amount of barbed wire most urgently needed. . . . After all, I had to take care of my interests!"

He is less convincing when he rises to lecturer on the sociology of the Lager. With righteous loathing he condemns the fighting among prisoners: what rabble, they know neither honor nor solidarity, the great virtues of the German people. But a few lines later he lets slip the admission that "these fights were deliberately promoted and encouraged by the management of the camp," that is, by him. He describes with professional arrogance the different categories of prisoners, interspersing the old contempt with jarring expressions of hypocritical, retrospective compassion. Political detainees

were better than common criminals and Gypsies (“They were . . . my favorite prisoners”) better than the homosexuals; Russian prisoners of war were like animals, and he never liked the Jews.

It’s precisely on the topic of the Jews that the false notes become more strident. There is no conflict here; Nazi indoctrination does not collide with a new and more humane vision of the world. To put it in simple terms, Höss has not understood anything, has not left behind his past; he is not cured. When he says (and he says it often), “Now I realize . . . now I understand that . . . ,” he is a blatant liar, like almost all of today’s political *pentiti*, and like all those who express regrets with words rather than with deeds. Why does he lie? Maybe he wants to leave behind a better image of himself; maybe simply because the judges, who are his new superiors, told him that the correct opinions are not the old ones but others.

It’s precisely the topic of the Jews that shows how much Goebbels’s propaganda influenced Germany and how difficult it is, even in an individual as compliant as Höss, to wipe out its effects. Höss acknowledges that in Germany Jews were “rather” persecuted, but he hastens to add that their arrival en masse was ruinous for morale in the Lager. Jews, as everybody knows, are rich, and with money you can bribe anybody, even the extremely honest SS officers. But the puritanical Höss (who in Auschwitz had taken a prisoner as a lover, and had tried to get rid of her by sending her to her death) disagrees with the pornographic anti-Semitism of Julius Streicher’s *Der Stürmer*. This publication “did a lot of damage; it didn’t help serious anti-Semitism at all.” That’s not surprising, since, Höss ventures to say, “it was written by a Jew.” It was the Jews who spread (Höss doesn’t dare to say “made up”) the news about German atrocities, and they should be punished for this, but the virtuous Höss also disagrees with his superior Eicke,[2] who would like to stop the leak by using the clever system of collective punishment. The campaign against the atrocities, Höss believes, “would have continued *even if* hundreds or thousands of people had been shot”; the italics of that *even if*, a gem of Nazi logic, are mine.

In the summer of 1941, Himmler informs him “personally” that Auschwitz will be something different from a penitentiary. It is to become “the greatest extermination center of all time”: let Höss and his collaborators find the best way to go about it. Höss does not raise an eyebrow; this is an order like any other, and orders must not be questioned. Some experience had already been gained in other camps, but mass

machine-gunning and toxic injections are not suitable, something more rapid and reliable is necessary. Most of all, “bloodbaths” should be avoided, because they demoralize those who carry them out. After the bloodiest actions, some SS killed themselves, while others would get methodically drunk; something aseptic, impersonal was needed to safeguard the soldiers’ mental health. Collective asphyxia with engine exhaust fumes is a good start, but needs improvement. Höss and his deputy have the bright idea of trying Zyklon B, the poison used to kill rats and roaches, and that works well. After a test carried out on nine hundred Russian prisoners, Höss feels “greatly encouraged”: the mass execution is successful, in terms of both quantity and quality—no blood, no traumas. There is a fundamental difference between machine-gunning naked people at the edge of a ditch they have dug themselves and throwing a little box of poison in an air duct. Höss’s highest ambition is fulfilled as his professionalism is demonstrated; he is the best technician of the slaughter. His envious colleagues are defeated.

The most repugnant pages of the book are those where Höss describes in detail the brutality and indifference with which the Jews charged with the removal of the corpses performed their task. These pages contain an obscene indictment, a charge of conspiracy, as if those wretches (weren’t they also “following orders”?) could take the blame for those who had created them and given that assignment. The crux of the book, and its least credible lie, is where Höss, faced with the killing of children, writes, “I felt such immense pity that I would have liked to disappear from the face of the earth, and yet I was not allowed to show any emotion.” Who would have prevented him from “disappearing”? Not even Himmler, his supreme boss, who, in spite of Höss’s respect, appears in these pages as both a demiurge and a pedantic, inconsistent, and intractable idiot.

Not even in his last pages, which assume the tone of a spiritual testament, does Höss manage to grasp the horror of his actions and to sound sincere. “Today I understand that the extermination of the Jews was a mistake, a colossal mistake” (note, not “a crime”). “Anti-Semitism failed; Judaism has actually taken advantage of it to move closer to its ultimate goal.” A little later, he claims that, upon “learning of the appalling tortures in Auschwitz and in other camps,” he almost “fainted.” Considering that Höss knew when he was writing this that he would be hanged, we are astonished by his obstinacy in lying with his last breath. The only possible

explanation is that, like all his peers (not just the Germans; I'm also thinking of the confessions of terrorists who have repented or distanced themselves), Höss spent his life making the lies that filled the air he was breathing his own, and therefore lying to himself.

We can ask, and surely someone will ask himself or others, if there is a reason to publish this book again today, some forty years after the end of the war and thirty-eight years after its author's execution. In my view, there are at least two good reasons to do so.

The first reason is conditional. An insidious operation was launched a few years ago, arguing that the number of concentration-camp victims was lower by far than what was claimed by "official history," and that toxic gas was never used to kill human beings in the camps. On both these points, Höss's testimony is exhaustive and explicit. It's not clear why he would have formulated it in such a precise and articulate way, and with so many details corresponding to those of the survivors and to the physical evidence, if he was under pressure, as the "revisionists" allege. Höss lies often to justify himself, but never about actual facts; on the contrary, he seems proud of his work as an organizer. To construct such a coherent and credible story out of nothing, Höss and his alleged masters would have had to be extremely cunning. The confessions extorted by the Inquisition, or at the Moscow trials in the thirties, or during the witch trials had a totally different tone.

The second reason is fundamental and of lasting relevance. Today, many tears are shed over the death of ideologies. I believe that this book shows, in an exemplary way, how far ideology may carry us when accepted with the radicalism of Hitler's Germans and of extremists generally. Ideologies can be good or bad. It is useful to know them, compare them, and try to evaluate them. It is always a mistake to marry one, even when it is cloaked in respectable words such as Fatherland and Duty. Rudolf Höss's story shows where Duty, blindly accepted, leads, and that is to the *Führerprinzip* of Nazi Germany.

Foreword to Rudolf R. Höss, Comandante ad Auschwitz *(*Commandant of Auschwitz*) (Turin: Einaudi, 1985)*

1. The initial English translation of *Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolf Höss* was published in 1959 by Weidenfeld & Nicholson.
2. Theodor Eicke (1892–1943), a Nazi general.

Foreword to *The Jews of Eastern Europe from Utopia to Revolt*

This volume contains the records of a conference held in Turin in January 1984 on the journey of Eastern European Jews "from utopia to revolt." It offers many surprises to the Italian reader, whether Jewish or Christian. We have read a lot about the final stop on this journey—that is, the bloody and desperate rebellions in the ghettos and the Lagers—varying from thorough, historically accurate works to epic transformations and commercial novels. The cinema has also dealt with the subject, again at varying levels of artistic quality and philological accuracy. On the other hand, we knew relatively little, or had only partial and distorted notions, about the background, the complicated historical and social circumstances that led to rebellion, and from which rebellion drew its exemplary strength.

In the West, and especially in Italy (where the Jewish presence was always numerically small and where, even during the terrible years when Hitler's barbarity was spreading, Jewish refugees in search of safety were few), people had a vague and poetic image of Eastern Jewry. This image came to us through the channels of literature, where the books of Joseph Roth and the Singer brothers, precisely because of their transfiguring power, played a preeminent and forceful role. From these, the reader basically derives the image of a Jew removed from the world, confined (voluntarily or not) to his shtetl, which is both a prison and a nest; he is alien, unaware, untouched by the political convulsions that changed the face and the borders of European countries during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was a *luftmensch*, "man of air," nourished on a naïve faith, on family love, on weird, picturesque legends; gentle, humble,

wandering, neurotic. A second, negative image was superimposed on this one, the result of Fascist propaganda or the sediment of old prejudices: Judaism, apparently scattered among the nations (the goyim), in reality is a single unit, an astute and wicked power bent on the economic conquest of the world, held together by secret ties that cross all borders.

The picture that emerges from these writings, from both the personal accounts and the historical reconstructions, is quite different. It's not only more articulate but also more concrete and credible, better suited to enabling us to understand the reality of yesterday and today. The picturesque and dreamy civilization of the shtetl survives into the second half of the nineteenth century, but it is secondary: in the Jewish world, as in the rest of Europe, a rapid process of urbanization is under way. The small Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian rural communities are becoming depopulated: the big-city factories attract artisans, tradesmen, the lower middle classes, who feel better protected from the recurrent countryside pogroms. A Jewish, urban proletariat is born, similar to, and yet different from, the majority proletariat. Similar in the merciless exploitation it is subjected to; different, and more restless and divided, because exploitation is often compounded by the hostility that Jews sense around them. The Jewish proletariat listens carefully to socialist and Marxist teachings but does not forget its own identity: it is divided between two allegiances, to its class and to its roots. An astonishing variety of options arise from this tension and are put forward. Toward the end of the century, however, two basic, incompatible trends emerge, both charged with messianic promise.

The trauma of the Dreyfus affair gives birth (or rebirth) to Zionist prophethood. Here in Europe, or even in America, you are and always will be a stranger; if you ever forget that you are a Jew, "the others" will remind you. You have a homeland, the land of your forefathers: it's far away and has become a desert, but if you cultivate it, it will bloom, it will flow with milk and honey. If you rescue it, it will rescue you: never again will you be a stranger or a slave. It seems like a dream, but, if you want, it can become reality. Paradoxically, this appeal draws the benevolent attention of tsarist authorities: why not? If they want to leave, why should we hinder them? Zionist leaders go as far as making contact with officials of the tsar's police; it's a clever and daring move that shocks supporters of Jewish socialist internationalism.

A social democratic strain soon emerges from among the different trends that compete with one another in this field. In 1897 it is established as a union-political party, first semi-clandestine and later official: the General Jewish Workers' Union of Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, the Bund. How far we are from all stereotypes! Bund members, workers and intellectuals, are neither humble nor resigned. Their double allegiance has turned into double pride: the pride of the proletariat and the pride of the Diaspora. *Aliyah*, the Zionists' return to the homeland, is desertion, flight: why immigrate to Palestine and rebuild hated bourgeois society there? This is our country, where we and our flesh-and-blood forefathers were born—not the patriarchs of the Torah. We are here, and here we wish to remain, in Poland and in Russia, proletariat among the proletariat of the whole world, because our struggle is their struggle. Yet we are not like them. We have, and we want to keep, our cultural autonomy, and first of all our language: not Hebrew, the rabbis' language, the language of a religion that we reject as we do all religions, but Yiddish, the *mame-loshn*, the mother tongue that for centuries we have been speaking in our homes. Judaism's center of gravity is us, it's here, *do* in Yiddish; our patriotism is the "*doi*keyt," "here-ism." "The Bundists' messianism, absorbed since childhood from parents, grandparents, and teachers, even when rejected at the level of consciousness, was feeding in a completely natural way the messianic eschatology of the socialist view of the world" (Frankel).

Around the turn of the century, the Bund is the largest Jewish workers' party in the Tsarist empire. It cooperates with smaller parties with which it is in constant, dissonant agreement; like every socialist party, it is shaken by internal conflicts, but, unlike other socialist parties, it has no inclination toward compromise; through strikes, congresses, and demonstrations, it strives to keep its members in a state of stormy and constant anger. In 1905 it reaches the peak of its revolutionary potential: it has available a well-trained paramilitary force and is one of the great revolutionary parties of European Russia. When, in June, the sailors of the battleship *Potemkin* revolt, it's a young Bundist, Anna Lipsic, who speaks before tens of thousands of people and the leveled guns of Cossacks and police. However, the Bund emerges weakened from that failed revolution. In Russia, the Bolsheviks crushed it in 1919, along with the other parties of the left. The Bund survived in Poland until the Nazi carnage, but neither in Russia nor in Poland did it die a natural death.

In retrospect, the utopian effort of the Bund may appear reckless, but no one at the time could have predicted the measure, or, rather, the lack of measure, of the regimes of Hitler and Stalin. Subsequent history proved the loathed Zionists, “anti-Semites who speak Yiddish,” according to a Bund slogan, right. For the Jews of Eastern Europe, there was no salvation without emigration. Yet the ideological and moral vigor of the Bund found its tragic height precisely in the crucial years of the Nazi terror. Without the insurrectionary experience of the Bundists, the revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto and the other heroic uprisings in ghettos and extermination Lagers would not have happened, or would have been just local tremors, desperate and improvised, with no idealistic context. The brothers-enemies—Bundists, Zionists, and Communists—could find agreement and unity of action only in the ghettos besieged by hunger, daily slaughters, and epidemics, only in the European resistance movement that fought to the very end without the light of hope.

It seems to me that, thanks to the pages collected here, the fighters of the ghetto show the Italian (or, generally, Western) reader a new face, historically believable and, above all, modern: a face far from that of the simplified heroes, the blameless knights so dear to folklore of all times, and closer to us, to our still controversial choices, to our unending Jewish quest for identity. Their precursors, the indomitable activists of the Bund, of early Zionism, and of all the other innumerable currents and trends (remotely mirrored in the plethora of parties that, to this day, complicate Israeli politics), were, like us, blind before the future, but they had precociously understood, and their story enables us to understand, that inaction and servility don’t pay.

Gli ebrei dell’Europa orientale dall’utopia alla rivolta *(*The Jews of Eastern Europe from Utopia to Revolt*), edited by M. Brunazzi and A. M. Fubini (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1985)*

What Burned in Space

What to say? It's not the moment for rhetorical praise of heroism. The news of the failure of the space shuttle mission,[1] broadcast in real time, or almost, throughout the entire world, is not comparable to a tragic accident on the job. Not only were seven young lives lost but, along with them, an enormous capital of intelligence that had been invested in experience. Each of the astronauts, except the unfortunate schoolteacher, had accumulated an invaluable store of knowledge, which vanished in an instant, in an apocalyptic fire.

A useful sacrifice or not? It would be cynical to make calculations, but one statement can be made with confidence. The shuttle was not as safe as had been declared. The aim of the reusable spaceship will certainly not be abandoned, but it will be achieved by an indeterminate number of improvements aimed at safety, as happened decades ago in the case of atmospheric flight.

In addition to the technological "benefits," which, starting with the first space flights, have been productive in the most surprising fields, we now expect a benefit specifically oriented to the protection of life. Perhaps it was a mistake to move so quickly to human travel: probably the time wasn't ripe and the risks were greater than expected.

We don't know precisely what the goals of the shuttle project were. Maybe it was aimed essentially at prestige—if we can do this, we can do other things that we don't want to and can't tell you. This failure will likely, it is to be hoped, serve as a warning: the moment to think of the shuttle as the airplane of tomorrow has not yet arrived nor is it about to.

Along with grief at a collective and instantaneous death, along with the frustration that accompanies every failed undertaking, may we be allowed to express a hope that this tragedy may help prevent other, greater tragedies that the future might hold in reserve. The almost simultaneous, and marvelous, circumnavigation of Uranus by *Voyager* has shown us in a tangible way that the universe we live in can be explored today without risking the lives of human beings.

La Stampa, *January 30, 1986*

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1. The space shuttle *Challenger* exploded and broke apart shortly after liftoff, on January 28, 1986.

Letter to the Editor of *Commentary*

I am responding to Fernanda Eberstadt's article, "Reading Primo Levi" [October 1985]. I neither wish to nor am I able to discuss Miss Eberstadt's opinions on the literary merits of my books; to our common good fortune, in your country as in mine, freedom of criticism exists. I would like, however, to comment on several passages in the article.

1. "It was only with the first sign of a decisive Allied victory and with the collapse of the Fascist regime on July 25, 1943, that Levi found within himself the will to resist" (p. 43). This assertion amounts to an accusation of opportunism, and it strikes me as insulting. I was not the only one to take up arms so late. I am not speaking here of the minuscule Italian Jewish community, but the entire resistance movement against the Nazis, in all of Europe, did not begin until after the German invasion; before that it would not have made sense. A soldier, even if animated by the best will in the world, does not mobilize alone, spontaneously, against an enemy who is not there. The decision to fight militarily was taken when it was possible to take it, but my anti-Fascist commitment and that of my family and the group of friends I belong to, goes back many years earlier (see, for example, the chapters "Zinc" and "Iron" in *The Periodic Table*), in fact, to the years of my adolescence.

A little further on: at the moment of my arrest by the Fascists, "Levi . . . thought it safer . . . to declare himself a Jew." That was the least important part of the motives that led me to declare myself a Jew. I expressed them clearly in *The Periodic Table*: "in part out of weariness, in part also out of an irrational point of pride."

2. On p. 45 and elsewhere I am accused of omission: that is of not having tried to demonstrate that the slaughter of the Jews was provoked by the Nazi terror and by Hitler's racist ideology. Such a drastic statement can spring only from an extremely superficial reading of my books, especially *If This Is a Man* (now reissued in English under the title *Survival in Auschwitz*). Even if one simply relies on the narrated facts, the revulsion against and condemnation of Nazism leap from every page.

Moreover, the explanation which Miss Eberstadt seems to put forward—that Jews are persecuted where and when they tend to assimilate—seems to me false, or at least not generally true. They weren't assimilated in Spain in 1500, and yet they were burned or expelled. They were assimilated in Italy, where they would have remained undisturbed or almost so if it had not been for the German invasion in the course of the Second World War. They were and are assimilated in Bulgaria, whose (pro-Fascist) government opposed their deportation. They rejected assimilation in Poland and Russia in the last century and were paid back with pogroms. In short, I see no correlation between assimilation (desired or attained) and anti-Semitism. The anti-Semite hates the Jew no matter what: if he assimilates, because he "tries to hide himself"; if he remains faithful to tradition and religion, "because he is different."

3. I am accused of irreligion. I am not religious; furthermore, the experience of Auschwitz led many religious people, Jewish and not, to doubt. All the same, I profoundly respect, and sometimes envy, those who have the support of a faith. The pious Lithuanian Jew on whom Miss Eberstadt dwells (p. 45) is plainly a positive character, and the episode described in the story in which hse appears really happened. The line of reasoning has been misunderstood: it is known to everyone (even to me) that "cooking" on Yom Kippur is prohibited, but the discussion described hinges on whether it is permitted to "keep the soup warm," that is, not to let it get cold. Whether this is allowed or not I personally do not know; my character, Ezra, maintains that it is not.

As for the suspension of the fast by rabbinical authorities, Miss Eberstadt must take my word for it; there was no communication between the camps and the outside world, and Ezra could not have been aware of this concession. However, in my opinion, he observed the fast because of his personal heroic zeal, and I remember quite well that he was not the only one.

In none of my books does there appear a malevolent representation of religious zeal; however, the way in which quotations taken from my books are used does seem inexplicably malevolent.

4. Even the characters in *If Not Now, When?* are not very religious. This fact should not surprise or scandalize anyone: most of them were born and raised in the Soviet Union, where all religions, and the Jewish religion in particular, were openly discouraged.

5. I am implicitly criticized for being assimilated. I am. There do not exist Jews in the Diaspora who are not, to a greater or lesser degree, if for nothing else than for the fact that they speak the language of the country in which they live. I reassert, for myself and for everyone, the right to choose the level of assimilation that best suits their culture and their environment.

I would finally like to say to Miss Eberstadt that likening me to Ausonius is inappropriate. I have not retired, like that late Roman gentleman, to cultivate roses and compose anagrams, nor have I ever eaten oysters; on the contrary, my civic involvement has been daily and constant, a fact well-known not only in Italy. But I must thank Miss Eberstadt nevertheless for the praise she has bestowed on me, despite her manifest distaste.

PRIMO LEVI

Commentary, *February 1986, written in response to the article "Reading Primo Levi," by Fernanda Eberstadt published in the issue of October 1985*

When They Drank Methanol in the Lager

The unfortunate affair regarding methanol (methyl alcohol) found in wine is teaching us many sad lessons.[1] First of all, our regulations about wine are like a sieve with areas where the mesh is ridiculously tight, and others strewn with huge holes. Italy, and Italy alone, notoriously forbids enriching wine with sugar. Yet, a few days ago, a "turncoat" admitted that much of the wine being sold is the product of an "assemblage" of several dozen components that are available on a vast black market. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this, provided that the liquid so produced is not harmful, tastes good, and is not called wine, but it points out a suspicious confusion that lends itself to innumerable frauds. Most important, it has revealed that alcohol is added to wine. Again, there is nothing wrong with that. The tax authorities, however, who are so sharp-eyed when it comes to alcohol, apparently don't realize that there are truckloads of bootlegged alcohol around that doesn't evade just manufacturing or import duties but escapes all analysis and can contain anything.

Since it's absurd to think that even the most fiendish adulterator would deliberately add poison to his wine, it's logical to think that batches of ethyl alcohol available on the black market may be "enriched" with methyl alcohol. The latter was exempted from taxation in 1984; since then, its cost has been a tenth that of ethyl alcohol. It has become very good business to sell, for example as a solvent, a product labeled ethyl that in reality contains methyl. Someone probably started adulterating wine with one such mixture immediately. As long as this was done in small percentages, with limited illicit gains, nothing particularly striking happened; but then, little by little. . . .

Second lesson. The old adage “what we like is good for us” is utterly false. Our senses serve us reasonably well with natural substances; no poisonous plant smells nice and no plant that smells nice is poisonous. But our senses work very poorly with the millions of substances that are chemically produced; one of them is methanol, whose smell is definitely pleasant and is not easily distinguishable from that of ethyl alcohol. It makes no difference whether methanol is synthetic (which by now is almost always the case) or comes from the distillation of wood: if pure, it always smells the same. The plant where I worked as a prisoner also produced methanol; the Russians would drink it, and die. The management had put up multilingual placards warning: “Those who drink methanol go blind and die.” This wasn’t enough; there were people who would steal the methanol, make it into something drinkable and sell it (not just to the Russians). Neither our nose nor our palate can defend us from the poisons of chemistry: only chemists can do that.

Hence, the third lesson. The extreme diffusion of wine in the marketplace multiplies to a frightening degree the number of regular inspections or spot checks that would be required. A single wholesaler has in stock tens or hundreds of tanks—large and small—all of which need to be checked, and at short intervals (assuming there is no false bottom, as this also can happen). The chemist must therefore possess several qualities. First of all, he must obviously abide by a deontological, or, rather, moral oath similar to the one Hippocrates prescribed for physicians. He has to be more knowledgeable than his adversary, the adulterator. So far, there should be no problems. But he also has to be more cunning than the adulterator, who is strongly motivated by profit; he needs the eyes of Sherlock Holmes and the nose of a bloodhound. Thus, he mustn’t be duped by sampling, which is often no more than an imaginative version of three-card monte. Finally, the way has to be smoothed for him. In the case under consideration, which is very serious for the Italian industry and for our image abroad, the chemist sent to inspect the wine has to be able to perform the analyses on the spot—maybe preliminary, but reliable and rapid. In his laboratory, there are marvelous tools, but they are few, expensive, and not portable. They provide a complete analysis in twenty or thirty minutes, but, given the thousands of samples submitted to him, this time period is unacceptable, nor, at this stage, is a complete analysis necessary.

We should have recourse to analytical tools that are simple, small, inexpensive, and fast; I believe that some already exist, though they have not been approved. If they don't exist, it will not be difficult to invent them. They could be used for preliminary screening; in suspicious cases, a formal analysis would then be undertaken. At the same time, drawing on the pool of unemployed youths, in the current slump it should not be impossible to train teams of "barefoot chemists," just as Mao did with doctors. No degree is necessary to learn how to find methanol in wine with the tools I have in mind; two or three days of practical training would suffice.

But there is more. In legal terms, it is pointless to define wine as "the product of the alcoholic fermentation of the must of fresh grapes"—that is to say, in historical terms. No army of inspectors will ever be able to check the paths followed by the innumerable small and medium-sized winemakers, and things done earlier in the process will surely escape any control. It would be better to elaborate a general specification, broad enough to encompass all wines, and without unnecessary restrictions. If the value and taste of wine improves with the addition of sugar and alcohol (ethyl!), why forbid it? Those who are eager for profit will have less of an incentive to cheat.

Finally, reporters and journalists should neither minimize nor dramatize. In recent weeks, the reader has been upset. He cannot understand whether the quantities of methanol that were found, those permitted by law and those considered toxic, are calculated as a percentage of the total wine, or in thousandths, or in parts per million, or in grams per bottle, or in grams per gram of ethyl alcohol. A little precision would clarify matters; only a few days ago, we read that "traces of pH9" were found in Michele Sindona's coffee mug,[2] as if pH were a well-defined toxic substance, rather than a measure of acidity.

La Stampa, *April 5, 1986*

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1. In March 1986, several dozen Italians were poisoned by drinking wine that was adulterated with methanol; nineteen died. Producers added methanol as a cheap way of increasing the alcoholic content.
2. Sindona was a banker and convicted felon who was poisoned with cyanide in his coffee while in prison.

The TV Fans from Delta Cep.

Dear Piero Bianucci,[1]

You will be surprised to receive a letter from an admirer, so quickly and from so far away. We know your silly notions about the speed of light; where we are, a modest one-time supplement to the TV subscription fee is all it takes to be able to send and receive intergalactic messages in real time, or almost. As for me, I am a great admirer of your TV programs, and especially of the ad for tomato puree. I wanted to tell you that I was very enthusiastic about your program last Tuesday, where you spoke about the Cepheids. In fact, I was pleased to learn that you call us that, because our sun is indeed a Cepheid; I mean, it's a star much bigger than yours, and it pulsates regularly, with a period of five days and nine hours, Earth time. It is, to be precise, the Cepheid of Cepheus—what a coincidence! But before I embark on describing our *way of life** I want to tell you that my girlfriends and I really like your beard. The men here don't have beards—in fact, they don't even have heads. Our men are ten or twelve centimeters long and look like your asparagus, and when we want to be inseminated we put them under our armpits for two or three minutes, as you do with thermometers when you take your temperature. We have ten armpits: we are all built with binary symmetry, so that our width is the golden section of our radius. This is unique in our galaxy, and we're very proud of it. Males cost from twenty to fifty thousand lire depending on their age and condition, and they don't bother us much.

By the way, don't get your hopes up: our temperature varies, around −20°C in winter, 110°C in summer—but we'll become friends anyway. I heard that you are an astrophile, and this made me . . . [*indecipherable*]

because my friends and I also spend many evenings in the posterior hemisphere contemplating the starry sky; we enjoyed locating your sun, which, seen from here, is a little shy of the seventh magnitude and lies in a constellation we call Jadikus (it's a kitchen utensil). Almost all of us, except for a few who love solitude, live in the anterior hemisphere, because it has more light and a better view. After all, our planet isn't big: changing hemispheres is a short trip of three or four kilometers that can be made on foot, or by swimming in the rivers when they're not frozen or dry.

We are also far from our sun, so it's rare for the rocks to melt, except for sulfur. When I spoke of summer and winter, I was referring to the pulsations of our sun. It wouldn't be easy for you people to adapt. There is a law-enforcement agency for the distracted and for the habitually late; sirens blare in all the towns and villages, and we have to burrow underground within half an hour. Each of us takes along her males. They say it's quite a spectacle, but only the girls from law enforcement can see it, with periscopes, from inside their adiabatic observatories: apparently the sun swells before your very eyes, and in a few minutes the sea starts to boil. It's a sea of water and sulfur dioxide, with iron salts—aluminum, titanium, and manganese—dissolved in it. We also have an armor made of iron oxide and manganese, and we change it when it gets too tight. We never go into the sea, because we are alkaline and the water is acid and would dissolve us. That happens sometimes: those who are tired of life throw themselves deliberately into the sea. It's not a very deep sea, and when the sun swells it evaporates in a few hours; it turns into an ugly expanse of gray and brown salt and all the water goes up into the sky to form a mist over the sun.

The summer lasts two of your days; we spend it sleeping and laying eggs. Our optimal temperature is around 46°C, so that if you and I were to meet during the pleasant season we could even touch; I'd like that, but it probably won't happen because . . . [*indecipherable*] aren't here yet. Then the heat gradually subsides, rain pours down, hot and then warm, and the grass starts to sprout again. It's the season when we all go out to pasture and exchange news. Last fall one of my friends told me that she saw a supernova; there hadn't been one in a while and she urged me to let you know about it. From your perspective, it should be in the neighborhood of Scorpio; if you pay the one-time tachyonic subscription you can see it in ten days, otherwise you'll have to wait 3485 years.

At the end of autumn, everything freezes: the sea with all its salts, the grass trapped in the rain and the dew, as well as everyone who remains outside. Winter is pleasant: our caves are well heated, we eat canned food, we get inseminated three or four times by various males, to set ourselves apart a little, but also because it's fashionable; we make music with our stridulating organs, watch all the TV in the universe, and organize literary prizes. Three years ago I even won a prize. It was for a very sexy short story, about a girl who had bought a male with her first paycheck and then she fell for him and didn't want to exchange him or have him pulped. I wrote it in 2.36 seconds. We do everything pretty quickly.

Your TV show is one of the most popular, especially because of the purees, which are of great interest to us. If you are able to submit your one-time payment and respond in a reasonable time, please send me the formula for your most important: (a) anti-fermentatives; (b) anti-parasitics; (c) anti-conceptions;* (d) anti-aesthetics; (e) anti-Semitics; (f) antipyretics; (g) antiquarians; (h) antihelminthics; (i) antiphons; (j) antitheses; (k) antelopes.

As a matter of fact, we of the eighth planet of Delta Cepheid are also exposed to many dangers and threats from which we need to protect ourselves. In particular, regarding points (c) and (h), there was much discussion in my den last winter, because the TV commercials weren't clear. At any rate, my friends and I would like to get the local chemical industry to produce them so we can try them—we had the impression that they could provide relief for some of our ills.

Cordially yours, . . . [signature illegible] *and friends*
Delta Cep./8, d.3º a.3,576.10[11]
Translated by Primo Levi

L'Astronomia, *no. 54, April 1986*

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1. Editor in chief of the newspaper *La Stampa*, author of numerous popular science books, and creator and director of a science program on Italian TV.

* Here, and throughout *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1981–1987*, an asterisk indicates that the word or phrase is in English in the original.

The Plague Has No Borders

We had just begun to recover from Sindona's coffee, when the jolt of methanol in wine arrived, followed by the clash in Libya between two foolish arrogant powers: the mobilization of aircraft carriers, missiles, assassins, and avalanches of lies in a childish matter of prestige.[1] We have scarcely had time to digest Libya, to trace the uncertain line between right and wrong, and we are abruptly overwhelmed by the disaster of Chernobyl.

It's too soon to draw all the conclusions, but some reflections can be attempted. The Soviets, for whom the American undertaking in Libya was a gift, a free makeup job for their image, suffer a devastating reversal: first, because the disaster happened, second because of the way they managed the news of it. They have been (and still are) so vague and reticent that no one even knows the precise facts, starting with the number of victims and the extent of the damage, present and future. A veil of discretion drawn over their own troubles, and the magnification of those of others, is an old illness of centralized regimes. Many will recall that in Fascist times a Party directive forbade reporting cases of suicide; as a result, reporters, caught between the rock of the ban and the hard place of professional duty, had to keep repeating the story of the unfortunate citizen who, running through the house or the streets with (who knows why) a loaded gun in his hand, fell and was shot dead when the gun went off accidentally.

Soviet history is littered with unbelievable instances of censorship, impossible denials, ridiculous silences, which increase in proportion to the area involved and the time that has elapsed. Celebrated examples are the delay with which the population found out about the Nazi invasion, and the censoring of information about the Lagers and the extermination of the

kulaks. In the present case, given the scarcity of official news, people will have to rely on hearsay, and the alarm will be greater. This obsession with secrecy attests to the Soviet government's unwarranted disdain for its citizens; they are neither immature nor mentally handicapped.

Yet the conduct of the Western press has not been exemplary, either. It can barely conceal its malicious joy, as if such disasters could not happen among *us*, and yet we Italians have known that among our nuclear power plants "only" the one in Latina doesn't have a waterproof dome of reinforced concrete; but, we add, it's a small power plant. It's like saying that if there were a leak it would be necessary to evacuate "only" Rome. The two deaths announced by the Soviets are probably an understatement, but the more than two thousand announced by America are (let's hope) overstatement; on our side information sins in the opposite direction—rather than late and sketchy it's immediate and sensational. They are pathologically stingy, we are muddled and profligate.

Unfortunately, nuclear technology and biology are intrinsically difficult; for the layman it's hard to calculate the risks and benefits. Now, we are all laymen; the few non-laymen are parties to the case, and so are not free from prejudice. As a layman, I venture to predict, or at least to hope, that Chernobyl will be a turning point in our choices when it comes to energy, in our methods of disseminating information, and perhaps even in the political relations between the two major blocs. Even from disasters (a pessimist would say: especially from disasters) we can learn many things.

The most important is this: nuclear pollution is subtle and imperceptible; against it there are no secure defenses. It laughs at our borders, rides wind and water, infiltrates the food chains; radioactive iodine can rain down from the sky thousands of kilometers from its source and settle in our thyroid, becoming thousands of times as concentrated, and attacking our health. The radiation emitted by the products of fission can alter the genetic inheritance of men, animals, and plants on the entire planet, damaging future generations. A nuclear accident spreads like the plague; it's not an internal affair, belonging exclusively to the country where it happened. The waters of the Dnieper lick Chernobyl but end up in the Black Sea and bathe the Turkish coasts, which have no nuclear plants: why should the Turks pay for the mistakes of others?

Gorbachev was wrong to be silent and right to ask for help. Let's give it to him, even we Italians (provided it is skilled help and not propagandistic),

but afterward, when, we hope, things have ended in the best possible way, let him agree to sit at the table. If he is truly a new man, let him speak the language used by responsible people.

La Stampa, *May 3, 1986*

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1. On April 25, 1986, the United States bombed Libya in response to the Libyan terrorist bombing of a Berlin nightclub frequented by American servicemen.



A Small Woman with a Regal Bearing

Finally some good news, in the endless stream of indifferent or bad news! Finally a moment of pure joy, not simple joy but many-faceted and complex. Joy because, after so many years, the world's most highly desired prize in medicine has gone to a woman. Because it has gone to a Turinese. Because this Turinese honors me with her friendship. And finally, but most important, because the Nobel fits Rita like a glove.

Indeed, by custom and by statute, it rewards a life productively dedicated to science, but it comes this time into the hands of a small woman, with an indomitable will and regal bearing, who, on the path she chose many years ago, is still traveling with intelligent energy, and with that rare combination of patience and impatience which belongs to great innovators.

But Rita Levi-Montalcini is in no way in the sunset of her career: for her the Nobel comes not only to crown past achievements. Even today, amid endless difficulties of every sort, including domestic, her activity is intense and unceasing. Rita not only works in the laboratory but pursues colleagues, students, and worthy followers, writes her long awaited memoirs, travels around the world to expound to scientists and non-scientists alike the profound meaning of her discoveries.

It's not for me to judge them, but I believe I have understood their groundbreaking quality: valuable in themselves, and recognized by friends and competitors, they are also creative, a barrier broken down, a passageway through which other light will shine, for the ultimate purpose of alleviating suffering and allowing us to approach, step by step, the most fleeting and enviable goal, that of the human mind that understands itself.

La Stampa, *October 14, 1986*

The Spider’s Secret

Many find it odd, and it’s starting to seem odd to me, too: for thirty years, namely for the entire middle part of my active life, I was occupied with the production of paints—that is, liquid substances that, spread in a thin layer, after a certain time become solid, spontaneously or when heated. I find it equally odd that, on my “lower level,” memories of paint are replacing those of Auschwitz. I notice it in my dreams, from which the Lager has disappeared by now, but in which more and more frequently I am confronted by a paint-related problem that I can’t solve.

Of course, I just gave a somewhat simplified definition of paint. Beer and seawater, too, if they evaporate as a thin layer, leave a solid residue, but nevertheless they can’t be called paints. In other words, paint has various other general and special characteristics that are known to all, and so there is no point in making an effort to define them here.

In the course of my career, I was confronted with many strange problems. For instance, I was asked once for a paint that could be applied to the insulators of high-tension power lines and that would change color in a way that was clear, irreversible, and visible from the ground whenever an insulator overheated, even just for a few minutes. Many years earlier a more frivolous problem was presented to me. A dandy who was purporting to be a cosmetics manufacturer asked me to study a colored paint, “for evening,” to be applied to the teeth the way you apply nail polish. At the end of the evening, it should be removable with a non-toxic solvent—in practice, ethyl alcohol. I was to come up with the product, and he would take care of a high-profile commercial launch.

I don’t think I devoted more than fifteen minutes to this question. I tested a green concoction that was presumably suited for the purpose on my own teeth; the outcome was so disgusting that I immediately called the dandy to tell him I was not available for his project. Another time, I was asked for a glossy black paint that would dry quickly and cost very little. It needn’t be weatherproof, insisted the customer—who was a coffin manufacturer.

Apart from these oddities, phenomena where liquids become solids continue to have a special appeal for me; you can’t expect a soldier to forget the battlefield. A paint factory is also a factory of stalactites, and this, too, is a passage from liquid to solid. But while natural stalactites take millennia to grow, ours take only weeks. Often the tanks are not watertight. Drops of paint that leak from them solidify before they fall, and turn into graceful short candles with a hornlike consistency that are mercilessly uprooted and thrown in the trash. They can be stocky or slender, transparent or colored; at times they are forked or in clusters. They grow slowly and silently like upside-down mushrooms.

The passage from liquid to solid is never a dull spectacle, as anyone knows who has witnessed a pig-iron casting cool or a flow of molten lava burn itself out. “Cooked” wax that solidifies in a cauldron takes, spontaneously, the elegant shape of a crater, while colophony, which retains some fluidity until it solidifies, sets in a glossy and smooth mirror, “Narcissus’ mirror.” And what about freezing water? Often a dirty city puddle, after a winter night, turns into a delicate mesh of jagged crystals tens of centimeters long; and the fact that no two snow crystals are exactly alike is proverbial.

We are at the edge of a forest of symbolic meanings, so that solidification is felt in turn as positive or negative, as reassuring or deadly. Blood coagulates, in most cases beneficially, at other times (inside its vessels) causing a fatal thrombus. It’s always a dramatic phenomenon, though, and fabulously complicated. And everyone has heard of rigor mortis.

The most wondrous solidification I’ve ever come across, however, is a completely different one. It’s the solidification of spider’s thread. Spiders are resourceful little creatures toward which—as I have already related—I have strongly ambivalent feelings. None of the patterns one normally encounters are applicable to the instantaneous solidification of a spider’s

thread. Could it be simple freezing—just as water, cast iron, and wax solidify when they are cooled below a given temperature? Surely not: a spider always has the temperature of its environment and its tank can't be warmer than the air. The spider's spinneret, seen under the microscope, is very similar to the one through which nylon is extruded, but this analogy is illusory: before passing through the spinneret, nylon is molten, at over 250°C.

Could it be that a solvent evaporates, just as it does with paint? No: no solvent has ever been found in the tiny body of the spider, except water, which evaporates slowly, while the solidification of the spider's thread is instantaneous; it turns from liquid to solid as soon as it comes out of the spinneret—otherwise the spider wouldn't be able to hang from it. Moreover, if it were evaporation of a water solution, the thread should be soluble in water, which is not the case; even when just woven, the spiderweb withstands rain and dew very well.

Could polymerization occur: could, in other words, long, and therefore solid, molecules, develop from a "soup" of smaller molecules contained in the spider's glands? Chemists don't know any polymerization process that occurs in a fraction of a second, and, so to speak, "on command"—that is, following the mere passage from a closed environment to the open air. They do know processes whereby solids are formed by mixing two liquids, but the spider possesses only one raw material.

The solution to the problem has been known for a few years, and its simplicity is disarming. The liquid secreted by the spider's glands, and stored above the spinnerets, becomes solid when subjected to traction. It is made of molecules long enough to be solid, but they are rolled up into a ball and therefore slide on one another: in other words, they are a liquid, although very viscous. But the spider secretes the thread always and only under traction: it "pulls out" its thread. Now, the nature of this liquid is so delicate and peculiar that a modest stretching is enough to cause an irreversible solidification: the knotted molecules stretch out and become parallel threads. All caterpillars that make cocoons use the same mechanism; this is how silk originates.

No chemist has yet succeeded in reproducing such an elegant, simple, and clean process. We have overtaken and violated nature in many fields, yet from nature we still have much to learn.

La Stampa, *November 9, 1986*

I Would Prohibit It

In principle, I have no objection to eugenics. It seems to me that if we really could obtain, without hurting people, a stronger humanity—more intelligent, gentler, better able to withstand diseases and temptations—there would be nothing wrong with it and no moralist could object. In the case of height, we have already, "unwittingly," achieved results, thanks to better hygiene and diet.

But the so-called Naples experiment[1] is not part of eugenics, the purpose of which is the improvement of progeny. Maybe the experiment would be of scientific interest if it could be demonstrated that it is reproducible, something that we are very far from. Let's not forget that the likelihood of a female's being born, as was desired in this case, was 50 percent; thus, the experiment proved little.

Wasn't it enough to limit ourselves to animals? Apart from any moral consideration, intervening in our species to modify the natural balance between the sexes is stupid and harmful. It's easy to imagine what would happen if the sordid exploit of Naples were to be corroborated, made available to the wider population, and gain acceptance: according to tastes or fashion we would have an excess of males or females, adding an artificial demographic problem to the many spontaneous problems that already burden us. In my opinion, the law should prohibit sex predetermination right now.

La Stampa, *December 2, 1986*

1. The reference is to a baby whose sex was predetermined before birth, an experiment successfully carried out in Naples by Professor Raffaele Magli.

Fra Diavolo on the Po

Before the current confusion of reforms, obtaining a high school diploma was an undertaking that made one tremble—it was a decathlon. The candidate was required to complete four written exams and an oral exam in every subject covered in three years of high school: in practice, a summary of everything that is known to mankind. Thus, by the day of the first exam, one would be completely exhausted, in a state both frantic and fatalistic, since it was clear to everyone that luck played a major role in the final results.

In July of 1936, precisely two days before my first exam, the written exam in Italian, I received a menacing red postcard from the Ministry of War: the following day I was to report to the seaplane station (the one on the Po River, from which the seaplane leaves for Venice: how many Turinese remember it?) for an urgent message. I went there full of foreboding and found myself in the company of another teenager, who (I never discovered why) was also called Levi, before a giant in a Fascist uniform who assailed us with an avalanche of insults, accusations, and threats.

He was red in the face, in a fit of rage; he accused us of nothing less than attempted desertion. We were both cowards: according to him, we hadn’t responded to a previous call, clearly intending to avoid military service in the Royal Navy. Yes, because our two names, of all names, had been drawn in the Turin lottery for the Navy draft. No one could save us from twenty-four months of service.

I didn’t even know how to swim at the time, and though I had read Stevenson and Defoe, the prospect of becoming a sailor struck me as absurd

and frightening. I went home terrified; the next day, I turned in an Italian exam that was insubstantial and incoherent, so much so that, in all fairness, I got a very low mark, was not allowed to take the oral exam, and was told to return in October. It was the first bad grade in my impeccable academic career, and it felt pretty much like a death sentence. I passed the other exams thanks only to an exhausting effort.

We held a family council; my father, poor man, already gravely ill, set about making the rounds of the relevant authorities, from the military recruiting office to the chief magistrate, from the Superintendent of Education to the Fascist Federation. What came of it was a paradoxical solution, a preemptive strike: I would avoid the Navy draft by enlisting as soon as possible in the pre-military course at the Voluntary Militia for National Security—in other words, the Fascist militia.

Thus, the following fall, once I had passed my Italian exam, I enrolled in the university and found myself in the position of university soldier. At the time I was neither Fascist nor anti-Fascist. Wearing a uniform gave me no sense of pride; rather, I found it somehow annoying (especially the boots). But I have to admit that I didn't dislike marching in step, in close order, especially to band music. It was a dance, and it gave me the sensation of belonging to a human alliance, of merging with a unified group. I later learned that Einstein declared he could not understand the type of man who took pleasure in marching in step. Well, at the time I was that type, even if seven years later some other marching in step made me change my mind radically.

So there I was, a soldier, all decked out in alpine hat, eagle, fasces, gray-green jacket and pants, and black shirt. The routine of pre-military education should have enabled me to predict much of what was to come after Italy entered the war, in 1940: suffice it to say that throughout the entire course I neither fired a single shot nor saw even from a distance what the cartridge clips of the extremely heavy Model 91 rifle looked like.

The muster was on Saturday afternoons in the courtyard of the university on Via Po, where, in one of the corridors, the armory of the University Militia was situated. We had to show up in uniform, and each of us was given a rifle; the bayonet—with its two lateral grooves "so that the

blood can drain away”—was fixed to the muzzle, and the loop of the bayonet sheath was threaded through the belt, along with cartridge pouches meant to hold ammunition but naturally empty. Once our belts were on, we would fill the cartridge pouches with bread and salami for snack time; the smokers used them for cigarettes. Pre-military training consisted solely of the tedious close-order drills and long walks in the hills that would have been pleasant if it hadn’t been for the loathsome boots that chafed our ankles and feet raw.

If I am not mistaken, I was the only true university student in my squad. The others were studying geometry or accounting, and had all enrolled in the University Militia for the various worldly advantages that could be gained from it—not one had joined out of Fascist beliefs. Because they were the same height as me, four shrewd, friendly boys—all a little frisky—were always near me in the squad, and with the aid of their rifles they kept themselves entertained by playing the part of Fra Diavolo.[1] They called one another Canù Vacché (Wizened Cowboy), Cravé (Cravero) Bastard,* Comi Schifús, and Simoncelli Struns[2]: as in Homeric texts, these were fixed attributes and were an integral part of their names—like honorary titles.

Comi Schifús in fact was an old acquaintance. He had been a classmate of mine in elementary school, and already then was trying his very best to be gross: he was the only one in our entire class who could lick the soles of his shoes—without taking them off, of course. It pleases me to mention the names of these faraway comrades in arms, in the event that any of them should recognize himself here. One had composed amiably obscene verses in which the surreal names of the parts of the above-mentioned rifle recurred: “dog collar sling,” “butt plate,” “nose cap,” and others I can’t recall because, as a matter of fact, we had never taken a rifle apart. The rifle was intended less as a weapon than as a dead weight, useful only in hampering our movements.

As a result of the racial laws, my military career didn’t last long: in September 1938, I was asked to turn in my uniform, and I did so without regrets. But when, in 1945, I returned from captivity in Germany, I discovered that the specter of military service in the Navy had not vanished: I appeared to be still registered for the naval draft. I was called to the

recruiting office to restate my position, stripped naked, and subjected to the statutory medical exam with the recruits of ’27. I was in pretty bad shape, but the doctor wanted to declare me fit for service. A negotiation ensued: strange as it may seem, I did not possess any documents to attest to my year in Auschwitz, except for the number tattooed on my arm. After long explanations and pleading, the doctor agreed first to classify me as temporarily unfit for service, and then to let me out definitively. Thus ended my brief military career.

La Stampa, *December 14, 1986*

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1. Fra Diavolo (literally, Brother Devil) was the popular name given to Michele Pezza, an Italian outlaw who resisted the French occupation of Naples and is remembered in folk legends and in the novels of Alexandre Dumas as a guerrilla leader.
2. “Schifús” is a distorted version of *schifo*, which means “disgusting”; “Struns” is a distortion of *stronzo*, which literally means “turd” and is used vulgarly to indicate someone who is mean.

Preface to *Moments of Reprieve*[1]

Writing and publishing *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce* marked a goal in my life as a writer. For many years afterward, I had the impression that I had fulfilled an obligation, in fact the only obligation I had that felt clearly defined. In Auschwitz, and on the long journey of return, I had suffered and seen things that not only seemed important for myself but demanded imperiously to be told. I had told them, I had borne witness; I was a chemist, I had a profession that gave me a living and occupied me thoroughly, and I did not feel the need to write anything else.

It didn't turn out that way. As the years passed, the job of writing made room for itself beside my professional activity, and eventually replaced it; at the same time I realized that my experience of Auschwitz was far from being used up. I had described its fundamental features, which today fall within the realm of history, in my first two books, but a crowd of details continued to surface in my memory, and I didn't want them to fade away. In particular, a large number of human figures stood out against that tragic background: friends, traveling companions, even adversaries, who, in their turn, asked to survive, to enjoy the ambiguous perpetuity of literary characters. It wasn't the anonymous mass of the shipwrecked, without voice and without face, but the few, the different, those in whom (if only for a moment) I had perceived the will and capacity to react, that is, a rudiment of virtue.

In these stories, written in different periods and on different occasions, and not, certainly, with any plan, it seems to me that precisely this common feature emerges. Each story centers on a single character, and he is never the object of persecution, the predestined victim, the prostrate man—the

one to whom I dedicated my first book, and of whom I wondered obsessively whether “he was still a man.” The protagonists here are “men” beyond any doubt, even if that virtue, the quality that allows them to survive and makes them exceptional, isn’t always one of those which ordinary morality approves of. Bandi, my “disciple,” draws strength from the holy joy of believers, Wolf from music, Grigo from love and superstition, Tischler from a patrimony of legends; but Cesare from a cunning without scruples, Rumkowski from a craving for power, Rappoport from a feral vitality.

Rereading them, I notice another peculiarity: the settings, which I chose instinctively, are almost never tragic. They are bizarre, marginal: moments of reprieve, in which the identity that has been suppressed regains its features for a moment.

The reader may be surprised at this recovered lode, thirty or forty years after the events narrated here. Well, it has been observed by psychologists that the survivors of traumatic events are divided into two sharply defined groups: those who repress their past wholly, and those in whom the memory of the offense endures, as if carved in stone, dominating all other experiences, before or after. Now, not by choice but by nature, I belong to the second group. Of my two years of life outside the law I have forgotten nothing. With no deliberate effort, memory continues to retrieve facts, faces, words, sensations: as if at that time my mind had been in a state of exalted receptivity, in which no detail was lost. I remember, for example, the way a tape recorder or a parrot might, entire sentences in languages that I didn’t know then, and do not know today. A few years ago I encountered, after thirty-five years, a fellow prisoner with whom I hadn’t had any special friendship, and I recognized him immediately in the midst of a crowd of unknown faces, although his face was much changed. Even now, odors from “down there” make me jump. Today it seems evident that the attention I had then, turned to the world and to the human beings around me, was not only a symptom but also an important factor in my spiritual and physical salvation.

It’s possible that the distance in time has increased the tendency to fill out the facts, to embellish: this tendency, or temptation, is an integral part of writing, and without it one writes not stories but reports. Nevertheless, the episodes on which I have constructed these stories really happened, and

their protagonists existed, even though, for obvious reasons, I have frequently changed their names.

In Moments of Reprieve *(New York: Summit Books, 1986)*

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1. The first section of Levi's collection *Lilith and Other Stories* was published separately in English under the title *Moments of Reprieve*.

Buck of the Wolves

The prestigious Einaudi series “Writers Translated by Writers” has published its nineteenth book, an unexpected gift: Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*, in a beautiful and meticulous translation by Gianni Celati. The book is very well-known, and precisely for this reason it reserves many surprises for the reader, or rather the rereader, regardless of age. We read a book we know differently from a new book: we already know “how it ends,” therefore we are more critical of the plot and pay more attention to the details.

Here we are immediately struck by the book’s genuineness. The *très curieux* Jack London, a writer long considered marginal, vernacular—in other words, a maverick within the illustrious American literary tradition—drew from his brief adventure as a gold prospector in Alaska an amazing number of experiences to relate, and he is a first-class storyteller. Nothing of what he says seems secondhand, as if written at a desk, relying on other books or the imagination. The wild world into which Jack London was plunged is decanted into his best books with the urgency and directness of real life; this is neither Verne nor Salgari[1] but a man who fought to the last in a struggle for life and survival, and found in this struggle the inspiration to write.

With happy intuition, London transferred his experience to a dog, and I believe that this dog has no rival in world literature, precisely because he isn’t a literary dog. Buck, well off, master of his home on a splendid California ranch, is canine and human at the same time, like all dogs who

are treated neither too badly nor too well by destiny or by their owners. He radiates dignity and respectability. More than Judge Miller's servant, he is his equal, his companion; he has an instinctive understanding of his rights and duties. But at the turn of the century, at the time of the gold rush, all strong dogs are under threat: they have unprecedented commercial value, they can be stolen, traded, and shipped up there, where the law of clubs and fangs prevails over the laws of civilization. They will become sled dogs or they will die.

Buck, thanks to his physical and moral strength, passes the first test of deportation, an endless journey by rail and then steamboat to reach a new and hostile land: no California sunshine, but snow on the ground and in the air. He is tamed; he learns that a man wielding a club is invincible. His dignity is not defeated but is transformed as he must adjust, he must learn new and terrible things. He learns that he can't trust anyone, and especially his companions, sled dogs who are already experienced. If he isn't as fast as they are, his daily ration will be immediately stolen. He learns that at night the fire and the tent aren't for him; he must learn, and does learn, to dig a hole in the snow, where his animal heat makes it possible to endure the arctic cold.

Buck must also learn the job, and here London's tone and observations are masterly. Each of these dogs, of a hundred different breeds, yoked to the sled every day, has an individual, surprisingly credible personality. Ethologist *ante litteram*, London has penetrated canine psychology to truly modern depths. Rivals with one another and yet gregarious, the sled dogs "elect" a leader, the head of the pack, the first dog in the team. He must be the strongest, but also the most experienced: hauling is a kind of work that must be consented to, and Spitz, the head dog, forces and speeds up consent. He punishes those who hinder the work, he bites the stragglers, he stops fights with his undisputed authority.

Buck understands and learns, but doesn't accept Spitz's authority: inside himself he feels, next to the endless craving for food, the craving for leadership. On the other hand, he accepts the sled: "*Though the work was hard, he found he did not particularly despise it. He was surprised at the eagerness which animated the whole team and which was communicated to him.*" It is work as the last resort and the alternative to servitude; how can we not recall Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and the wall that the prisoners build willingly, fighting against the frost of another

Arctic? Dave and Solleks, old sled dogs, are passive and indifferent during the short hours of rest, but when they are harnessed to the sled they become "*alert and active, anxious that the work go well, and fiercely irritable with whatever, by delay or confusion, retarded that work. The toil between the sled's traces seemed the supreme expression of their being, and all that they lived for and the only thing in which they took delight*." Work is intoxicating: the dogs' "*heart breaks when they are excluded from it.*" Here, in embryo, is the intuition of the human pathology of early retirement.

Buck is different. He feels growing within himself "the dominant primordial beast," he subtly provokes the leader of the pack and encourages indiscipline until it comes to an open challenge. This is the most brilliant page of this short book, and its harshest: on a freezing night, surrounded by the ravenous but neutral pack, Spitz and Buck confront each other, and Buck, the more cunning fighter, triumphs. The loser is devoured on the spot by his former underlings. The next morning, Buck forces himself on his human masters: he has killed the pack leader; he is the new head of the pack. He will be an even more efficient leader (a Kapo?) than Spitz, better at maintaining discipline and anticipating the dangers of the track.

Then the pack changes owners and in the spring, when the ice is most treacherous, it ends up in the hands of three inexperienced men. Hunger, exhaustion, and lashes: Buck's dignity is offended, the dog rebels; he "knows" who should be obeyed and who shouldn't. Subjected to a deadly beating, he is rescued by Thornton, the good pioneer, toward whom Buck develops that total, exclusive love which only dogs are capable of: and right here, in my view, the book weakens. This devotion is excessive: what happened to the "primordial beast"?

Nor is one convinced by passages permeated by half-baked echoes of Darwin. Thornton dies, struck down by Indian arrows, and Buck, his last tie with human civilization undone, listens to the call of the wild—that is, the howling of the wolves. He feels within himself, through evolution, the wolf's blood. In spite of his different life, he approaches the pack until he becomes part of it, and in fact its leader. California, the sled, and Thornton are forgotten, and Buck's story (this is Celati's observation, but I believe it's valid only after this turn of events) dissolves into legend. Buck's blood prevails over that of the wolves to the point of changing their appearance: a new generation of wolves is born, with a canine coat. Buck has become the Phantom Dog who at night savagely tears to pieces prey and men; yet,

every summer, he goes on a pilgrimage to the place where Thornton is buried—the only creature this dog who is now a wolf ever loved. Come on, this is a bit too human.

La Stampa, *January 11, 1987*

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1. Emilio Salgari (1862–1911), an author of adventure stories that take place in exotic lands.

The Black Hole of Auschwitz

We cannot remain indifferent to the debate under way in Germany between those who tend to trivialize the Nazi slaughter (Nolte, Hillgruber) and those who assert its uniqueness (Habermas and many others).[1] The thesis of the first group is not new: there have been massacres in every century, especially at the outset of this one, and in particular against the "class enemies" in the Soviet Union, hence near the German border. We, the Germans, during the Second World War, simply followed a horrible but by now established practice: an "Asian" practice made up of slaughters, mass deportations, merciless exile to hostile regions, torture, family separations. Our only innovation was technological: we invented the gas chambers. Incidentally, it's precisely this innovation that was denied by the Faurisson school of "revisionists."[2] Thus the two arguments complete each other in a scheme of historical interpretation that cannot but cause alarm.

Granted, the Soviets cannot be absolved. The slaughter of the kulaks first and, later, the despicable trials and the countless cruel actions against real or alleged enemies of the people are extremely serious offenses. They led to the political isolation of the Soviet Union, which, to varying degrees and with the forced interval of the war, continues to this day. But no justice system absolves a murderer because there are other murderers in the house across the street. Moreover, it's indisputable that these events were internal to the Soviet Union and that no outsider could have opposed them without resorting to a general war.

The new German revisionists tend to present Hitler's slaughters as a preventive defense against an "Asian" invasion. This thesis seems to me extremely fragile. It's far from certain that the Russians intended to invade

Germany. On the contrary, they feared Germany, as demonstrated by the hasty Ribbentrop-Molotov pact; the subsequent, sudden German aggression of 1941 confirmed that those fears were justified. Further, it's not clear how Stalin's "political" massacres could find their mirror image in Hitler's extermination of the Jewish people. It's well-known that, before Hitler's rise to power, German Jews were deeply German, intimately integrated into the country, considered enemies only by Hitler and the few fanatics who initially followed him. The identification of Judaism with Bolshevism, Hitler's obsession, had no objective foundation, especially in Germany, where the vast majority of Jews notoriously belonged to the bourgeoisie.

It is true that "the Gulag existed before Auschwitz," but it shouldn't be forgotten that the purposes of the two hells were not the same. The first was a massacre among equals; it wasn't based on racial supremacy, it didn't divide humanity into superhumans and subhumans; the second was based on an ideology imbued with racism. Had it prevailed, we would find ourselves today in a world split in two: "we," the masters, on one side, and all others their servants or exterminated because they were racially inferior. This contempt for the fundamental equality of rights among all human beings revealed itself in a multitude of symbolic details, from the Auschwitz tattoo to the use, in the gas chambers, of a poison originally produced to disinfest ships' holds overrun by rats. The ruthless exploitation of the corpses, and of their ashes, is an exclusive feature of Nazism, and, in spite of those who would like to blur the contours of Hitler's Germany, remains its emblem to this day.

It is in fact true that mortality in the Gulag was terribly high, but it was a sort of by-product, tolerated with cynical indifference. The primary purpose of the Gulag, however barbaric, had its own logic, consisting in the reinvention of a slave economy aimed at the "construction of Socialism." Not even in Solzhenitsyn's writings, trembling with justified rage, does anything similar to Treblinka and Chelmno appear; neither labor camps nor concentration camps, they were black holes for men, women, and children whose only crime was to be Jewish, places where people got off the trains only to enter the gas chambers, and from which no one came back alive. The Soviet invaders of Germany, after the martyrdom of their country (do you remember, among hundreds of episodes, the brutal siege of Leningrad?), were eager for revenge and were responsible for serious excesses, but there weren't among them Einsatzkommandos, charged with

machine-gunning civilians and burying them in huge mass graves that were often dug by the victims themselves. And although they harbored a justifiable craving for retaliation, the Soviets never planned the annihilation of the German people.

No one has ever claimed that there were “selections” in the Gulag, such as those, repeatedly described, which occurred in the German Lagers, where, after a quick look at a prisoner’s front and back, the SS doctors (doctors!) decided who could still work and who was to go to the gas chamber. And I don’t see how this “innovation” could be considered marginal and mitigated by an “only.” This development was not on the “Asian” model; it was thoroughly European. The gas was produced by renowned German chemical factories, German enterprises received the hair of the massacred women, and the gold in teeth extracted from the corpses went to German banks. All this is specifically German, and no German should forget it; nor should he forget that in Nazi Germany, and there alone, even children and the dying were sent to an atrocious death in the name of an abstract and ferocious radicalism without equal in modern times.

In the ambiguous debates that are under way, the fact that the Allies bear a heavy share of the blame has no relevance whatsoever. It’s true that no democratic country offered asylum to the Jews who were threatened or expelled. It’s true that the Americans refused to bomb the railway lines to Auschwitz while they repeatedly bombarded the adjacent industrial district. And it’s also true that there were probably sordid reasons for the Allies’ failure to come to the rescue: the fear of having to shelter or support millions of refugees or survivors. But one can’t call this real complicity, and the moral and legal difference between those who take action and those who do nothing to oppose it remains immeasurable.

If today’s Germany cares about the place that it is entitled to among European nations, it cannot and should not whitewash its past.

La Stampa, *January 22, 1987*

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1. Ernst Nolte (b. 1932) is a German historian and philosopher; Andreas Hillgruber (1925–1989) was a German historian; Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) is a German philosopher.

2. Robert Faurisson, a French professor and Holocaust denier, is discussed in several essays in *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980*.

Nose to Nose: A Date with Love in the Dark

JOURNALIST: *Wait a minute, my goodness! It's two full days, forty-eight hours, since I've been here waiting for you to show up, and you already want to go back inside. My director won't hear of any excuses, you know: if I come back without an interview I risk losing my job, and he wants it right away, before the mating season is over.*

MOLE: Go ahead, then, but hurry up. It's not that I'm in a rush: it's just that I don't like the light. Some other time, if you warn me first, we can arrange to meet in the evening—at night everything is simpler, and calmer. Don't you hear that buzzing sound? Tractors, motors, even planes in the sky: it's unbearable. Once upon a time, it wasn't like this, or so I'm told: in the fields there was peace. But in the meantime, bear with me, you know I can't see well. Are you male or female?

JOURNALIST: *Male, but I don't see what difference that makes.*

MOLE: Yes, it does make a difference. You can't trust females. They interest me for just two weeks a year, then not at all—better off alone. The only thing females look at, even yours, is fur. Not that they're wrong. Did you know that ours is the only fur that you can also stroke the wrong way? Otherwise we wouldn't be able to back up in our tunnels.

JOURNALIST: *Tell me: you made a radical choice. No sky, no sun or moon—in other words, perpetual darkness and silence. Isn't it a little monotonous? Don't you get bored*?

MOLE: You are all the same. You measure everything according to your human standards. Yes, it was a choice, but a reasoned one. I

preferred hearing, smell, and touch to sight. Don't think that I don't have ears, just because they can't be seen from the outside. My sense of hearing is ten times as sharp as yours—on a logarithmic scale, of course. I can hear a root grow, the rustling of an earthworm. And to protect myself from your unbearable din all I have to do is descend fifty or sixty centimeters: there I am even protected from the frost. Monotonous? I can distinguish at least twenty different qualities of soil and I can sense humidity and wind before they arrive.

JOURNALIST: *Would you mind showing me your front paws? I'd like to take a picture.*

MOLE: No, what's this—no pictures. And why don't you call them hands? After all, they're not that different from yours—just a lot more powerful. I bet that, big as you are, you wouldn't withstand the traction force of one of my hands. After all, look, you should try to do what we do every day and every night. It's been a while since it rained, the soil in my lawn is nice and crumbly—in other words, the conditions couldn't be better. Go ahead, Mr. Man, abandon your erect posture for a moment, get down, prone, like us, and let's start digging together, but without tools, okay? Well, you'll see that I, a big old mole, super-slow, will be ten meters away while you're still breaking your fingernails on the surface. And I will have dug myself a perfect tunnel, cylindrical, the soil well packed against the sides, because, ever since I was small, I've learned to advance by rotating, like a gimlet. We have our trade secrets, too.

JOURNALIST: *You said you're interested in females only a few days a year? Do you go and look for them*?

MOLE: It's consensual. Females have a particular scratching style that is more compact, and softer: we can hear them from afar, and they can hear us. When it's time for love, the mutual search is a stimulating adventure. It's also a choice. You hear digging above, below, to the east, to the west, this one is rougher, the other is smoother, until we decide for that one and off we go, digging vigorously, until the two tunnels meet. In fact, mostly we meet nose to nose, so that we can determine if our odors agree. If they do, the marriage is made.

JOURNALIST: *Would you introduce me to your wife?*

MOLE: I'd love to, because she's a great girl. Beautiful, too: much younger than me. But it's the end of March, and she's gone off somewhere to prepare the wedding chamber. It meant a lot to me, and I made it clear. I wanted it to be spacious, comfortable, well carpeted with grass and moss—but that's a female's job.

JOURNALIST: *And the job of a male, excuse me, what would that be*?

MOLE: More or less like yours. You hunt for money and we hunt for earthworms. You invest in goods and real estate and we cut their heads off.

JOURNALIST: *Whose? The earthworms'*?

MOLE: Yes, it's the best investment. You wouldn't have thought so, would you? But a headless earthworm doesn't escape and doesn't rot. Do you know how many earthworms I have in the bank? More than eleven hundred, plus about forty assorted larvae. One has to think of the future, our own and our children's. Once, digging, I even found a small viper, just hatched. I cut her head off, too, but after two days she had already started to age, and so, to keep her from going to waste, I devoured her immediately. You know, we pay for the strength in our arms: if we don't eat the equivalent of our weight in fresh meat every day, we starve.

JOURNALIST: *I understand. One moment while I write that down. Done. But now tell me: is it true that you never have the desire to explore the world above? Grass, flowers, running water? Or even the little animals that don't go underground—crickets, snails, grasshoppers*?

MOLE: Oh yes, I won't deny it, but they are the adventures of youth. I, too, had them, on moonless nights with boys my age. There were a dozen of us. Imagine, once I found a nest of skylarks on the ground, with all the eggs in it—what a dinner that was! But the real entertainment was different: we would attract dogs by scratching loudly against a rock, let them come close, jump out for an instant with a scowl to frighten them, and then immediately burrow in again. You should have seen how they dug! But we went into reverse and in a second were already beyond their grasp. In other words, if we don't deliberately go

looking for trouble, no one bothers us. We have darkness, but we also have peace.

"*Imaginary Zoo: Natural Histories by Primo Levi,*"
Airone, *January 1987*

Adam’s Clay

How difficult it is to understand a text that is, admittedly, not well understood by its own author! This thought accompanied me during the challenging, but enlightening, reading of a recently published book, *Seven Clues to the Origin of Life*, by A. Graham Cairns-Smith.[1] Notwithstanding its lofty aim, this is a book for the general public, and it attempts to popularize an important and daring hypothesis.

Obviously, the title itself is at the same time an understatement* and full of promises. The origin of life on Earth is not a problem like any other; it’s the one problem over which all scientists, and not just biologists, have racked their brains since the beginning of science. There is no shortage of proposed solutions. Before Spallanzani and Pasteur, the accepted answer came from the classics and Aristotle: life originates by means of spontaneous generation from corrupt matter: frogs from mud, flies from filth. It was only in the nineteenth century that this naïve belief was dismissed: compared with microorganisms, frogs and worms are too complex to develop “by themselves”; but then what about microorganisms?

The electron microscope, along with the discoveries of genetics, was to provide a blunt and disappointing answer: microorganisms, too, are extremely complex. They are “high tech” machines, and thinking that they originate through spontaneous generation is as absurd as thinking that one can make a watch by shaking up together its smallest components. The fundamental, unique components of life, the nucleotides of nucleic acid, which are present in everything from molds to beech trees, giraffes, and ourselves, cannot develop by themselves; just think of the number and

complexity of the steps that the chemist must follow to produce a single one of them, and of the precautions necessary to keep it from self-destruction.

And yet—unless we wish to resort to supernatural hypotheses—some spontaneous generation must have occurred. Toward the middle of this century, a curious experiment by Stanley Miller gave rise to great expectations. By exposing to “artificial storms” (high temperatures, electric discharges) a mixture of methane, water, ammonia, and hydrogen, he obtained the building blocks of organic life: traces of amino acids and nucleosides. Everyone, chemists and laymen, exulted. A path had been opened; the act of creation postulated by all religions and metaphysics was unnecessary. Life could have originated by itself, from the primeval soup made up of the oceans of the newborn Earth.

These hopes were to be crushed by more careful scrutiny. Bricks are not enough to build a house: a plan, a direction, a design are necessary. The key to life is orderly complexity, and the simple cannot give birth to the complex. Nor did it make much sense to claim that order came from the cosmos, as Hoyle recently stated: if so, who could have introduced order into the cosmos? Either the problem is shifted from one place to another or one must resort to God. Well, scientists respect God and those who believe in him, but they are reluctant to accept a premature intervention on his part, before they have exhausted all other possible explanations.

Cairns-Smith formulates a new and fascinating hypothesis. He begins with an analogy: imagine finding in an uninhabited area an arch made of stones that sustain one another. The first hypothesis is that this is a human artifact, or in any event the product of a superior intelligence: an arch doesn’t build itself. And yet one can imagine a different, “natural” mechanism. To build an arch, man might lay the stones upon a foundation, upon a natural stone scaffolding, which is later washed away by a flood. What if the same thing happened in the creation of life? If, in other words, primeval life were what is left of a construction whose haphazard base elements later disappeared?

Cairns-Smith believes that he has found this scaffolding in a material that is extremely common on Earth, of complex structure but extremely varied in its forms, as revealed by the electron microscope. Further, this material is ennobled by an illustrious Biblical reference. Primitive life, proto-life, would be based not on carbon but on clay silicates: yes, that same clay used by God the Father to make the first man.

The numerous clays studied by Cairns-Smith reveal surprising capacities: they absorb material from surrounding water, they grow, they subdivide, they mend themselves when damaged; moreover, they can form layers of almost imperceptible thickness, small tubes, porous masses. They are, in other words, the equivalent of tiny chemical labs, with equipment for filtering, distilling, concentrating, and so on. Most important, they can multiply by reproducing themselves; and how many such laboratories can be at work simultaneously! Nor is Cairns-Smith frightened by the capacity, typical of life, to extract carbon and nitrogen from the atmosphere in order to "make them organic"; when exposed to the sun, iron salts transform carbon dioxide into formic acid, and titanium oxide transforms nitrogen into ammonia—the rest is easy. . . .

The next step is not easy but, rather, frighteningly difficult: how, from the self-duplicating clays, can we arrive at the organic life that has triumphed today? I must admit (but Cairns-Smith admits it, too) that here things get confusing. The step would be gradual: a "usurpation," as if, one by one, the original fibers were gradually removed from a hemp rope and replaced with nylon fibers. There would have to be a long cohabitation between the embryonic life of clays and organic life, with the final ascendancy of the latter. Like nucleic acids and proteins, clay particles are able to fold over on themselves, assuming characteristic and specific configurations that can even be transferred to other particles they come into contact with.

Are you satisfied, reader, as you try to read the great book of nature backward? I am, in spite of everything, in spite of the fact that the author himself reveals his doubts with dozens of "ifs," "buts," and "maybes" on every page. I emerged from this difficult and disconcerting reading with a vague impression of having witnessed a breakthrough, perhaps comparable to those of Newton and Darwin. Or, on the other hand, this may be nothing more than a "working hypothesis," a scaffolding that will be demolished, whether the arch stands or collapses. At any rate, a new idea has come into play, halfway between chemistry and geology, and today we know how productive cross-fertilization among different disciplines is.

La Stampa, *February 15, 1987*

1. Published by Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Live from Our Intestine: *Escherichia Coli*

JOURNALIST *(knocking delicately on the intestine wall): May I?*
ESCHERICHIA COLI: Please! Come on in.
JOURNALIST: *No, not to be rude, but, you see, I wouldn't want to damage your host, who after all is a friend of mine. No drastic interventions. If you don't mind, we'll conduct the interview like this, me on the outside, you on the inside. I'm taping and the microphone is very sensitive: just try to speak up. Is this the first time you've been interviewed?*
E. COLI: Yes, but don't worry, I'm not at all nervous. We're not easily excitable, both because of our temperament and because we lack a nervous system.
JOURNALIST: *Do you like it down here, in the dark, with all this half-digested stuff that your host dumps on your head three or four times a day?*
E. COLI: It's fine, except when they give him antibiotics. Then life gets a little tough, but some of us survive, and we almost always manage to perpetuate the species. Please bear with me now, I'm in mitosis, that is, I'm splitting in two: but it's just a matter of a few minutes, then one of my halves will be at your service again. Done, carry on; I'll stay here while my twin goes on her way. She won't listen in and won't disturb us; we know how to be discreet.
JOURNALIST: *You must have heard that you are no longer just saprophytes, tolerated until you give us a stomachache. You are now on the front pages of the newspapers: we even know how to take a sample of your DNA and replace it with different DNA and thus teach you to produce proteins that are useful to us. On this*

subject opinions differ. Some say it's a good thing, and that, indeed, using this method we could even teach you bacteria to fix atmospheric nitrogen; others are afraid that you'll learn too much and end up taking over.

E. COLI: Yes, yes, I am aware of this. In fact, one of my cousins to the 397th degree was operated on in this way, and she didn't even suffer much—apart from the trauma of finding herself in a glass tube instead of in the warmth of an intestine. Well, I am a member of the prokaryote workers' committee and, from the union's point of view, we have no objections. The time for claims of equality is past: we, too, understand now that specialization is necessary, and useful to both parties. In fact, it's been a while now since we went on strike, and I, as the union representative, believe that the strike is a blunt weapon at this point: the opposition has tools too powerful at its disposal. Politics is the art of the possible—one of my ancestors said that five hundred million years ago—and we are possibilist by nature, or actually opportunist. That's exactly why you mustn't underestimate us. You should follow my advice and guard your glass tubes carefully. Personally, I am good-natured, but I can't vouch for my colleagues whose switchboards you have changed. Be careful: if an epidemic should break out you'll be the ones to suffer, but so will we, who live in peace in your precious bowels. There's no doubt that in the long run we would learn to adapt and survive even in the intestine of a cockroach or an oyster, but it would take time and effort and a good number of victims.

JOURNALIST: *Thank you, ma'am. If you have nothing to add, I'd conclude here*.

E. COLI: Well, that's a good one! And the invention of the wheel, and of the asynchronous engine, what about that? It took you two hundred years, after you set up the first microscopes, to notice, but now our precedence is clear, and you come to me with your microphone without mentioning it? Believe me, that's nerve. It's the arrogance of you multicellular types, as if you had discovered everything yourselves!

JOURNALIST: *I must beg your pardon. You see, we journalists have to deal with so many things, Craxi's relay team, the health*

tax, Lebanon, Reagan's blunder. . . .

E. COLI: So you don't know anything about it? Listen, I'll explain it in two minutes, so you won't get it wrong in your piece. We have six flagella, okay? But we don't move them the way one would a rope or a whip: we rotate them the way the rotor of a small electric motor rotates. For each flagellum we have a motor and a stator, and when we smell food the flagella become elongated coils; they position themselves almost like a tail, and push us forward, like a propeller. It's simple, right? Then the ciliates arrived, with their stupid alternative motion, the wheel was forgotten, and it took two billion years for you to rediscover it. In essence you are ciliates, too: all your mucous membranes are ciliated, isn't that so?

JOURNALIST: *Thank you, this information is extremely interesting. You mean that if the ciliates hadn't appeared, we'd be able to turn our heads all the way around, maybe ten times, without having to turn back the other way? And what about blood vessels, nerves, and all the rest? They would get all tangled up.*

E. COLI: That's your business, or, rather, evolution's business. But your cars work well, and that's exactly how they're made. I mean, the fact is that you wasted an idea that you shouldn't have overlooked. What a shame it's too late to patent it.

"*Imaginary Zoo: Natural Histories by Primo Levi,*"
Airone, *February 1987*

The Seagull of Chivasso

JOURNALIST: *Mr. Seagull, what are you doing here?*

SEAGULL: Herring gull, if you please. We are sedentary, the others, the *ridibundi*, or black-headed gulls, are vagabonds, opportunists without scruples.

JOURNALIST: *Mr. Herring Gull, I feel I've met you before, but in a different setting: soaring over the surf—I don't remember if it was at Cinque Terre or at Caprazoppa. But I do remember your fantastic glide, as you drifted in the wind, and then a sudden swoop down and right back up with a fish in your beak. I followed it all with my binoculars: I regretted not having a movie camera.*

SEAGULL: You remember correctly—it was a mullet for my little ones. I had seen it from the air and I dove two meters under water to catch it. It was a good dive; I remember it, too. Eh, those were the days, but already by then mullets were becoming scarce. My wife and I had made ourselves an inaccessible nest, invisible, actually, right above the sea. It was a safe life: every foray meant a fish, some so big that I had trouble bringing them back to the nest, or even swallowing them. It was a worthy, noble profession for those who had good wings and a keen eye. Heavy seas couldn't scare me; as a matter of fact, the bigger the storm, the more I felt that I owned the sky. I flew amid the lightning, when even your helicopters stayed on the ground, and I felt happy —"fulfilled," as you would say.

JOURNALIST: *Exactly: it was the right setting for a flier like you. But what led you to settle in Chivasso?*[1]

SEAGULL: You know, rumors travel fast. A distant relative of mine lived in Chioggia,[2] which wasn't half bad; but then the water became scummy and stank of naphtha, and the fish became scarce. He and his wife flew up the Po River, in stages, all the way to Chivasso. As they went along, the water became less polluted. Well, years ago he came down to Liguria to tell me that Lancia is in Chivasso and is hiring lots of people.

JOURNALIST: *There's no doubt about that. But you can't mean that Lancia also hires seagulls? Or is generous enough to provide for them?*

SEAGULL: That's a sore point. Obviously Lancia doesn't produce fish—on the contrary, it causes many of them to die—but it produces trash. It hires people who produce an incredible quantity of trash, three or four hundred tons a year. And it has a company cafeteria, it produces garbage dumps, and in the garbage dumps, well . . . in the dumps there are mice. There, you made me say it.

JOURNALIST: *You mean that you've gone from being a fisherman to being a mouse hunter? Well, look, these things happen to us, too. To humans in general and to us journalists in particular. It's not as if every day or every year there is a war to talk about, or a dam that breaks, or an earthquake, or a volcanic eruption, or a nuclear catastrophe, or a trip to the moon. We, too, have to content ourselves with chasing mice. And if there are none, we have to make them up.*

SEAGULL: . . . or you go and interview seagulls, right? It's all grist for the mill.

JOURNALIST: *No, believe me, I am fully aware of your uneasiness. It can be seen, so to speak, with the naked eye: you don't fly as high in the sky and it's rare to hear you screech. I saw two of your colleagues nesting at the mouth of a sewer, others under a bridge. And still others—a lot of them—hang out near the Turin zoo and steal the fish from the seals and the polar bear.*

SEAGULL: I know. It's embarrassing, but I went there, too. We need fish, otherwise our eggs have weak shells, so transparent that you can see the chick inside, and when you sit on them they break. And in the Po there's not much fish. Let's hope that now, with the new drainage basin, the situation will improve.

JOURNALIST: *Nevertheless, prestige aside, I imagine that a nice rat, the kind that visits a garbage dump, is not to be despised as prey.*

SEAGULL: You think it's easy to catch a rat? At first, the hunt was successful: you'd see something moving in the trash, swoop down, give it a good blow on the nape of the neck with your beak, and the rat was done for. But they are a terribly intelligent species, and they've learned to defend themselves. First of all, they only go out at night, and we can't see that well at night. Then one of them stays on lookout and if one of us cruises over the dump the guard gives the alarm and they all hide. And, finally, they scare cats, but they scare us, too, the few times we've happened to confront one unexpectedly, on open ground. They have such teeth, and such quick reflexes, that many of us lost our feathers, and not just feathers.

JOURNALIST: *So that leaves nothing but the trash.*

SEAGULL: You really want to rub salt in the wound. Trash, yes. It's not very dignified, but it's profitable. I'll end up stealing the crows' job and get used to eating carrion and poorly picked bones, or I'll even become a vegetarian. In this world, those who don't adapt succumb. In this, I must say, my wife has fewer scruples than I. When it's my turn to sit on the eggs, she goes around on foot in the dump and brings me a little bit of everything, so much so that I had to give her a talking-to and explain that polyethylene should be left where it is, it can't even be used to line a nest, because it's impermeable. You should see what she brings me—dead kittens, cabbage stalks, fruit peels, and watermelon rinds. I'm still rather disgusted, but the little ones eat everything. The next generation scares me; there's no restraint anymore.

JOURNALIST: *Sir, you seem to me too pessimistic. Just as in England, where they cleaned up the Thames, they will clean up our rivers, and then even the sea will go back to the way it was. After all, console yourself: even among us men there are those who could fly and swim but who instead, because of bad luck or lack of courage, wander around garbage dumps and pick up filth.*

We must give them, and you, the opportunity to regain their dignity. I beseech you, do not forget the sea.

"*Imaginary Zoo: Natural Histories by Primo Levi,*"
Airone*, March 1987*

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1. A town near Turin, on the Po.
2. A town at the southern tip of the Venetian lagoon.

The Giraffe in the Zoo

GIRAFFE: What are you looking for down there? You've been buzzing around with your camera and your movie camera for a while now. I'll tell you right away, I am not in a good mood—I don't mean today, I mean never. With this fence and this metal barrier that keeps me from head-butting all the pests who come here to ooh and aah. Once, though, I got some satisfaction. One of the visitors was very tall and was wearing a straw hat; I took it away from him with a flick of my tongue and chewed it thoroughly. It wasn't good—it tasted like glue—but at least it was revenge.

JOURNALIST: *I'm sorry to disturb you. It's not just a whim of mine or my director. There's talk now of closing down the zoo, and who knows where you'll end up and certain problems that concern you might remain unresolved.*

GIRAFFE: So you're just a journalist looking for odd things?

JOURNALIST: *As far as oddity goes, take it as a compliment, but you have your fair share.*

GIRAFFE: All right then, out with the questions, but they had better be simple and clear, no tricks.

JOURNALIST: *Let's put it this way, then: in brief, sex, height, weight.*

GIRAFFE: Not to be vain; but I think you can tell from a distance that I am a male.

JOURNALIST: *Yes, I only asked for the sake of being thorough. With a neck that long, how many cervical vertebrae do you have?*

GIRAFFE: I have seven vertebrae, just like you and just like a mouse. I weigh seven hundred kilos and I'm 6.2 meters tall.

JOURNALIST: *Good. This means that when your head is up you're putting spectacular pressure on your legs [he takes notebook and pencil from his pocket]: if you do the math, something like 450 millimeters of mercury, plus at least another 140 from the heart. A total of, let's say, 600, and when our blood pressure is only 200 we don't feel well—yet we are both mammals, and we're made more or less of the same materials. Don't you suffer from hypertension, especially when you run? Or from varicose veins, or from internal hemorrhages?*

GIRAFFE: You have to understand that, ever since we decided to lengthen our necks and legs to reach the highest leaves, we've studied hydrostatics, physiology, and histology with intelligence and passion. We immediately realized that some innovations cause problems—for example, the act of drinking is not a simple feat for us. In the first place, even if we lower our neck all the way, we still can't reach the ground. So as soon as our little ones are weaned, we have to teach them that in order to drink from a river they have to spread their front legs wide. It's not elegant, but it's necessary. And then each sip needs to reach a height of about three meters. We understood immediately that the glottis pump was not enough. Well, our sages solved the problem by giving us a series of small peristaltic pumps, positioned along the esophagus. That said, I can't claim that drinking is the easiest thing in the world for us, and as a matter of fact I am personally grateful to the director of the zoo who had that curious trough installed for me over there—you wouldn't be able to reach it even if you stood on tiptoe. So, given the complications involved, we drink rarely and for as long as possible.

JOURNALIST: *Thank you. But the question of your feet remains: I mean the difference in pressure when you're lying down and when you're standing.*

GIRAFFE: We never lie down: that's a luxury we leave to cows and to you. We sleep standing up, always ready to flee, because we have many enemies.

JOURNALIST: *But the hypertension, really . . .*

GIRAFFE: Your insistence makes me think you must have some sort of personal problem.

JOURNALIST: *Yes, it's true. Hypotensive drugs, diuretics, no salt. . . . It's not a simple life.*

GIRAFFE: That's all because you didn't know to equip yourselves in time. Yes, we are hypertensive, but we don't suffer from it. Have you ever worn elastic hose? Well, our four legs have natural, built-in elastic hose. I must tell you, they are extremely comfortable. Veins and arteries don't get exhausted, even if the pressure is what you've calculated, and they are made of an excellent material that doesn't wear out; in fact, it renews itself over time. Then we found a way to reduce the blood pressure. In you humans, the blood in the arteries is viscous, but so is the blood in your veins, which has to flow back to your heart. Well, we perfected a series of small valves that are positioned in all the large arteries. They open with every contraction and close again, which keeps the blood pressure normal. It's as if every vein were subdivided into independent segments. Please excuse my primitive language—I am not a physiologist, I am just a male giraffe, proud of his height and humiliated by his captivity. Enough now, please; I have to get some exercise, not that the veterinarian prescribed it—it's my instinct and nature. I must run, even if only in the miserable space where you have confined me.

The Journalist takes his notebook and writes: "In spite of their structure, which is so different from that of all other quadrupeds, when giraffes run they are extraordinarily elegant. Their pace is between a gallop and a dance. The four legs leave the ground almost simultaneously while the neck balances the majestic rhythm of their gait. It appears slow but is very fast: it recalls the sailing of a ship, and betrays not the least effort. The vast body sways naturally, tipping inward when the animal changes course. Observing it, I realized how great is their need for the freedom of large spaces, and how cruel to confine them within the meshes of a fence. And yet the specimen that I interviewed was born here, in captivity, ignorant of the unspoiled splendor of the savanna; but he carries its primeval nobility within himself." (He reads the text aloud.)

Grunt!

"*Imaginary Zoo: Natural Histories by Primo Levi*,"
Airone, *April 1987*

Love on the Web

JOURNALIST: *Good evening, Mr. Spider, or, rather, Mrs. Spider.*
SPIDER (*shrill*): Are you edible?
JOURNALIST: *Well, I think so, but it's not an issue I've ever really thought about.*
SPIDER: You know, we have many eyes but we are very nearsighted and we're always hungry. For us the world is divided in two: things you can eat and everything else.
JOURNALIST: *I'm here not as a potential victim but to interview you.*
SPIDER: An interview? Can interviews be eaten? Are they nutritious? If so, hand it over. I'm curious—I've eaten many things in my life but never an interview. How many legs do they have? Do they have wings?
JOURNALIST: *Actually no, you can't really eat them; they are consumed differently. How can I put it? They have readers, and sometimes they can be nourishing.*
SPIDER: Then I'm not interested, but if you promise to repay me with some flies or mosquitoes . . . you see, with the hygiene today, they've become scarce. Are you good at catching flies? You're so big, it can't be that hard: your web must be huge.
JOURNALIST: *Really, we have different methods, and catching flies isn't an occupation that takes up much of our time. We don't like to eat flies, and when we do it's by accident. In any case, I'll do my best. So, can we begin? Tell me, why are you upside down?*
SPIDER: In order to concentrate: I have few thoughts, and this way they all flow to the brain and I can see things more clearly. But

don’t come too close, and be careful with that thing in your hand; I wouldn’t want it to tear my web. It’s new; I made it this morning. It only had a little hole—you know, beetles aren’t very respectful—but for us it’s perfection or nothing. With the first flaw I eat the web again and digest it, and thus I have material ready for a new one. It’s a question of principle. Our mind is limited but our patience has no bounds. Once I even had to remake my web three times in one day, but it was an immense effort. After the third web, which luckily no one ruined, I had to rest for three or four days. Everything takes time, even replenishing our spinneret glands, but, as I was saying, we have a lot of patience, and waiting causes us no discomfort. When one waits one doesn’t consume energy.

JOURNALIST: *Your webs are masterpieces, but do you make them all the same? Never an improvement, never an innovation?*

SPIDER: One mustn’t ask too much of us. Look, it’s already an effort to answer your questions; we have no imagination, we’re not inventors, our cycle is simplified. Hunger, web, flies, digestion, hunger, new web. Why rack one’s brains, I beg your pardon, one’s nerve ganglia, to study new webs? Better rely on the memory that we carry imprinted within us, on the model we’ve always used, at most trying to adapt it to the surroundings at our disposal. That’s almost too much already for our brains. If I recall correctly, I had been hatched from the egg only a few days when I made my first web: it was the size of a stamp, but, aside from the scale, it was identical to this one in front of your nose.

JOURNALIST: *I understand. Now tell me; there are rumors about your, let’s say, conjugal behavior . . . just rumors, let’s make that clear, I personally have never seen anything indecent, but, as you know, people talk . . .*

SPIDER: You’re alluding to the fact that we eat our males? Is that it? Yes, of course. It’s a kind of ballet; our males are thin, shy, and weak, not even that good at making themselves a decent web. When they feel desire increasing, they venture into our webs, step by step, uncertain, hesitant, because they also know how it might end up. We wait for them; we don’t take the initiative, the game is clear on both sides. We females like males as much as we like

flies, if not more. We like them in every sense of the word, as husbands (but only for the briefest time necessary) and as food. Once they have fulfilled their function for us, they lose all attraction except as fresh meat, and so, in one fell swoop, they fill our stomachs and our wombs.

JOURNALIST: *Do marriages always end up like that?*

SPIDER: Not always. There are some farsighted males who know about our permanent hunger and bring us a wedding gift. Not out of affection or as a compliment, but only to satisfy us: a daddy longlegs, a gnat, at times even something more substantial, and then everything runs smoothly and they get by with just anxiety. You should see them, those wretches, as they watch to see if their gift was enough to sate us; and occasionally, if they think it wasn't, they run to their webs to get another mouthful.

JOURNALIST: *It sounds like an ingenious system, and, all told, it has a certain logic. I, too, in their place, would behave like that, but, you see, my wife has less appetite and a milder character; and then our marriages last longer, and we would feel it a shame to be content with only one copulation.*

SPIDER: To each his own, of course. But I wanted to tell you that this isn't the only system the males invented to avoid being devoured. We have some distant cousins who pretend to dance in triumph around the female they have chosen, all the while tying her up a little at a time, carefully crossing the threads. Then they inseminate her and leave. Others are afraid of our strength; they kidnap females as soon as they hatch, while they are still adolescents and not very dangerous, keeping them segregated in some recess until puberty, yes, feeding them, but just enough to keep them alive without getting too strong. Then, they, too, do their job, free the girls, and run away.

JOURNALIST: *Thank you, the interview is over.*

SPIDER: Thank goodness, I was getting tired—intellectual work has never been my strong point. But don't forget the flies: a man's word is his bond.

La Stampa, *April 26, 1987; then, under the rubric "Imaginary Zoo: Natural Histories by Primo Levi,"* Airone, *May 1987*

Calvino, Queneau, and the Sciences

My memories of Italo Calvino go back a long way. To be precise, they go back to our common baptism as writers, when, in 1947, Arrigo Cajumi simultaneously reviewed his first book, *The Path to the Spiders' Nest*, and my first book, *If This Is a Man*, in *La Stampa*, wishing us youths, the youths of that time, a long career. There were long gaps in my association with Calvino, owing to his absence from Italy and to the fact that I was living basically in Turin while he was traveling a lot. His happiest hour, however, was the publication of the translation of Raymond Queneau's *Petite cosmogenie portative* (*A Pocket Cosmogony*). The translation was done by Sergio Solmi, and Calvino wasn't entirely satisfied with it; he had revised it himself, but was dissatisfied with his revision, too, as this fantastic poem by Queneau, which begins with the creation of the universe and ends with computers, has a part about chemistry that contains—like the rest of the book—myriad tangles: there isn't a line that doesn't conceal a trap. Queneau was a fabulous master of manipulating words, squeezing a word, extracting from it, beyond its meaning, its sound as well: he was an acrobat. And Calvino was a friend, a disciple, and a devotee of Queneau in this dimension, too.

After sifting the Italian translation of *A Pocket Cosmogony*, we found a good number of knots left in the sieve, some of which Queneau himself was no longer able to untangle. When, some decades after writing the book, he was consulted, he said: "Forgive me, I can't remember what I intended to say." With joy, and, I must say, fun, Calvino and I worked on this in the mountains, at Rhêmes Notre Dame (in fact, there were three of us—a kitten sat on the table, on Solmi's manuscript, doing its best to help, every now

and then trying to turn the pages with its little paw). So this was a game, but it was a grand and wonderful game—the very game in which Calvino was a master, squeezing everything possible out of a word, turning it into an instrument of penetration.

In Calvino, this love of words went hand in hand with an equally deep love of nature that wasn't at all idyllic, sentimental, or romantic. It was a naturalist's love, which he had inherited from his parents, which he nurtured to the end, and which, to the careful reader, had already been apparent in his first book. Indeed, in the very title of his first book: that path, the only one in the world where spiders make a nest instead of weaving a web, is a discovery made by Calvino/Pin.

I would say that in the literary fabric of all Calvino's books the meticulous precision of a scientist appears; although he never took academic classes, he was in fact a scientist. Anyone who has read *Cosmicomics* realizes that it isn't just entertainment: it's an extremely profound book, a book to meditate on, page by page. And this is a truly distinctive feature of Calvino, at least in his early writings: the capacity to make you laugh and to make you think at the same time. In *Cosmicomics*, in *T Zero*, in, to a lesser extent, the more famous triad—but again to a high degree in *Mr. Palomar*—the great wonder of the layman emerges: before the order of creation, before this clock whose maker is not known for sure, before the passing of time. The subject of time is almost an obsession for Calvino, as it is for anyone who has even the vaguest idea of what cosmogony is today. The theme of the labyrinth remains in suspense: whether or not there is a way out is debatable. In my view, however, Calvino's labyrinth does have an exit, or at least it's conceivable, we hope that it has: it is our labyrinth, the labyrinth where we live. This is a multifaceted symbol. To me, as a hybrid, half chemist and half writer, a concise definition of Calvino's writing consists in its rejection of conventions along with a prodigious capacity to create new ones. For this reason I truly believe that if there is one writer—and not just an Italian writer—who will never be imitated, because he is inimitable, that writer is Italo Calvino.

Statement made on the occasion of the presentation of Raymond Queneau's La Canzone del Polistirene *(*The Song of Styrene*), translated by Italo Calvino; Milan, January 29, 1986, sponsored by the Progetto Cultura*

of Montedison. The text was published in Montedison Progetto Cultura, *no. 5, April 1987, and later appeared in a longer version, in G. Poli and G. Calcagno,* Echi di una voce perduta *(Milan: Mursia, 1992).*

Foreword to *Offended Life*

Not every book can stand up to a question that is often put openly to its author: Why does this book exist? Why, to what end, prompted by what urge did you initiate this effort? I think that this anthology can stand up to the question and also to the opposite question: Why only now? Why so late?

Late, yes: had the collection and transcription of these life stories been undertaken earlier, the memory of those interviewed would have been sharper, and their number greater. Many of our fellow former deportees have died. Late, for reasons of organization, but also because only recently, and not just in Italy, have we fully recognized that mass political deportation, accompanied by the will to slaughter and by the reestablishment of a slave economy, is central to the history of this century, on the same level as the tragic introduction of nuclear weapons. It's also central in the memory of the survivors. Almost all the interviewees, even those who suffered less, even those whose health and family were not permanently affected, even those few who (for reasons we respect) refused to talk, know it, feel it, and said it, more or less explicitly. Finally, this modern-day return to barbarity is central in the conscience of the guilty and their heirs. If it weren't so, we wouldn't have witnessed the obscene efforts of the revisionists, young historians who have in recent years come out into the open, and though they claim to be politically pure, *tabulae rasae*, impartial, neutral, receptive to all the pros and cons, devote pages and pages of polemical acrobatics to proving that we didn't see what we saw, didn't live what we lived. Although the introduction doesn't say so, this anthology of brutality and of pain deliberately inflicted is dedicated to them.

The level, the tone, and the historical value of the testimony varies. It couldn't be otherwise: among the deportees were men and women; intellectuals, factory workers, and peasants; partisans, opponents with a strong political commitment, and poor souls rounded up randomly in the street; believers and laymen; Christians and Jews. Nonetheless, the stories largely coincide in certain essential aspects, which distinguish them from the recollections (often just as painful and dramatic) of returning soldiers or of former prisoners of war. There is, everywhere, described with naïveté or with surprising expressive strength, the trauma of separation, of feeling uprooted: the sealed train (an inevitable detail, to the point of becoming the very symbol of deportation) abruptly tears you away from your environment, climate, country, family, profession, language, friendships, and hurls you into an alien environment, strange, incomprehensible, hostile. Sometimes the deportee doesn't even know what corner of Europe he has landed in. It's the Lager, the KZ: new words for him, never heard before. In a way, it's an upside-down world, where honesty and gentleness are punished, while violence, betrayal, and deception are rewarded. Here, as is to be expected, destinies and accounts differ. There are those who give up right away and adjust instinctively to a subhuman existence; those who try hard to understand and to react; those who seek, and find, comfort in their faith; those (in particular the political detainees, and especially the Communists) who recognize around them a life force, an untamed will to continue the struggle, an experience and an international solidarity that alleviate the material and moral sufferings of the newcomers. The events that follow diverge as well. Some found their families, homes, friends, jobs, and for them the liberation was a happy time, without shadows or difficulties. But some found their families annihilated, their homes destroyed, the world around them indifferent and deaf to their anguish, and had to laboriously rebuild a new life on the ruins of the old one. For them, the grief has never ended.

Another feature that unites all these interviews is their spontaneity, and the goodwill with which they were granted. Often one has the impression that the desire to talk, to find an interested and attentive listener, is old, and that the opportunity to give written form to experiences by now remote in time had long been hoped for. Many of the depositions share a characteristic trait: the need to speak, to "speak about it," goes back to the time of imprisonment. Sometimes, it's almost a vow, a promise that the believer

makes to God and the nonbeliever to himself: If I ever return, I will speak, so that my life will not have been in vain. In other words, the hope of survival coincides with the obsessive hope of being able to tell others, to sit beside the fire, around the table, and talk: like Ulysses at the court of the Phaeacian king, like Silvio Pellico after surviving the squalor of the Spielberg, like Ruzante returning from battle, like Tibullus' soldier who narrates his exploits and "draws his camp on the table with wine"; and like the unforgettable soldier described by Eduardo de Filippo, who returns "town by town" from Germany to his starving and "millionaire" Naples, right after the war, and seeks, in vain, someone who will listen to him.[1] The veteran's tale is a literary genre.

For the survivor, bearing witness is an important and complex undertaking. It's perceived simultaneously as a moral and civic duty, as a primary, liberating necessity, and as social prestige. Those who lived in the Lager see themselves as custodians of a fundamental experience, included in world history, witnesses by right and by obligation, frustrated if their testimony is not sought and understood, rewarded if it is. Therefore, the interview that preceded this anthology was, for many of us, a unique and memorable experience, the event that we had waited for since the day of our liberation, and that gave meaning to liberation itself.

There are many of us (but every year our number decreases) who remember the specific way in which we feared death *down there*. If we die here in silence, as our enemies would like, if we do not return, the world will not know what man was capable of, and still is; the world will not know itself, and will be in greater danger of repeating National Socialist barbarity, or some other, equivalent barbarity, regardless of its real or declared political origin.

In this urge to live to tell the story, this awareness of a clear historical obligation that surfaced in the rare moments of respite, many found the strength to resist, day after day. The idea for this book originated in the rational need to bear witness. To those who conceived, financed, and promoted it, to the young researchers who listened patiently to our reminiscences, often confused and upset by a renewed anguish, and to those who worked to reconstruct them, we offer our gratitude as survivors who are no longer young, who are not always heard, but who have not forgotten.

Foreword to La vita offesa: Storia e memoria dei lager nazisti nei racconti di duecento sopravvissuti *(*Offended Life: The History and Memory of the Nazi Lagers in the Stories of Two Hundred Survivors*), edited by Anna Bravo and Daniele Jalla (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1987)*

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1. Silvio Pellico (1789–1859) was a patriot and dramatist who was imprisoned for eight years in Spielberg prison in Brunn. Ruzante was the stage name of the playwright Angelo Beolco (1496–1542), whose dialogue *Il parlamento de Ruzante* tells of his return from the Venetian war front, only to find that he has lost his wife, his land, and his honor. Tibullus (c. 55 *bc*–19 *bc*) was a Roman poet. *Napoli milionaria!*, by the Neapolitan Eduardo De Filippo (1900–1984), premiered in 1945.



“Our Generation . . .”

Our generation has had the unenviable fate to live through events of historical importance. I don’t mean to say that *afterward* nothing more happened in the world: natural catastrophes and collective man-made tragedies have followed everywhere. Yet, in spite of the omens, nothing has happened in Europe that compares to the Second World War. Therefore, each one of us is a witness, whether he likes it or not; and the research carried out by the Piedmont Region regarding the memories of the survivors of deportation is justified and timely, since the deportation, owing to its extent and the number of its victims, is emerging as an event that is unique, at least until now, in human history.

I was asked to participate in my double capacity as a witness and as a writer. I am honored and, at the same time, burdened by a responsibility. A book is read; it may or may not entertain, it may or may not educate, it may or may not be remembered or read again. As someone who wrote about the deportation, this is not enough for me. Since the publication of my first book, *If This Is a Man*, I have hoped that my writings, even though they are signed by me, would be read as collective works, as a voice representing other voices. More than that: that they would be an opening, a bridge between us and our readers, especially young ones. It is soothing for us former deportees to sit at the same table and tell one another about our by now distant ordeals, but this serves little purpose. As long as we live, it’s our duty to talk, of course, but to talk to others, to those who weren’t born yet, so that they know “how far man can fall.”

Therefore, it’s no accident that a good part of my current work consists of a sort of uninterrupted dialogue with my readers. I receive many letters

full of “whys?” and requests for interviews; and above all I am asked, especially by young people, two fundamental questions: How could the horror of the Lagers happen? Will it happen again?

I don’t believe in prophets, in people who can read the future; those who have passed themselves off as such have, so far, failed miserably, often becoming ridiculous. Even less do I see myself as a prophet, or as a legitimate interpreter of recent history. However, these two questions are so pressing that I felt obliged to attempt an answer, or, rather, a cluster of answers, those which were distributed on the occasion of this conference. Some answers are addressed to Italian, American, and British readers; other, I believe more interesting answers are the outcome of an intricate network of correspondence that for many years put me in contact with the German readers of *If This Is a Man*. These are the voices of the children and grandchildren of those who were responsible for what happened or who allowed it to happen or who didn’t care to learn about it. There are also here the voices of different Germans, who did what they could, whether little or much, to oppose the crime their country was committing. I thought it right to give space to both groups.

We survivors are witnesses, and every witness is obliged (in part by law) to give complete and truthful answers. In our case, however, this is also a moral duty, as our ranks, always small, are thinning. I tried to fulfill this duty with my recent book, *The Drowned and the Saved,* which some of you may have read and which will soon be translated into English and German. This book, too—which consists of questions about deportation (not only by the Nazis) and of tentative answers—is part of my dialogue with readers, which by now has lasted more than forty years; I see it as very much in tune with this meeting. I hope readers will find that the book accomplishes the same purpose as the meeting: that it makes a modest contribution toward an understanding of the history of our time, whose violence is the child of the violence that we fortuitously survived.

In 1976 Levi added an appendix to If This Is a Man, *in which he answered the questions that were most frequently asked by students he met in the schools and by other readers of the book. For an American edition of* Survival in Auschwitz *(*If This Is a Man*) and* The Reawakening *(The Truce) (published by Summit Books in 1986), he wrote this text, which was then*

added as an introduction to the appendix. The Italian version appeared in the anthology Storia vissuta *(*Living History*) (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988).*

Foreword to *Writings in Memory of Daniele Levi*

I don't know who was the author of the consolatory but cruel expression "whom the gods love die young." The death of a young person, and especially a lively, pious life-loving scholar like Daniele Levi, is not an event that we can be consoled for, much less be cheered by. The devout and just man (and just among the just is his father, Isacco, to whom we Jews of Turin owe so much) is not consoled—that is, his sorrow is not erased—but it abates, with the sorrow of others; he draws from his faith the strength to resign himself to a Will that transcends us, because its designs are unknown to us.

We would like this collection of writings and testimonials concerning a short, difficult life to be read not only as an homage to the dead man but also as a collective act of thanks to the father, who is left to mourn him in solitude, desolate but undefeated.

Foreword to Scritti in memoria di Daniele Levi *(*Writings in Memory of Daniele Levi*) (Turin: privately printed, 1993); Levi's foreword was written in 1986–87*

Foreword to *Broken Future* by Lidia Beccaria Rolfi and Bruno Maida

The international year of the child, 1979, ended with many words and commitments but few results. The fact that the collective conscience of all countries felt the need for such a celebration is in itself a depressing symptom. Obviously, the year of the child originated in a widespread feeling of guilt, in the awareness that to this day, even in the most advanced countries, there is no feeling of reverence toward children, as prescribed by the Gospels, and that adults are preparing, for today's children, a future full of shadows. And yet love for children is inscribed in us; the proximity of a child, even an unknown child, makes us responsible, brings us joy, strength, and peace of mind. It's an axiomatic love, unquestionable, a product of our remote evolutionary roots as nurturers of our newborns, but in the human species this love has been enriched with meanings and symbols. To us, the child is (or should be) the embodiment of innocence, of the boundless potential that can turn into anything, of the blank slate on which anything can be written.

There is and has been no civilization that hasn't acknowledged and exalted this love, with the exception of the "civilization" established by National Socialism in the heart of Europe. On this point, as on many others, Nazism has become an unavoidable term of comparison, as "what shouldn't happen," and yet did happen. Its seeds survive, and Lidia Rolfi recognizes them under many guises in the world we live in. They are always, invariably, negative, precisely what is and shouldn't be: the negation in deeds of the morality proclaimed in words.

But at the time of the Nazis words and deeds were consistent. The most unbelievable pages of this book come from Nazi sources, and they not only concern the treatment reserved for children of little or no “biological value” (Jews, Gypsies, Slavs) but extend the reach of violence to the children of pure Aryan and German blood. Of course, it’s a different kind of violence: not a drop of German blood must be lost; rather, it must be reclaimed whenever it has been mixed with less noble blood. In Poland, in Bohemia, in Ukraine, children who, according to the Handbook of Germanization, had the requisite genetic features were snatched from their parents and entrusted to German families or to the Lebensborn organization. As I said, this information—order sheets, treatises, even legal regulations—comes from German sources. Some remained in a nebulous draft state, because of their intrinsic absurdity; others were implemented with a maniacal and paranoid diligence that makes one wonder, considering that the fundamental feature required to qualify as a pure German was blond hair, while Hitler and his champion Himmler had brown hair.

In other words, children are subjected to a hierarchy of behaviors, on different levels, but with a single inspiration, which is to extend to the human species the practices of zootechnics. As if man, including National Socialist man, had no mind, no memory, feelings, or passions, and were nothing but living matter, to be accepted or rejected according to its appearance. Children of Germanic blood must become warriors if male, makers of warriors if female. “Germanizable” children must be Germanized. All others, according to their country of origin and their “race,” must be made to work, starting at the age of ten, deprived of any education, used in the Lager as guinea pigs in so-called medical experiments. Gypsies are to be confined to the Lager and later killed, Jews killed even before entering the Lager.

I don’t think that facilities for mass slaughter like those of the Nazis exist anywhere in the world today, nor do clear plans for genocide, immediate or deferred, like the ones described in this terrible book. However, children continue to suffer and die by the millions from hunger and disease, or are caught in the meshes of incomprehensible and cruel wars. As long as this happens, pages such as these must be read, even if they cannot be read without anguish: they are vital nourishment for those who wish to watch over the conscience and the future of the world.

Foreword to Il futuro spezzato: I bambini nei lager nazisti *(*Broken Future: Children in the Nazi Camps*), by Lucia Beccaria Rolfi and Bruno Maida (Florence: La Giuntina, 1997); written in 1980*

Primo Levi in America

The Publication of Primo Levi's Works in the World

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Primo Levi in America

The story of Primo Levi's relationship with American publishing begins, curiously, nearly forty years before the publication of *The Periodic Table*, in 1984, made him a recognizable literary figure in the United States. The American segment of Levi's life, which has been impressively researched by Levi's distinguished biographers, reveals as much about American and Jewish-American literary culture as it does about Levi. As early as 1946, Levi had sent a version of what became *If This Is a Man* to several American cousins, including a first cousin of his wife, Lucia, and his own first cousin, the gifted translator Anna Yona. She in turn brought several translated chapters to the venerable firm of Little, Brown, which had them read by Joshua Loth Liebman, a best-selling author himself, who said, in the recollection of Levi's cousin Andrew Viterbi, that "no one wants to hear about this thing."

In many ways, Rabbi Liebman represented popular, if not prevailing, Jewish-American sentiment at the time. Responding to the parlor anti-Semitism that was so pervasive in the wider culture in these early postwar years, even Jews were merely continuing a tradition of obfuscation and bowdlerization that had been prevalent in the 1930s and earlier. On a much wider scale, Hollywood's egregious denial of Jewish persecution was typified by the classic 1942 film *Casablanca*, in which the word "Jew" is never mentioned—but how can the desperate refugees, willing to sacrifice anything to gain a visa to the "free world," be anything but fleeing Jews, one step ahead of their German and, yes, French persecutors? Indeed, publishers like Little, Brown were simply unable to countenance something as horrific or unfathomable as this inferno, memorialized not in the fourteenth-century imagination of Dante but in a contemporary account by an Auschwitz survivor struggling to rehabilitate his life as a chemist in Turin.

Levi's work was first published in Italy the next year, 1947, but it took twelve more years for the English-language rights to be sold. The year after

the second Italian publication of *If This Is a Man*—in 1958, this time by Giulio Einaudi Editore—a now defunct boutique press called Orion, which specialized in refined literary editions and had an adjunct office in Florence, purchased these rights. Roslyn Targ, then of Horch Associates, a prominent foreign rights agency, made the deal with Orion for $1000. Translated by Stuart Woolf, who worked directly with Levi, the book came out in America to polite, if not exciting reviews, in the fall of 1959. However, this English-language version, produced with a raft of typos, which greatly upset Levi, failed to get any attention beyond a small group of serious literary Jewish readers. Even less successful was the translation of *La Tregua* (*The Truce*), retitled *The Reawakening* in America, and published in 1965 by Atlantic Monthly Press, which reverted the rights to the book only eight years later. This was hardly surprising, and surely had less to do with the quality of Levi's book than with American responses to the Holocaust.

As Cynthia Ozick has noted, "The word 'Holocaust' wasn't really ubiquitous in America until the late 1960s." And even then, America seemed to be able to handle only "one Holocaust icon," Ozick commented, referring to her friend Elie Wiesel, who had blazed a trail in an atmosphere of denial, neglect, and deafening silence. It seemed unfair to compare Levi, that "quicksilver little woodland creature enlivened by the forest's most astute intelligence," as his friend Philip Roth put it, with Wiesel, who lived in America and spoke English fluently. Levi disliked crowds and public speaking, and possessed an Italian sensibility that was too weirdly scientific, too foreign, or, perhaps some readers felt, too intellectual for American readers. It should be stressed again that even in the 1960s, American Jews were still responding to a legacy of "restriction" clauses and other forms of anti-Semitism, so that assimilation, if not etiolation, remained a goal. Arthur Samuelson, who became Levi's editor at Summit Books in the 1980s, recounts that he had to invent one of the first college courses on the Holocaust at Hampshire College and had to read most of Levi's works in Italian, as they were not available in English in the 1970s when he was an undergraduate.

The literary agent Bobbe Siegel faced similar obstacles as she attempted to expand Levi's literary presence in the United States. After starting out with Roslyn Targ, Siegel struck out on her own, and was engaged by Erich Linder, of Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale, to handle Levi's American rights. Siegel adored Levi personally and recalled, "He was an

exceptionally sweet and courteous man." She visited him in Italy several times throughout the 1970s, but was unable to find an American publisher at all receptive to Levi's work.

Alvin Rosenfeld, an eminent literary critic and scholar at the University of Indiana, began a correspondence with Levi but was equally frustrated, unable to find a version of *The Periodic Table* available in English. "I told Levi that I had read the German translation," Rosenfeld said, "and I thought it was extraordinary. He gave me permission to place it in America, but I had no luck—some told me it was not a good chemistry book, while others told me that there was too much chemistry for the book to be a personal memoir." Rosenfeld, who was on good terms with the renowned critic Irving Howe, appealed to him for support, hoping that Howe might achieve for Levi what he had done, nearly twenty years earlier, for Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep,* first persuading a publisher to take on Roth's much neglected and virtually forgotten 1934 masterpiece, and then reviewing it brilliantly on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review.* Rosenfeld's personal appeal to Howe worked. Howe, along with a distinguished translator of Italian literature, Raymond Rosenthal, became key in getting Emile Capouya, not only himself a translator but also an editor at Schocken Books, to sign up *The Periodic Table* after it had been rejected by more than twenty American publishers. Arthur Samuelson, only a few years out of college, was then still a young editor at Schocken. He was also very enthusiastic about *The Periodic Table,* but he rose to prominence at Schocken not for his love of Levi but for publishing the enormous *New York Times* best seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People,* by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Pursued by other publishing houses for, as he recalls, "hitting this home run," Samuelson took a job at Summit Books, a division of Simon & Schuster. There he proceeded to buy up seven of Levi's unpublished titles for approximately $1500 each, leaving *The Periodic Table* behind at Schocken, where it was still being translated by Rosenthal. As Bobbe Siegel, who brought these seven books to Samuelson in a shopping bag, later reflected, "I had no trouble selling Levi to those who had heard of him then, but I had trouble getting money."

Siegel was not the only one who faced hurdles. Simon & Schuster was a hugely successful, commercial firm, and Arthur Samuelson, who had been hired for his ability to create pop best sellers, was faced with the daunting task of presenting Levi's book to the Simon & Schuster sales force. "When

I presented *If Not Now, When?*, I stood up to say that I had a book about the Holocaust, and sales estimates shrank. When I said it was written in Italian, they shrank even further, and even more so when I said that it was literary. I had to tell people that there are just some books that are in no category, Jewish or otherwise, that they are just great books, and this is how I represented it in America."

Samuelson's excitement about Levi's works came to be shared by others. Saul Bellow, who had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, had already commented on the dust jacket of the Schocken Books edition of *The Periodic Table*: "After a few pages I immersed myself in *The Periodic Table* gladly and gratefully. There is nothing superfluous here, everything this book contains is essential. It is wonderfully pure." The reviews that accompanied the publication of Levi's memoir in the fall of 1984 were, at long last, so laudatory—eclipsing any raves that Levi had received in Europe—that the way was finally paved for him to achieve literary recognition in America. Already a highly praised and respected master in his native land, but not necessarily known as a "Jewish writer," Levi was hardly prepared for the celebrity, best-seller status that depicted him foremost as a Holocaust survivor and memoirist and suddenly catapulted him out of literary anonymity on American shores. While *The Periodic Table* garnered phenomenal reviews, *If Not Now, When?*, published several months later, in April 1985, through Simon & Schuster, finally achieved the commercial success that had previously eluded Levi.

At this juncture, Levi, accompanied by his wife, was preparing for what turned out to be his only visit to America. He had been invited by, among others, Alvin Rosenfeld, Irving Howe, and Summit Books. His publisher planned a publicity tour of nearly three weeks, beginning on April 12, 1985, which would take the Levis to New York, Los Angeles, San Diego, St. Louis, Bloomington, Indiana, and, finally, Boston. "We worked out an arrangement to bring Levi over, mostly as a book promotion," Rosenfeld recalls, "but he got cold feet over it. He was not really a public personality. He was reserved, though wonderful—he did not have what we call platform presence, in the terms of Mailer or Wiesel, for those are people who know how to stand before a large audience and bring it alive. That was not Levi, who was like a string quartet, not a full orchestra."

Wendy Nicholson, the director of publicity at Summit, who was Levi's publicist, recalled that "he was a sweet little man, very tiny, and he felt like

a rabbit in the sights of the hunters." He possessed a "most extraordinary moral gravitas," she added, but "he had no patience for fools or superficiality, and he was disgusted by the banality of the questions" he was asked. While the thronging New York crowds and autograph seekers became so intense that Irving Howe was forced at one point to act as Levi's bodyguard, it was apparent to Nicholson that a cadre of highly influential reviewers was able to position Levi beyond the "Holocaust" label and convey the gossamer subtlety of Levi's works to a greater public. "It was not as bad then as it is now," Nicholson says of this period, the mid-1980s. "Levi was a serious person and he was honored for that. It was the last stage of a certain quality of reviewing, which doesn't exist in commercial newspapers and magazines today, and there was also a level of discourse that no longer exists."

Besieged by well-wishers, hounded by literary paparazzi, and picked up for events in black limousines—one thinks of a tour for a blockbuster author like, say, Judith Krantz or Sidney Sheldon—Levi must clearly have had second thoughts about his visit. As Ian Thomson writes in *Primo Levi*, "Levi began to survey his American cultural mission with a mixture of dismay and wonder. He asked Lucia if any non-Jews at all lived in New York; so far they had met mostly Jews." This astonishment was clearly evident to Levi's editor, Samuelson: "Jews in Italy are far more comfortable as Italians rather than as Jews, whereas in this country Jews have turned it into a brand, and Levi didn't see himself as a Jewish brand. The situation he was describing [in his books] was not restricted to Jews, and he was arrested for being in the anti-Fascist movement." For Levi, Samuelson added, "to say that you are a Jewish writer is a diminishment; it says that you have value only to Jews, and that was not the audience he was writing for. Americans are much more comfortable benefiting from or participating in the brand, whereas in Italy you would have been dismissed as having parochial concerns."

Leaving New York and traveling to San Diego, Primo and Lucia Levi were met at the airport by Lucia's cousin Andrew Viterbi, who had first met Levi at his bar mitzvah in Turin in 1948, and whose father had read to him his cousin's *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*). Viterbi threw a festive brunch for the Levis in La Jolla, and amplified what Levi's editor first noticed in New York. "He [Primo] mentioned somehow that he considered himself to be an Italian, an internationalist, and then a Jew, who happened

to have been brought into the tragedy of war. But in coming to America they labeled him that way and pinned a Star of David on his chest." Viterbi's son, Alan, added, "In the United States, there is less appreciation for great intellectuals. There he was perceived just as one of Italy's great writers, while here he was pigeonholed," and added that Primo was a shy individual whose "way of communicating was with the pen."

At Claremont College, where Levi had been invited by the rabbi of the college, he gave a fine lecture in English but was upset when the translator at the question-and-answer session afterward bungled his Italian answers, prompting Levi to respond himself in English. Arriving in Bloomington after a stop in St. Louis, Levi was united with his friend and correspondent Alvin Rosenfeld at the University of Indiana, where the response was far less raucous than in New York. Rosenfeld recalled, "America is a fast-paced, rather dizzying country, and Levi was from Piedmont, which is known for a slower pace of life and a greater reserve. Primo embodied that in a very civilized way. His manner was not an ebullient manner. He was very affable, and in a small room it was a joy to be with him, but he was not given to platform antics, and crowds were not his thing."

At Levi's final publicity destination, Boston, the novelist Leslie Epstein—the son and nephew of the twin brothers who wrote *Casablanca*, and whose own novel *The King of the Jews* Levi had read in English and admired—remembered that Levi "looked aquiline, held his head back, and seemed physically like a rod of steel, which must have helped him survive." Picking him up in his little red Fiat called "Frisky" ("He probably loved it after all those limousines," Epstein quipped), the novelist recalled that Levi seemed to feel quite at home, especially since he was reunited with Anna Yona, his first cousin, at a particularly memorable lunch. According to Epstein, Yona was "lively, humorous, and a really wonderful person." He observed that she "possessed many of the qualities" of Levi himself: "the dignity, the calm, a certain irony, and a sense of the moments that lie before and behind the one that one happens to find oneself in." In Boston, Levi gave a talk called "Beyond Survival," and he was feted, Epstein emphasized, as an Italian writer, not as a Holocaust icon. Epstein admired Levi so much that he offered him a position at Boston University, but Levi responded, "I cannot do."

"Why not," Epstein countered.

"My mother," Levi replied, "is in a very sad way."

“She was beloved, but he also felt trapped by her,” Epstein said of Levi’s mother, Ester, who lived with her son and daughter-in-law in Turin. “He had to stay with her.”

In the fall of 1985, months after Levi’s American sojourn, an incendiary essay—“a celebrated spitball” in the words of James Marcus, who had corresponded with Levi—appeared in *Commentary.* Written by Fernanda Eberstadt and ostensibly a review of *If Not Now, When?*, the piece was clearly an attack on Levi himself, who in 1982 had challenged Israel’s right to invade Lebanon and had called for Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon to resign. The article criticized Levi’s ability as a novelist and further questioned his appropriateness as a Holocaust spokesman, suggesting that he was not “Jewish enough,” as Levi’s biographer Carole Angier has noted, and that his background as a civilized Western European Jew rendered him clearly unable to comprehend the totality of the genocide of a diverse mass of six million people. According to both Arthur Samuelson and Marcus, this piece angered and wounded Levi, a man who suffered from episodic and lasting depressions, and who was at the time already deeply saddened by the unexpected death of his friend and editor Italo Calvino, that September.

The last full year of Levi’s life, 1986, was marked by visits from two Americans, encounters that were poignant in their own distinct ways. Philip Roth, who had first met Levi in London that April, traveled to Turin in September to visit the writer he so admired. Assigned to write an essay for *The New York Times Book Review,* Roth was given a tour of Levi’s old factory, among other touchstones from Levi’s past. Roth’s profile, which appeared only months before Levi’s death, described the writer as a “chemist-artist” who when “listening . . . is as focused and as still as a chipmunk spying something unknown from atop a stone wall.” Roth further noted, “Of all the intellectually gifted artists of this century—and Levi’s uniqueness is that he is even more the artist-chemist than chemist-writer—he may well be the most thoroughly adapted to the totality of the life around him.”

The other American visitor was Risa Sodi, then a twenty-eight-year-old master’s candidate at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Sodi, now a Yale administrator and an Italian literature scholar, met Levi three months before Roth’s visit, on June 19, 1986. She wrote, “That afternoon, Levi answered the doorbell in shirtsleeves and led me into his living room. After some preliminary chitchat, my nervousness made me blurt out, *‘Ora*

possiamo cominciare!' (We can begin now!), and so began an intense but agreeable three-hour conversation, punctuated only by two phone calls, which he didn't answer, and one trip he made to the kitchen to prepare us an espresso." The biographer Myriam Anissimov said later, in *Primo Levi: The Tragedy of an Optimist*, that Sodi was "the only one who succeeded in having a private conversation with Primo Levi, the only one who succeeded in breaking through his shell." The meeting produced a profound and indelible effect on Sodi, who calls Levi "a polestar for my professional and scholarly life."

Two days before Levi's death on April 11, 1987, Alvin Rosenfeld received a letter from his friend, in which Levi reported, "I am suffering from a severe depression, and I am struggling at no avail to escape it. . . . Please forgive me for being so short; the mere fact of writing a letter is a trial for me, *but the will to recover is strong* [italics added]. . . . Let us see what the next months will bring to all of us, but my present situation is the worst I ever experienced, Auschwitz included."

Unquestionably, Levi's American story—from the all too casual dismissal of his Auschwitz memoir by a Boston rabbi in 1946 to his dismay at being interviewed in 1985 by a *New York Times* critic who had not read his book and the caustic attack on him in *Commentary*—reveals as much about permutations of American culture, literature, and politics, Jewish or otherwise, as it does about Levi himself. The outpouring of praise that rained down upon Levi in 1984, along with the encomiums that greeted the posthumous publication of *The Drowned and the Saved* a few years later, has, if anything, continued to grow and has augmented his stature in these last three decades. All of this is underscored by the publication of several outstanding Levi biographies; the appearance of the 1997 film version of *The Truce*, starring John Turturro, and of *Primo*, a theatrical work and film, adapted and performed by Antony Sher; the serialization of two Levi short stories in *The New Yorker* in 2007; the proliferation of academic Levi symposiums; and, finally, this American and English copublication of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, with thirteen new translations and a corrected one by Stuart Woolf, Levi's first English translator.

As a newly hired editor at W. W. Norton & Company in 1998, having started to prepare *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel* with Nathalie Babel, one of Babel's daughters, I began to contemplate doing the same for Levi's canon, aware that his Italian publisher, Einaudi, had brought out his collected works the preceding year. My undertaking began in earnest in 1999 (with the first of my more than 5000 e-mails devoted to this project), but the Levi copyright situation was so daunting as to become an Augean stable, since his books had been published in America by at least seven different publishers, some only through distribution from England. It took Norton another six years to come to terms with all of Levi's English-language rights holders, as well as with Einaudi, which held the rights to the unpublished material that appears in this edition. Only later, once the translator Ann Goldstein had agreed to edit the *Complete Works*, did we jointly decide that all the books would be retranslated with the exception of *If This Is a Man*, which was revised for this edition.

The publication of *The Complete Works* marks, then, the beginning of a new chapter in the story of Primo Levi's publication history in English. Among the works of thousands of survivors who have written about their harrowing ordeal in this most unimaginable and unspeakable of twentieth-century horrors, Levi's sovereign volumes stand out for their understanding of the human condition, for their philosophical exploration of the polarities of good and evil, and for the grotesque nexus that can bind these two human forces. The exquisite subtlety of Levi's insights, so acute they seem to belong to someone who has seen too much, to someone who has so obviously suffered from severe depressions himself, come with a prose style so lyrical and memorable that they position this self-effacing Italian chemist as one of the most original and universal, even one of the most enduring, of all twentieth-century writers.

To quote Levi himself in his posthumously published short story "A Tranquil Star," translated by Goldstein, "We still don't know much about the convulsive death-resurrection of stars: we know that, fairly often, something flares up in the atomic mechanism of a star's nucleus and then the star explodes, on a scale not of millions or billions of years but of hours and minutes; we know that these events are among the most cataclysmic that the sky today holds; but we understand only—and approximately—the how, not the why. We'll be satisfied with the how."

ROBERT WEIL

Adapted from a speech given at Yale University as part of the conference "Primo Levi in the Present Tense: New Reflections on His Life and Work Before and After Auschwitz," February 29, 2008

The Publication of Primo Levi's Works in the World

Primo Levi is among the best-known of modern Italian writers in the world. He is an icon in the debate on the Holocaust, and his works have been translated into more than forty languages. Yet the process by which he achieved his fame did not follow a straight line; rather, the international translation and publication of his works came about sporadically and often long after their original appearance in Italian.

There is no single reason for this. For one thing, the editorial market varied in different places, depending on such factors as the degree of independence of the press with respect to the government; the popularity of Italian literature and Holocaust literature; and the presence or absence of good translators. In some countries, individuals—intellectuals, publishers, journalists, translators—played a crucial role in promoting and furthering the publication of Levi's works in their home language and territories. One must also consider the geopolitical context: for example, repressive regimes banned the publication of works on the Holocaust, and there was also some resistance to the diffusion of such literature on the part of some democratic countries, which may have been unwilling to disturb the equilibrium of the cold war. A final obstacle to publication of Levi's works, again varying from place to place and with different degrees of consciousness, has been a desire to repress the memory of the past: a reluctance to face their culpability not only on the part of the nations directly involved in the extermination of the Jews but also—in radically different geographic contexts—on the part of countries that for years have perpetrated similar crimes against their own political, ethnic, or religious minorities.

The first translation of Levi into any language was the English-language version of *If This Is a Man*, published in 1959 by Orion Press, an American publisher that also had offices in Florence. The translator, the young British

historian Stuart Woolf, had the friendly support of Levi, who was very happy with the result. Five years later, Woolf translated *The Truce* for the British publisher Bodley Head (and in the United States for Atlantic Monthly Press). Although both received positive reviews, the two works had almost no circulation in the United Kingdom until the 1980s, partly because Italian literature was considered a niche market, and partly because the Anglo-Jewish community played only a small role in British intellectual life. Similarly, both translations received little attention in the United States.

In 1961, the trial of Adolf Eichmann, who had been captured in Argentina and transferred to Israel, took place in Jerusalem. This proceeding was instrumental in bringing the subject of the Holocaust, relegated to the background since the late 1940s, back into the world's consciousness.

That same year, German and French translations of *If This Is a Man* came out. Levi was especially attentive to the German edition; he had the good fortune to find a uniquely qualified translator in Heinz Riedt, who had deserted from the German Army and taken part in the Italian Resistance; the two men established an intense working relationship. Thanks to Riedt's linguistic skills and his empathy, Levi was able to satisfy a requirement that was very important to him: preserving the harsh slang of the German that he had been forced to learn in the Lager. The volume was published—in the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) only—by Fischer Verlag, with a preface by the author: a letter from Levi to Riedt and, through him, to all Germans. Yet Levi's hope of establishing a real dialogue with the German people was realized only in part: while he did receive affirmations of solidarity and regret (but also, from some, declarations of a lack of culpability), in Germany his fame has been mainly posthumous.

If This Is a Man was brought out in France by the publisher Buchet-Castel as *J'étais un homme* (*I Was a Man*). This unfaithful, ineffectual title reflected the level of a translation (by Valentina Montel and Michèle Causse) that was extremely disappointing to Levi, who had had great expectations for it. He attributed the book's lack of success to the poor quality of the translation. The mistakes and other infidelities were for the most part corrected in a second translation, by Martine Shruoffeneger, but it did not appear until 1987, from Éditions Julliard.

These first three translations were followed by versions in Finnish (1962), Dutch (1963), and Turkish (1967; the text, based on the German

translation, was heavily altered). Meanwhile, *The Truce* appeared in German (1964), French (1966), Dutch (1966), and Japanese (1969), and excerpts were published in a Polish journal (1963). A collection of twelve stories from *Natural Histories* came out in German (1965).

After the initial burst of international publication, the seventies and the early eighties did not see many new translations. This limited interest was manifested in two ways: in some places it was years before any of Levi's work was published (Israel and most of Eastern Europe) and in others, after a first translation (usually in a small printing), years passed before a second work appeared—or, as in France in the case of *If This Is a Man*, a better translation of the same work—and began to establish Levi's reputation. In fact, the situation resembles the fate of *If This Is a Man* in Italy as well (see page 2813).

More of Levi's works came out in French (*The Wrench*, in 1980) and in English (two collections: *Shemà*, a collection of poems, in 1976, and *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*, a selection of stories taken from *Natural Histories* and *Flaw of Form*, in 1977). In 1972, for the first time, his work appeared in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), with a collection of stories taken from *Natural Histories* and, seven years later, *The Periodic Table* (1979). *If This Is a Man* was published in Romania and Poland (1974 and 1978). There was a Czech version of *The Periodic Table* in 1981; a Finnish translation of *The Truce* the same year (but almost twenty years after the Finnish translation of *If This Is a Man*); and in Poland in 1983 a volume that included *Natural Histories* and *Flaw of Form*.

The most surprising situation is undoubtedly that of Israel. The dramatic circumstances leading up to its independence, in 1948, pushed the experience of the Shoah into the background, and only after the Eichmann trial did books on the subject begin to come out there. Nonetheless, the trip that Levi made to Israel, in 1968, went unnoticed, and his efforts to find a publisher for *If This Is a Man* (whose appearance in Hebrew was important to him) were in vain. For one thing, the experience of the Holocaust was more familiar there. Also, at that time, just after the Six Day War of 1967, Israeli society clung to a national identity marked by heroism, and, as some historians have noted, the figures of the former deportees and the millions

who had died in the gas chambers roused conflicting feelings; there was even a belief among some that those victims had let themselves be massacred, “like lambs led to the slaughter.” The Yom Kippur War of 1973 represented the start of a new phase of reflection on the past and on the Shoah in particular: the silence of the forties and fifties, and an interest that in the sixties had sometimes had a self-serving streak (the Holocaust as a historical legitimatization of Zionism), yielded to reconsiderations of the founding myths. Such considerations became even more painful after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and relations with the Palestinian population soured. In this reading of events, it’s perhaps not remarkable that the first translation of a work by Levi did not appear until 1979, and that it was *The Truce* (with a preface by Levi written for the Hebrew edition), not *If This Is a Man.* The latter did not come out for nine more years—until 1988, a year after Levi’s death.

In Eastern Europe, Levi’s reception was late, sporadic, and beset by difficulties. For one thing, there was little interest in the Holocaust. The most atrocious crimes against the Jews had been perpetrated in these countries, in too many cases with the complicity of local populations; at the same time, the peoples crushed by Nazism tended to recall their own sufferings rather than those of the Jews. In the Soviet Union, the Second World War was celebrated as an anti-Fascist patriotic epic, and the racist foundation of Hitler’s regime was undervalued. Finally, in the countries in the Soviet sphere, the memory of Nazi barbarism was soon replaced by the experience of Stalinist brutality.

In this historical and political context, which inevitably influenced the autonomy of the publishing market, it’s not hard to understand why in Eastern Europe most of Levi’s work appeared only after 1989. The fate of his work in East Germany is emblematic: *The Periodic Table* was butchered by censorship (many references to life in the Lager were removed), while neither *If This Is a Man* nor *The Truce* could be published at all, because of the “bourgeois” mentality attributed to the author and the false image of the Russians that, according to those censors, it presented. They also found intolerable Levi’s insistence on the tension between the prisoners in the Lager and the “fluctuating” border that he traced separating victims and torturers: the theme, in other words, of the “gray zone.”

Moreover, it should be recalled that Levi was considered a problematic writer in authoritarian regimes of another stripe. The military dictatorships

of Portugal, Spain, and Greece wished to repress the tragedy of the Shoah: in the two Iberian countries because it involved Nazism and fascism, which both regimes had been inspired by; in Greece because Levi's work compelled a reckoning with the country's responsibility in the persecution of its own Jewish population. Besides, the suffering of the Jews was overshadowed in the collective memory by what the opposition on the left had endured in the years after the war.

The American publication of *The Periodic Table*, in 1984 (thanks to the insistence of the Jewish history scholar Alvin Rosenfeld and of Raymond Rosenthal, an accomplished and experienced translator), can be considered a turning point. It not only smoothed the road to the translation, in the United States, of seven more works by Levi but stirred an international wave of interest in him. His sudden and tragic death, three years later, further focused attention on his works.

Between 1986 and 1990, in Scandinavia and Finland, *If Not Now, When?* and *If This Is a Man* were published and, in Denmark and Finland, *The Periodic Table*. In Sweden, the Italophile intellectuals Göran and Ingrid Börge played a crucial role: Göran was the first to write about Levi, in 1969, and Ingrid was his main translator into Swedish.

In the countries of southern Europe that returned to democracy in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, there were translations of *If This Is a Man* (Castilian, 1987; Portuguese, 1988), *The Periodic Table* (Portuguese, 1988; Catalan and Greek, 1990), and *If Not Now, When?* (Portuguese, 1988).

A Czech translation of *The Drowned and the Saved* came out in 1989, printed in Cologne by a publisher in exile; it was reissued, this time in Czechoslovakia, in a new translation, in 1993.

Levi's major works were finally published in Israel between 1987 and 1991, along with a collection of stories. In Brazil (whose population was for the most part ignorant of the extermination of the Jews), the military dictatorship in power from 1964 to 1984 had discouraged publication of authors who reported on violations of human rights. *If This Is a Man* did not come out until 1988; other translations followed in the nineties.

Interest in Levi was consolidated in the nineties, with new translations almost everywhere in the West, as well as in Turkey and Japan. The most

remarkable phenomenon, however, was the numerous translations finally published in Eastern Europe, once the Berlin Wall had fallen and the process of the breakup of Yugoslavia was under way. The post-1989 translations appeared in Hungary (with an unusual choice as a first work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1990), in Croatia (*The Periodic Table*, 1991, and *If This Is a Man*, 1993), and in Slovenia (*The Periodic Table*, 1992).

In Bulgaria, *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce* came out in a single volume in 1995. In the Bulgarian literary world, the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, who was born in Sofia but had immigrated to Paris, made an important contribution to Levi's success by devoting a chapter to him in his book *Facing the Extreme* (1991). The work of the translator and literary critic Božan Hristov also played a major role.

Indeed, it was relationships with other intellectuals that helped Levi achieve international fame: the praise of Saul Bellow, who had a decisive role in assuring Levi's large-scale fortunes, and of Alvin Rosenfeld; the friendships with the Romanian-born writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel and with Philip Roth; the long-distance dialogues with the philosopher Jean Améry and the writer Jorge Semprún; and his posthumous relationship with the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (the 1998 book in which Agamben compares himself with Levi came out in the United States in 1999, under the title *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*).

In the twenty-first century, knowledge of Levi's work has become widespread in the places where it first appeared, and has, in addition, reached new and sometimes far-flung audiences. Today almost all of Levi's works have been translated into English, French, and German.

In Spain, most of Levi's works have been translated (into Castilian), including the stories, the poems, and the interviews; in Greece, the major works have been published but not the poems or the short stories. In Portugal, on the other hand, attention to Levi has been limited.

In Holland, a single publisher, Meulenhoff, has published almost all of Levi's works, including several collections of his stories; in 2001 all of the stories, many translated for the first time, were brought out in a single volume.

The major works have been translated into Danish and Swedish (thanks to the Italian Cultural Institute in Stockholm, Levi's book of poems *Ad ora incerta* has also appeared in Swedish). In 2012 the Danish publisher

Rosinante collected *If Not Now, When?*, *The Truce*, and *The Drowned and the Saved* in a single volume. A similar, very successful trilogy was issued in 2013 by Bonniers, Levi's main publisher in Sweden, which reprinted *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*, together with the first Swedish translation of *The Drowned and the Saved*. Although Norway and Finland are small countries with small publishing markets, they still seem—somewhat surprisingly, considering their involvement in the Second World War—farther behind in the promotion of Levi's works.

The number of countries of the former Soviet bloc where Levi's works are finally appearing is growing: Albania, Slovakia, Macedonia, Serbia, Russia, Estonia, and Lithuania. In these countries, too, the preferred volumes have been *If This Is a Man*, *The Truce*, *The Drowned and the Saved*, and *The Periodic Table*. There continue to be translations into Croatian, Slovene, Polish, and Hungarian. *If This Is a Man* was also published in a Romansch-language edition in Switzerland, in 2011.

Most significant, however, is the expanding audience for Levi's works in the non-European world. In Latin America, translations continue to appear in Brazil and Mexico, and in 2005–06 two long interviews were published in Argentina.

In Asia, Japan's early interest in Levi's work—*The Truce* came out in 1969—was followed by years of silence; the "battle for memory," or, rather, the effort for collective reflection on the crimes perpetrated by the country during the Second World War, began only with the death of Emperor Hirohito, in 1989. Interest in Levi revived in the nineties, thanks mainly to the translations of Hirohide Takeyama. The first translation into Chinese was *The Periodic Table*, in 1998; three years later *The Drowned and the Saved* appeared in Mandarin (and in 2013 in simplified Chinese). In South Korea, an account of the wretched fate of political detainees under the military regime was possible only after 1988, with the establishment of democracy, but it was still some twenty years before Levi was published there: translations of *If This Is a Man*, *The Periodic Table*, *If Not Now, When?*, and *The Wrench* came out between 2007 and 2013. *If This Is a Man* was published in Vietnamese in 2010, and *The Truce* appeared in India in 2008, in Malayalam.

New editions and printings continue to appear in Hebrew (in 2002 *The Truce* and *If Not Now, When?* and in 2007 a collection of interviews with Levi). In 2009 the Aladdin Project, an association of writers, diplomats,

intellectuals, and translators, whose purpose is to inform an Islamic audience about the Holocaust, made Arabic and Farsi translations of *If This Is a Man* available on its website.

Levi followed the international publication of his works closely, aware that every new translation offered a chance to broaden his readership. In many cases his involvement was important, not only in encouraging publication but because he had a contractual right to check the quality of the translations into languages that he knew.

The expansion of Levi's popularity, although posthumous, into geographic areas completely outside the experience of the Holocaust testifies to the fact that the message of his work has acquired a universal value, that it is capable of defending human dignity in very diverse contexts; it's not surprising that his name often comes up in reports of contemporary crimes against humanity, such as the genocides in the nineties (in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda) or the barbarization of political and social life in vast areas of the world (even in the West, where we have seen, for example, aggressive displays of anti-Semitism and xenophobia).

In international culture, the image of Levi as a witness has come to dominate not only his status as a great writer but other essential aspects of his personality and his work. This is no doubt a consequence of the fact that in most languages Levi's fundamental texts of memory have become available before his more narrative works. And in the languages into which a single work has been translated, that work has almost always been, even in more recent years, *If This Is a Man*. The publication of the *Complete Works* in English represents a crucial step in encouraging a change in that perception.

MONICA QUIRICO

The list of sources for the citations and part of the information in this essay—writings and interviews by Primo Levi, critical literature on him and on his work—can be consulted at the websites of Liveright/W. W. Norton (http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=4294988470) and the International Center for Primo Levi Studies in Turin (http://www.primolevi.it/Web/English).

Notes on the Texts

IF THIS IS A MAN

"*If This Is a Man* is a book that was written immediately." This statement, which Primo Levi made in Cuneo, in Piedmont, in November 1975, during a talk with readers, needs to be interpreted. Levi's first book appeared in the fall of 1947—almost three years after the liberation of Auschwitz—by which point dozens of memoirs about the deportation had already appeared in Italy. Among these, however, only seven had to do with the deportation of the Jews. From the chapter "Die Drei Leute vom Labor" we know that Levi had already scribbled some brief notes in the Lager, just as we know that he had to destroy them, because if they had been found on him he would have been sent before a firing squad. He fixed them on paper just the same, to ensure for himself two things that were very rare in that place: solitude and thought—not only rare but a source of the most acute suffering, "the pain of remembering, the old fierce anguish of feeling myself a man again, which attacks me like a dog the moment my consciousness comes out of the darkness."

So even in Auschwitz Levi had tried to write; but, as far as we know, he didn't write in the months just after the liberation. The "truce" that gives his second book its title was an adventurous middle time of wandering through Europe. His traveling companions were fighters or survivors or victims like him; they were part of the same history, of the same geography as the Lager. They were people with whom he exchanged stories along the way, and doing so was consoling; but they were not an audience. The testimony —that is, "the evil tidings of what man's audacity made of man in Auschwitz," as the finale of the chapter "Ka-Be" solemnly chimes—had to be brought to the others: to those who were distant, those who would have preferred not to know, the indifferent, the unwilling, the incredulous, the

torturers themselves and those who had supported them. This was the audience that Levi sought.

There was a notable exception to this abstention from writing before his return to Italy. In Katowice, in the spring of 1945, a commission from the Soviet government approached some three thousand former deportees of various nationalities and asked them to document their experience in the Lager of Oświęcim—the Polish name of Auschwitz. That early investigation depicted, concisely but reliably, the key role that Auschwitz played in the Final Solution, in the structure and functioning of the industry of death, in the number of victims. Among those who compiled testimony were two Jews from Turin: a forty-seven-year-old doctor, Leonardo De Benedetti, and a twenty-five-year-old chemist, Primo Levi. *Report on the Hygienic-Sanitary Organization of the Concentration Camp for Jews in Monowitz (Auschwitz—Upper Silesia)* probably had an early version (shorter, and perhaps drafted in French), which may someday be found in some archive in the former USSR. The Italian text is, instead, a version conceived for an audience that knew almost nothing about the Lagers. Levi and De Benedetti published it on November 24, 1946, in the prestigious journal *Minerva Medica*. The text was rediscovered in the 1990s, after decades of oblivion, thanks to Alberto Cavaglion, and has been translated into English (*Auschwitz Report*, edited by Robert Gordon; London: Verso, 2006).

The capacity apparent in *Auschwitz Report* to gather, remember, and organize information of minute complexity is astonishing—anthropological no less than clinical, political no less than scientific. The authors, De Benedetti and Levi, were prisoners at the bottom, at ground level; their ability to overcome the ignorance of space and time that was inflicted before every other humiliation is equally astonishing. The *Report* should be read and studied on its own, and not as an outline for *If This Is a Man*. It was the first evidence of a technical nature produced by survivors of the Lager: effective because it was concrete, addressed to the few who at the time were interested in knowing the reality of the extermination. And it was an *engagé* text, commissioned and written with the war still going on, or just concluded.

Auschwitz Report, then, really was “written immediately,” but the statement is also truthful with regard to *If This Is a Man*. During a TV broadcast in 1974, Levi answered a question on the origin of his first book

“as a structure”: “It had no origin, it emerged from a series of stories. It originated upside down, and perhaps that’s visible. I wrote the last chapter first, because it was the most urgent, the freshest in memory, but I had no intention of writing a book. The structure emerged little by little, when I realized that these episodes were a tale, that they could be arranged chronologically, that they were, in other words, a chronology.”

In the second, definitive edition of 1958, the book concludes with the places and dates of its composition: “Avigliana–Turin, December 1945–January 1947.” The DUCO-Montecatini plant, where Levi went to work as a chemist on January 21, 1946, was in Avigliana. It was his first full-time job after returning to Italy, and from then on, work and writing were superimposed on each other, as he recounts in the chapter “Chromium” in *The Periodic Table*: “I had kindly been granted a rickety desk in the laboratory, a noisy, drafty workplace full of people coming and going with rags and cans, and had been assigned no definite task; unoccupied as a chemist and in a state of complete alienation (though it was not called that at the time), I wrote, in no order, page after page of the memories that were poisoning me, and my colleagues looked at me stealthily, as if I were a harmless lunatic. The book grew in my hands almost spontaneously, without plan or system, intricate and crowded as a termite nest.” Thus for weeks he made notes randomly, but impelled by the urgency of remembering, until a structure began to emerge. The date “December 1945” alludes to the first phase of this feverish pursuit of the facts.

The typescripts of the first drafts of the final chapter, “The Story of Ten Days,” are dated February 1946. Thus the earliest chapter that Levi was able to shape is the one with the simplest structure: a diary. The design of the work and the chronology of the facts related in it began to develop from that nucleus. *If This Is a Man* (in both versions, 1947 and 1958) perfectly melds the chronology of the facts recounted with the thematic progression in the witness-narrator’s discovery of the Lager. Every new subject confronted in the individual chapters—the journey, the entrance into Auschwitz, the infirmary, the forced labor, the selections for the gas chamber—corresponds to a deliberate step forward in the calendar, along the arc of the months and the seasons. Diary and story come together smoothly; the same is true for the descriptions of the events and the reflections on them.

We know the dates of the drafts (or at least the first drafts) of some of the book's chapters, thanks to a typescript that Levi sent to his cousin Anna Yona, who lived in Massachusetts, in the hope of finding through her a publisher in the United States—that is, even before the work appeared in the original language. Thus, "The Canto of Ulysses," February 14, 1946; "Kraus," February 25; "Chemistry Examination," March; "October 1944," April 5–8; "Ka-Be," June 15–20.

When Levi wrote "The Canto of Ulysses" he wasn't aware that Jean Samuel, known as Pikolo, had survived the evacuation march from Auschwitz; like all the healthy prisoners, Jean had been forced to march through the night of January 17–18, 1945. He was tracked down by Charles Conreau, the French schoolteacher with whom Levi had spent his last days in the Lager. Charles, having returned from Auschwitz before Levi, had sent him a letter from France, which Levi found waiting for him upon his return. He answered right away, asking Charles, among other things, to look for Jean Samuel in Strasbourg. Charles found him in early March 1946 and gave him Levi's address in Turin. Jean wrote to Levi on March 13; Levi answered on the 23rd with a long letter, telling him: "I'm writing: some poems, some essays, even some stories related to life in the Lager." In "Chromium" Levi also tells us that in those first months after his return he wrote "short, bloody poems." The fact that in that letter—contemporaneous with the writing of his first book—he distinguishes "essays" from "stories" (and indicates that he considers the gesture of writing *stories* about Auschwitz particularly bold) means that, individually, he gave to the texts that were gradually emerging a character that was predominantly either narrative or nonfiction. Among the more essay-like—whether they were completed or still being written—were surely "This Side of Good and Evil" and "The Drowned and the Saved."

In that first letter of March 23, Levi told Jean that he was writing about him in one of the stories: "You will find it odd." Later, on May 24, Levi sent him a rough draft, in Italian, of "The Canto of Ulysses." In a letter dated April 6, he gave a strange and extraordinary definition of the texts that he was producing: "*machins*," that is, in French, as the historian Sergio Luzzatto puts it, "contraptions, thingies. . . . Certainly Levi said it out of modesty. But maybe he said it for another reason as well. Maybe the writer intuited, clearly, that his different ways of analyzing the experience of the Lager, contemporary and contextual, were outside the categories of

traditional literary genres: altogether, they had the amphibious and ineffable quality of works that are sui generis." *Machins*, therefore, against the Auschwitz machine, defined thus in the chapter "Initiation": "precisely because the Lager was a great machine [Italian *macchina*] to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts."

At the start of 1947 *If This Is a Man* was ready. Levi said, without providing many details, that he presented it to two or maybe three publishers, who rejected it. The only one about which we have definite information is Einaudi, in Turin. Cesare Pavese and Natalia Ginzburg, editors who were also writers, both read the manuscript. Ginzburg, née Levi, was Jewish. Her husband, Leone Ginzburg, had founded the publishing house with Giulio Einaudi, and was a celebrated Slavicist and anti-Fascist—he was, in fact, a leader of Justice and Liberty, the movement in which Levi was active during his brief time as a partisan. Leone Ginzburg had died in prison in Rome, on February 5, 1944, after being tortured by Nazi jailers.

The rejection of *If This Is a Man* on the part of a Turinese, anti-Fascist publisher that should, theoretically, have been sympathetic toward Levi, and should have readily grasped the value of the work, caused outrage not only in Italy. After Levi's death, Ginzburg admitted that she had, forty years earlier, done something foolish. But in 1947 the war had been over for two years, and memoirs that recalled its horrors seemed to have saturated the market, even if few were about the deportation of the Jews. Einaudi wished to publish books that constructed the future: at first glance Levi's did not seem such a book, and also its stylistic approach was far from the literary climate of the time; the neorealist writers modeled their style on American examples, especially Hemingway.

In the spring of 1947 Levi gave some episodes from his book to *L'Amico del Popolo* (*Friend of the People*), a Communist weekly published in Vercelli, outside Turin. The editor of the paper was Silvio Ortona, the unnamed author of the two lines "until one day / it will no longer make sense to say: tomorrow" that "run through" Levi's memory in the chapter "Kraus." The episodes that were published were, in shortened versions, "The Journey" (March 29, 1947); "On the Bottom" (April 5); another excerpt from "On the Bottom," entitled "Häftlinge" (May 17); "Our Nights" (May 24); and "An Accident" (May 31, from "Ka-Be"). Included in this last excerpt was the future epigraph poem of *If This Is a Man*, here titled

“Psalm.” On March 29, the paper, presenting the first excerpt, explained that the pieces were taken from “a forthcoming book, *On the Bottom*, about the extermination camp of Auschwitz.” The work was therefore complete but had not found its definitive title, and the uncertainty persisted until the last moment.

In the meantime Levi’s life continued on its course. At the end of June 1947 he quit DUCO and ventured into business in a private chemistry lab with his friend Alberto Salmoni; it was a commercial failure, which he tells us about in two stories in *The Periodic Table*, “Arsenic” and “Tin.” In September Levi got married, and at the end of that summer the Florence journal *Il Ponte* published, in its August–September issue, another important episode, “October 1944.”

At that point, the book had been accepted by the publisher De Silva, also based in Turin, and run by Franco Antonicelli (1902–1974), another figure with long experience in both publishing and the anti-Fascist struggle. He was at the time the president of the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale del Piemonte (National Liberation Committee of Piedmont), and Levi’s book reached him, as the literary critic Marco Belpoliti notes, “through Alessandro Galane Garrone, who had read the manuscript at the end of 1946 at the urging of Levi’s sister, Anna Maria, who was also a member of the CLN.” It was Antonicelli who came up with the title. At an early point, as we have seen, Levi had thought of calling the book *On the Bottom*, then he inclined toward *The Drowned and the Saved*. Antonicelli, deleting the imperative “Consider” from one of the lines of the epigraph poem, coined *If This Is a Man*. He had a brochure printed in which he presented it as “the work of a new writer,” and in which he insisted on not only the moral but the literary value of the work: “No book in the world on the subject of these tragic experiences has the artistic value of this one.” On the fourth and last page of the brochure the epigraph poem was reproduced, in Levi’s handwriting, with the line “Consider if this is a man” printed in red.

Levi undertook to publicize the book himself. In the October 1947 issue of *L’Italia che Scrive*, he wrote the magazine’s monthly “I Present My Book” column, under the title “If This Is a World”:

> If not in fact, in intention and in conception, the origins of my book go back to the days of the concentration camp. The need to tell “others,” to make “others” share it, took on for us, before the liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with other elementary needs: the book was written to satisfy this need; in the first place, therefore, as an interior liberation.

> This explains its fragmentary nature: the chapters were written not in logical succession but in order of urgency. The work of linking and unifying was carried out more deliberately, and is more recent.
>
> I have avoided crude details and polemical and rhetorical temptations. Those who read it may have the impression that other, more atrocious accounts of prison have gone too far: it's not true, everything that has been read is true, but this was not the face of the truth that interested me. Nor did it interest me to tell about the exceptions, heroes and traitors, but, rather, by inclination and by choice, I tried to focus attention on the many, on the norm, on the ordinary man, not vile and not a saint, whose suffering is all he has but he is incapable of understanding it and containing it. It seems to me unnecessary to add that none of the facts are invented.
>
> I am not able to judge my book: it may be mediocre, bad, or good. I hope that it is read, in any case: not only out of ambition but also in the small hope of making the reader understand that these things have to do with him.

The work with which Levi made his debut demonstrates in several ways his universal intention: he speaks here of the *world*, *man* in general, the *many* on whom he focuses his attention, the *many* he hopes will read his book, the warning that the facts narrated have to do with the reader, *every* reader. *If This Is a Man* came out in October 1947 as part of De Silva's nonfiction series Biblioteca Leone Ginzburg (Ginzburg had been a close friend of Antonicelli); the cover featured a figure taken from Goya's *Disasters of War*. In addition to the brochure, the publisher printed an advertising flyer, inserted in the book, for which the author concisely summarized the meaning of the work: "This book was not written to accuse, or even to provoke horror and hatred. The lesson that emerges from it is for peace: those who hate are violating not just a moral principle but, first of all, a law of logic." That last sentence has the knife edge of Pascal's *pensées*: if the law of the strongest that originates in hatred of those who are different is taken to its extreme consequences, the inevitable result will be the annihilation of the human race, of the species "man," for whom the work is titled. In these words, just as in the book, Levi's ethical fiber equaled his exactness as a witness and his power as a writer.

In the 1974 TV appearance mentioned above, Levi said that *If This Is a Man* was "a record of events reflected on afterward." The title confirms this: the book offers evidence of the facts (*this*) and an interrogation of that same evidence (*if*): testimony entrusted to memory and subjected to a continuous critical test. Before entering into the heart of the story, the reader has to cross two more thresholds that lie beyond the title. First, a Preface, similar to the text published in *L'Italia che Scrive*, in which Levi fixes the tone that he intends to give to his own voice and the objective that he sets

himself: “to furnish documentation for a
detached study of certain aspects of the human mind.” Detachment does not, however, imply coldness, and the reader will be surprised by the second “threshold,” immediately afterward: the epigraph poem, which in the book has no title. Its opening lines seem to be chanted in a rapt voice: a hum that develops in a spiral fashion, a spring compressed, and then, at the start of the second stanza, rushes out in a burst of anger, of crude battering sounds. The entire poem is a dense weave of phonic molecules, distributed symmetrically. The voice that addresses the reader reveals itself, line by line, as a voice that judges and commands. Its source is the voice of God, Alberto Cavaglion observes, a voice whose tone is found at the close of “October 1944,” in the invective against Kuhn after the selections for the gas chamber. But here, before the story begins, Levi intends to force his reader into a situation—created by the tools of rhetoric—similar to that which a prisoner was hurled into when he entered Auschwitz. Levi creates an acoustic shock that is converted to a moral shock: “consider,” “ponder,” “carve,” “repeat.”

The story that follows is also surprising. It’s not a simple autobiography, nor is it the lamentation of a helpless victim. Two nouns are sufficient to understand how complex and subtle the conceptual outline of the book is. The first is found in the Preface: “It was my good *fortune*.” The decisive role of chance in the events of the Lager, as Robert Gordon notes, and the intervention of a relative “good fortune” for the individual Levi inform us that the story told is always true but never simple. The second noun belongs to the same family as fortune: “relief.” Levi uses it twice at the start of the work. In the chapter “The Journey” we read a sentence that gives us chills: “We had learned of our destination with relief. Auschwitz: a name without significance for us at that time, but at least it implied some place on this earth.” If that is the announcement of the journey, the definitive arrival at Auschwitz is marked by the transfer of those chosen for forced labor to their barracks: in the truck, and under the guard of a German soldier who, instead of shouting at the prisoners, “*Guai a voi, anime prave*” (“Woe unto you, wicked souls”: *Inferno* III:84; it’s the first explicit citation of Dante in the book), asks them for their money and their watches. A thief, in other words, and not even very clever: “The matter stirs us to anger and laughter and a strange relief.” Autobiography and history, horror and the grotesque, humiliation and humor, all in a structure of paradoxical events and words.

In hindsight, Levi can say that being deported in 1944 was his "good fortune," for he now (1947) knows the history of the Third Reich and the Nazi Lagers, while both times he says "relief" it follows an immediate recognition of observable facts: only someone who knew nothing of Auschwitz could feel relief. In the same way, Levi the deportee realizes for the first time that he has fallen into an absurd place when he is induced to quote Dante. And he resorts to Dante not because he has to describe a horror that challenges every possibility of expression but because he is surprised at having found moral mediocrity where he expected incorruptible sadism.

Thus the story is introduced. But there are two distinct episodes in *If This Is a Man* that allow us to witness both the book's *material* and its *spiritual* birth. The first is the episode cited above where Levi, left alone in the chemical laboratory at Buna, writes a few lines in pencil that he immediately afterward destroys. The second is "The Canto of Ulysses": the urgency to communicate, using as amplifier, support, and filter of his own voice a famous text whose language is adequate to the need: the *Divine Comedy*. The structure of *If This Is a Man* is therefore visible—and in a certain sense directly commented on—within the work itself. For it is not a book of remembrances but, rather, a book in which the author revisits an absolute present, which concerns Everyman. When, in "Chemistry Examination," Levi writes the sentence "Today, this very day, as I sit at a table and write, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened," he is joining the two cognitive poles of his story, the *during* of Auschwitz and the *now* of the writing, delivering them to the *always* of reading and of literature, and uniting in a single figure the Häftling Levi and the writer Levi.

If This Is a Man is therefore rooted, first of all, in a need to speak not of oneself—not of one's own humiliation, one's own hunger, one's personal misfortunes—but of an extreme condition, new in the world, which concerns every man because it represents a direct threat against any human being, and which can teach each of us something unprecedented. The need to communicate this universal news implies that *If This Is a Man* will not be the testimony of a category: not of Jews, not of political prisoners. The book is not entitled *If This Is a Jew*, although Levi quickly points out that Jews represent more than 90 percent of the victims of the Lagers.

Another consequence of this primary need is that Levi attributes equal importance to individuals and to the structure of Auschwitz. The story of

men whose names have been taken away, *If This Is a Man* is also a prolonged, persistent exercise in restoring to each of them a name (and a personal history). Levi's determination to construct a termite nest in which every insect is newly endowed with name and surname is the most profound feature that—beyond the many quotations and allusions, explicit or implicit—he shares with Dante Alighieri and his *Comedy*, which is crammed with individual stories, stories that without him would be condemned to eternal oblivion. Levi is close to Dante also in his moral imagination, in his capacity to elaborate—starting with what is seen in the netherworld—anthropological-interpretative categories. In terms of language, then, Levi had the intelligence, in *If This Is a Man*, to make use of two registers that proceed side by side but are completely distinct: the "new, harsh language" born of the Lager and reproduced with implacable acoustic memory, and the high tone that is the privilege of the narrator, and that describes the most despicable actions in a clear, educated courtroom-style diction. In Dante, Levi found the simultaneous presence of the two languages, and a representative realism with incomparable power.

Dante's ability to carve reality by verbal means accounts for three further, particularly complex aspects of *If This Is a Man*. The first, as noted in the case of the word "relief," is the active presence of the comic beside the tragic, animating grotesque human portraits. Second, the deeper one sinks into the inferno, the more the roles of victims and torturers tend to get mixed up, and here we are in the territory of collaborationism, on the path that leads to the "gray zone" of *The Drowned and the Saved*. Third, and last, is the empathic energy with which Levi tries to reason with the logic of someone else, even his torturers: an effort that, according to the Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, cost him inner peace, and which is an exercise in mimesis that owes much to the example of Dante. Finally, though, a Dantean element must be mentioned that is absent in Levi: forgiveness. Levi had no intention of forgiving his torturers.

If This Is a Man was favorably received. There were more than twenty reviews, a brilliant result for an author who was just starting out and for a work published, in an edition of 2500 copies, by a small publishing house. Most of the reviews were in left-leaning newspapers and journals in

northern Italy. But the book was also reviewed in *La Stampa*, the main daily in Turin, and in the *Corriere d'Informazione*, the sibling of the most important national daily, *Corriere della Sera*, in Milan. One of the advertisements circulated by De Silva some months later carried the information that the "wife of the famous scientist Enrico Fermi" would translate the work for readers in the United States. Laura Capon Fermi was of Jewish origin, but her version was not completed. It's probable that she worked on an intermediate version of the text, which precedes the edition of 1947; what remains of the translation is preserved in the University of Chicago Library.

The most farsighted review of *If This Is a Man* came out in the Piedmontese edition of the Communist *Unità*, on May 6, 1948. It was entitled "A Book About the Death Camps," and was signed Italo Calvino. In a 1975 interview, Levi said, "I feel like Calvino's brother and he like mine. *If This Is a Man* and *The Path to the Spiders' Nest* came out almost at the same time. From then on, although we didn't see each other much, the paths we traveled were close and parallel." In *La Stampa* the debuts of Levi and Calvino were reviewed together, but what the two books shared was not completely evident in 1947. In effect both replaced the abstract myths of heroic prison and heroic resistance (forged immediately after the war in Italy for political reasons) with the raw truth of a story: truth was reached through style. Both books challenged those monumental representations of History, sowing doubts and raising questions, and punctuating with ironic and grotesque details the dramas described in their pages. In his review of Levi's book, Calvino said openly what needed to be said: "With facts like the extermination camps it seems that any book has to be inferior to the reality in order to be able to sustain it. Yet Primo Levi has given us on this subject a magnificent book that is not only an extremely effective piece of testimony but has pages of genuine narrative power, which will remain in our memory as among the finest of the literature on the Second World War."

Calvino used the adjective "fine," praising the work for its form and not only for its content: he was the first to say that Primo Levi was a writer. A year later he confirmed his judgment, writing in an essay about diaries of the Lager: "I will confine myself to citing the one that, and I believe I am not mistaken, is the finest of all: *If This Is a Man*, by Primo Levi: a book that for sobriety of language, power of images, and psychological acuity is truly unsurpassed."

In the summer of 1948 *If This Is a Man* was a candidate for the Viareggio Prize, one of the most prestigious in Italy. Levi was eliminated in the first phases of the contest, and yet, along with Calvino's judgment, and with the literary attempts he was making in those same months (poems, stories) in directions different from that of the witness, his nomination for the prize is an indication of the wish to build for himself a possible path as a full-time writer. The attempt failed; but that same year Levi received a great moral and literary acknowledgment, although it was limited to a private exchange of letters. The poet Umberto Saba (1883–1957; his mother was Jewish, and his birth name was Umberto Poli) wrote to him on November 3:

> Dear Signor Primo Levi,
>
> I don't know if it will please you to hear from me that your book *If This Is a Man* is more than a fine book, it's a fated book. Someone had to write it: destiny willed that that someone should be you.
>
> It is fated as, in the last century, Silvio Pellico's *My Prisons* was. Was it successful? Was it not? I don't know anything about it. Horror and, even more, disgust for what is happening isolate me increasingly from everything that is written and said today. And even your book I got by chance; unlikely that I would have bought it. But as soon as I began to read, I couldn't stop. Now it is as if I had personally had the experience of Auschwitz. If it were possible, I would order that it be used as a school text. But those responsible (if men can be responsible for something) for the extermination camps will be careful not to. Unfortunately, the immense crisis of evil and stupidity that began in 1914 will need some centuries to wear itself out. I have the impression that your book will live even beyond the crisis. Because many others have described those horrors, but they have all done it from the outside; no one—at least as far as I know—has suffered them, and rendered them, from the inside.
>
> *Yours, with gratitude and affection*
> SABA

In 1949 De Silva, in financial difficulties, handed over its activities and its warehouse to a publisher in Florence, La Nuova Italia. Hundreds of copies of *If This Is a Man* remained unsold. The verb with which Levi notes the natural disaster that destroyed them, on November 4, 1966, is remarkable, tying them to the Lager and to Dante's Ulysses: "They drowned in Florence during the flood because Nuova Italia, which had taken the rights, kept the volumes in a cellar."

The Levi who made his debut was therefore appreciated as a writer, and at the end of the forties he received various invitations to contribute to journals. Despite his attempts at different kinds of writing, he did not neglect his book, which, because of the change in publisher, was now out of print. In 1952 he offered it a second time to Einaudi, for which he had started working as a translator of scientific books. In this attempt he had the support of Paolo Boringhieri, who a few years later set out on his own, founding the publishing house that bears his name. Now, again, Einaudi said no to "Primo Levi's fine book," which, according to Einaudi's records, "having already been through the hands of two publishers, wouldn't have much chance of success."

However, the publisher had agreed that *If This Is a Man* was a "fine" book, and two years later it established a new series of works devoted to the deportation and the extermination of the Jews, bringing out Robert Antelme's *Espèce humaine* (*The Human Race*), the diary of Anne Frank, and the *Bréviaire de la haine: Le IIIe Reich et les Juifs* (*The Breviary of Hatred: The Third Reich and the Jews*), by Léon Poliakov. The time was ripe, and, finally, ten years after the liberation, a third proposal was successful. The contract for a new Einaudi edition was signed on July 11, 1955. Almost three years passed before the book was printed: in 1956 Einaudi suffered a severe financial crisis and had to cut back its new publications. In compensation, Levi had time to reconsider the structure of his book. He didn't rearrange it and didn't rewrite, but he made many small corrections and some notable additions; the earliest and most orderly study of the variations was done by the critic and philologist Giovanni Tesio in 1977. Yet, even in the absence of a real remaking, *If This Is a Man*–1947 can be considered a work on its own.

Tesio explains that "the largest number of additions is in the first part of the book, up to and including the chapter 'Our Nights.' Afterward, only the chapter 'The Last One' has a substantial addition. Elsewhere it's a matter of

alterations in the order of a few lines or even a few words." In particular, all the events leading up to Levi's arrival at Fòssoli, in the chapter "The Journey," are new: the 1947 version began with the sentence "In mid-February 1944 there were six hundred Italian Jews in the camp at Fòssoli." Also new are the portrait of the child Emilia, the encounter with Schlome, and the background of the character of Alberto, who only in 1958 becomes a fully rounded figure; the biggest addition has to do with the three stratagems for survival related in the chapter "The Last One," in whose 1958 version picaresque pages and dramatic pages end up coexisting. The end of "On the Bottom" is new, with the quotation from Dante and the soldier thief. Right after "On the Bottom," Levi inserts a completely new chapter, "Initiation," which, if we recall his letters to Jean Samuel, is perfectly balanced between the essay and the short story. Tesio notes that the "work of revision . . . appears to follow the sole criterion of adhering more closely to the testimonial and psychological truth of the material." In the 1958 edition this truth is expressed by a structural symmetry as well: now that there are seventeen chapters in the book, "The Drowned and the Saved" occupies the ninth position, at the exact center of the work. The chapter of those who survive, either by force or by cunning, therefore appears as the fulcrum of the book, fittingly for a text that, after years of new reflections, will resonate with the pages on the gray zone in a work that bears the identical title.

The new edition of *If This Is a Man*, like the first, was part of a nonfiction series, "Saggi." Starting in 1960, the pace of reprintings increased, and as early as mid-1959 the work of the German translator Heinz Riedt began, leading to the publication, in November 1961, of *Ist das ein Mensch?* In 1962 Radio Canada submitted to Levi an abridgment of the text that the author liked so much that, two years later and along the same lines, he put together a script for Italian radio. The director was Giorgio Bandini, one of the first directors to stage Beckett in Italy.

In 1966 a theater version, written by Pieralberto Marché and Primo Levi, and directed by Gianfranco De Bosio for the Teatro Stabile of Turin, was staged. For this production, Levi sent the costume designer, Gianni Polidori, letters and notes accompanied by drawings in which he described certain concrete aspects of the camp, such as the uniform and the crude utensils available to the Häftlinge. The theater version of *If This Is a Man* was published by Einaudi; in the Preface Levi compared himself—for the

first time publicly—to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. The show's national premiere, scheduled for Florence, was canceled because of the flood that year (which thus "drowned" Levi's work in two different ways). The show finally opened in Turin two weeks later, on November 18, and had around fifty performances; it was awarded the Saint-Vincent prize as the best theatrical text of 1966.

In 1972 *If This Is a Man* was published in an edition for middle schools, as *The Truce* had been in 1965. In this case, too, Levi wrote a preface intended for students (it is included in *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980*, in volume 2). Levi also compiled explanatory footnotes and added two maps, representing Nazi Europe covered by Lagers and the system of camps and subcamps making up Auschwitz; finally, he provided a bibliography on the subject. In 1976 he added to the school edition another appendix, in which he responded to the most recurrent questions asked by readers, especially students. Starting in 1979, this appendix was included in all Italian editions of the work.

Levi's final work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, is a meditation on the Lager forty years after the events. But Levi never stopped reflecting on his first book, and answering questions about it. In 1985, when the Australian writer Germaine Greer asked him to talk about the literary quality of *If This Is a Man*, he confessed that in the course of decades he had

> constructed a sort of legend around that book, that I wrote it without a plan, that I wrote it on impulse, that I wrote it without reflecting at all.
>
> The other people I've talked to about [it] accepted the legend. In fact, writing is never spontaneous. Now that I think about it, I can see that this book is full of literature, literature absorbed through the skin, even while I was rejecting it (because I was a bad student of Italian literature). . . . When the time came, and I needed to write this book, and I did have a pathological need to write it, I found inside myself a whole "program." And it was that literature I'd studied more or less unwillingly, the Dante I'd to do in high school, the Italian classics, and so forth.

Levi's "and so forth" hints at a long list of sources. The ideal guide for this exploration is the edition of *If This Is a Man* with commentary by Alberto Cavaglion, published in 2012 by Einaudi. Among other things, Cavaglion points out the changing presence of Dante in Levi's work: the Dante of *The Truce* "is already no longer the same as that of *If This Is a Man*," while "Biblical Scripture loses its function as a frame for the narrative." Other presences, from Dostoevsky to Eliot and Vercors, "are

reduced or eliminated . . . as the result of a ruthless operation of self-revision. Not to mention Baudelaire, literally removed."

This library of the Primo Levi of *If This Is a Man* leads back to the image of the book written "immediately." In 1995, fifty years after the Second World War ended, the *Times Literary Supplement* drafted a list of the hundred most important books published in the world since then. There were three Italian titles: Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and two works by Levi, *If This Is a Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved*. In the *TLS* chronology, *If This Is a Man* was placed in the 1950s, without, that is, account being taken of its first edition, written so soon after the events that it was narrating. "Immediately," in 1947, Levi had been capable of describing Auschwitz to the entire world, with a unique balance of attention and vision, of empathy and detachment. It is often said that the horrors of the Lager are unspeakable and indescribable; people seldom consider, instead, the increase in expressiveness that, thanks precisely to Levi, has been gained from Auschwitz: the density of meanings, the patrimony of new images, the inexhaustible thesaurus of surprising and disturbing moral definitions that his deceptively clear pages offer.

What do we look for when we prepare to read Primo Levi? We look for truth: the truth of the facts. Yet there is a second truth: the truth of style, the presence of literature. Levi's is not literature *of* the Shoah or *on* the Shoah. It is literature *in* the Shoah: as Umberto Saba saw, Levi's first book speaks physically and mentally from within the Shoah, with the body, the voice, and the intellect of a witness, of a witness who discovers—as the reader, too, discovers—that he is a writer. If Levi is measured according to the dimensions of international literature, *If This Is a Man* really is a book written *immediately*: contemporaneously with Antelme's *Espèce humaine* and Gramsci's *Letters from Prison*, which also came out in 1947.

The first English edition of *If This Is a Man*, translated by Stuart Woolf, was published in 1959 by Orion Press, in New York, and Bodley Head, in London.

THE TRUCE

"I had a railway guide, so to speak, of my journey home. A sort of itinerary: such-and-such a day in such-and-such a place, in such-and-such other place.

I found it, and I used it as an outline, almost fifteen years ago, for writing *The Truce*." Primo Levi had an excellent memory: he nurtured it by keeping his attention focused and by recording the important facts. Yet he had a reflective temperament, and he didn't write immediately. Significantly, *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce* were not composed right after the liberation of Auschwitz, or during the journey home—a journey that in the last chapter of *The Truce* Levi defines as "an interlude of unlimited openness, a providential gift of destiny, never to be repeated." These words explain the noun "truce," telling us that, during the eight and a half months (from January 27 to October 19, 1945) that elapsed between the arrival of the Red Army at the gates of Auschwitz and the return of the survivor Primo Levi to his home in Turin, the experience of Auschwitz was not over.

Before the completed act, there is the act that is being completed, the event in progress: this holds true for real events and for writing as well. A literary style is not ready-made, and certainly Levi's was not. *The Truce*, published fifteen years after *If This Is a Man*, is a very different book. In a sense, Levi had to invent two languages, so as to be able to tell us about two worlds and two journeys, the downward journey of the Lager, the upward journey of freedom regained. We can identify the path of this work in one of the most famous episodes of the book, the story of Hurbinek, the child who cannot speak but utters "slightly different articulated words," who carries out "experimental variations on a theme, a root, maybe a name," and who "continued his obstinate experiments as long as he lived." In this episode, Levi calls us to witness the very invention of language: a fundamental battle with the hunger to express oneself, a struggle for life that represents for the person describing it the invention of *his own* language, the construction of himself as a writer.

If This Is a Man ends in a state of suspension that is also a hope: with the name of a friend, Charles, with whom Levi has already, since the liberation, "exchanged long letters" (here is, again, writing), and whom he hopes "to see again one day." His first book concludes at that point, but the impulse behind the story was not used up. It turns out that shortly after completing *If This Is a Man,* Levi had drafted at least the first chapter of the future *Truce*: "I had written one or two chapters . . . in '47/'48, which became the first chapter of *The Truce*," he said in an interview. A letter of December 4, 1947, from Levi to Arrigo Cajumi, the first reviewer of *If This Is a Man*, confirms his early intention of writing a second book, about the

adventures of the journey home. Further evidence indicates that a first draft of the chapter “The Greek” goes back to 1954, while the episode of Ferrari, the ineffectual pickpocket of the chapter “Katowice,” appeared in the Turin daily *Stampa Sera* on December 19–20, 1959.

But writing, or the attempt to write, was in some sense secondary. For years Levi had been telling stories of his adventures on the way home through a war-ravaged Europe to friends, relatives, and also—as soon as he became a public figure, a writer invited to speak in public—high school students. It was in those performances that the structure of the individual episodes took shape, along with their rhythm, their humor, their style. Levi told Philip Roth that he had “retouched” each episode “en route so as to arouse [the] most favorable reactions.” When he started on his third career, as the public witness (alongside the chemist and the writer), Levi presented himself not only as a guardian of memory and as a survivor of the Shoah but as a character in an adventure novel: an epic that he was able to relate with the talents of an anthropologist and a humorist. He also told Roth: “A friend of mine, an excellent doctor, told me many years ago: ‘Your remembrances of before and after are in black and white; those of Auschwitz and your travel home are in Technicolor.’”

Levi declared repeatedly that he had written *If This Is a Man* in a rush, as if an interior voice were dictating it, sentence by sentence. Today we know that, on the contrary, a rich library of literary and figurative allusions stands behind the book, and that the author’s attention to his style was meticulous. And yet that sensation of being guided by a prompter was in some sense well founded: the naturalness of expression, the urgency to tell coincided with the creation of a literary language. When Levi finally decided to put into writing the stories of *The Truce*, the experience was diametrically opposite: “I had described that return journey a thousand times: it was as if I had dictated it.” This time, then, it was he himself who was dictating, guiding events with the consciousness of the professional writer. And it was he who decided when to begin: “Finally the moment arrived in which the equation between free time, desire, and the pressure from others was perfect.” At the end of the text we read the dates “Turin, December 1961–November 1962.”

The title that Levi initially gave the work was *Vento Alto*, or *High Wind*. The image is of regeneration after catastrophe, and contains a religious allusion: the high wind that God sent over the earth to dry it after the Flood:

“And God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters assuaged.” The title *The Truce* was suggested later by Giorgio Lattes, an engineer who was a childhood friend of Levi. The book was published by Einaudi in April 1963. *The Truce* belongs to the so-called era of détente, the era of Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Pope John XXIII, which marked a truce in the cold war. Levi explained to Roth that “in Italy, for the first time, you could speak of the USSR in objective terms without being called a philo-Communist by the right wing and a disruptive reactionary by the powerful Italian Communist Party.”

The jacket copy, not signed, was by Italo Calvino: “As the miracle of *If This Is a Man* was a classical equanimity in the face of the atrocious material of the story, here, in *The Truce*, in this lively, colorful account of an unexpected springtime of freedom, there is a poignant note of anguish, of an incurable sadness.” This dark state of mind is most evident at the end of the book, with the dream of the Lager as the only permanent reality. That nightmare is not connected only to the first page, where Levi lays out the theme of the “shame of the survivor,” a theme that he returned to in *The Drowned and the Saved*. The dream in which “nothing outside the Lager was true” also corresponds to a line of the poem that opens *If This Is a Man*, in which Levi expresses the wish “May your house fall down,” addressing those who refuse to listen to and reflect on his story. This is exactly what happens in the final dream of *The Truce*, where “everything collapses and is destroyed around me. . . . I am alone at the center of a gray and murky void.” The wish comes true, but for the very person who flung it at his recalcitrant listeners. The detail is striking, as is the fact that “gray” is the color evoked. In fact, *The Truce* contains vivid examples of the two principal themes of *The Drowned and the Saved*: at the start of his investigation into “Shame,” Levi directly transcribes the first page of *The Truce*; and the “gray zone” is also represented, and not only in the color that pervades the final nightmare.

In *The Truce* Levi presents himself as a spectator-actor who lives in an in-between state: he is no longer a prisoner who has been stripped even of his name, but he is not yet a man fully reintegrated into his own life and the life of his country. This state is called “limbo,” or “Purgatory,” in the same pages in which Levi tells the story of Hurbinek. The only person in the entire Big Camp—the main Auschwitz camp—who is capable of communicating with Hurbinek, of offering him concrete help, is Henek, the

fifteen-year-old Hungarian boy who “spent half his days beside Hurbinek’s bed,” and knew how to be “maternal rather than paternal.” Right after the conclusion of the story of Hurbinek we learn that Henek, during his months in Auschwitz, was the Kapo of the children’s Lager. “When there were selections in the children’s Block, it was he who chose. Did he not feel remorse? No: why should he? Was there another way to survive?” Henek, the only person in the entire limbo of the Big Camp who could have taught Hurbinek to speak, is a perfect representative of the “gray zone,” though in 1963 it did not yet have a name.

The Truce was immediately popular among Italian readers. Sales were high, reviews numerous and admiring. It came in third for the Strega Prize, and won the Campiello Prize, which, though only in its first year, was already prestigious. A professional jury made up of nine writers and critics chose five finalists, and, from among these, three hundred ordinary readers, from all over Italy, chose the winner. Levi was awarded the prize at the Campiello’s headquarters, at the Fondazione Cini, in Venice, on September 3, 1963. A journalist happened to observe Levi on the train to Venice: he was reading Isaac Asimov in English, “with the same devout scruples with which one would read a breviary.” Although *The Truce* was Levi’s second book, he didn’t frequent literary circles. Asimov was not mainstream literature (and Levi himself wrote and published science fiction stories), and Levi felt alien among professional writers.

Starting with *The Truce*, however, literature was destined to be, for Levi, an increasingly absorbing activity. He had described the adventure of the journey—even before his return—in a letter written in Katowice on June 6, 1945, and addressed to his friend Bianca Guidetti Serra: “I’m dressed like a tramp and I may arrive home without shoes, but in exchange I’ve learned German, and a little Russian and Polish, and also how to get by in many circumstances, not to lose courage, and to endure moral and physical sufferings. I’ve grown a beard again, to save on the barber; I know how to make cabbage-and-turnip soup, and can cook potatoes in a lot of different ways, none with seasonings. I know how to set up, light, and clean a stove. I’ve done an incredible number of jobs: mason’s helper, digger, garbage collector, porter, gravedigger, interpreter, bicyclist, tailor, thief, nurse, fence, stone breaker—even chemist!” From these vividly descriptive lines we have the proof that, if the writer did not yet exist, the narrator was already at work for the people close to him. This work continued through

the years. In 1965, Einaudi published a version of *The Truce* for students, for which Levi wrote notes and an introduction (the latter can be read here in *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980*); in that edition the brief passages having to do with sexual desire, although innocent, were cut. In the spring of 1978, Italian radio's Channel 1 broadcast a radio version of *The Truce*, under the direction of Edmo Fenoglio. Here, too, as for the radio and theater versions of *If This Is a Man*, the aim was to reproduce the book's Babel of languages.

The first English translation of the work, by Stuart Woolf, was published in England in 1965, by Bodley Head, with the title *The Truce* and the subtitle *A Survivor's Journey Home from Auschwitz*, and the same year in the United States by Atlantic Monthly Press, under the title *The Reawakening*.

NATURAL HISTORIES

In late 1965, Italo Calvino gave Primo Levi a copy of his book *Cosmicomics*, signing it: "To Primo Levi, who traveled down this path before me." At that point, Levi had published only *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*, but Calvino knew what he was talking about, because some years earlier, as an editor at Einaudi, he had considered a group of stories by Levi that had a completely different source. From his opinion as a reader, dated November 22, 1961, we can deduce what they were:

> Dear Levi,
>
> I finally read your stories. The science fiction, or rather biological fiction, ones, always appeal to me. Your fantasy mechanism, which takes off from a scientific-genetic starting point, has a power of suggestion that's intellectual but also poetic, just like the genetic and morphological digressions of Jean Rostand. Your humor and your elegance easily save you from the danger of falling to a level of subliterature, a danger that those who use literary molds for intellectual experiments of this type often run into. Some of your inspirations are first-rate, like the Assyriologist who deciphers the mosaic of tapeworms; and the evocation of the origin of the centaurs has a poetic force, an

> impressive plausibility (and, my goodness, one would have said that writing about centaurs is impossible today, and you've avoided the Anatole France–Walt Disney–type pastiche).
>
> Naturally, you still lack the confident hand of the writer who has a complete stylistic personality, like Borges. . . . You move in a dimension of intelligent digression on the edges of a cultural-ethical-scientific panorama that reflects the Europe we live in. Maybe the principal reason I like your stories so much is that they assume a common culture notably different from the one assumed by so much of Italian literature.

Calvino had thus hesitated for some time before reading the stories, fearing that they were "subliterature." Now he could say to his colleague that they were authentically literature and, in addition, in a genre very different from what was being practiced at the time in Italy and elsewhere. The mere fact that he mentions Borges as a term of comparison attests to the sincerity of his opinion.

So, as early as 1961—that is, even before turning to the writing of *The Truce*—Levi wanted to present himself to the public as a writer, and as an author of fantastic stories. Calvino's letter alludes to "Man's Friend" and to an early version of "*Quaestio de Centauris*" entitled "The Centaur Trachi." Both stories appeared in the Roman weekly *Il Mondo*, on January 16, 1962, and April 4, 1961, respectively.

Natural Histories was published by Einaudi in September 1966 under the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila, but the journey of the fifteen pieces collected in the volume had begun at least twenty years earlier. Levi wrote "The Mnemagogs" in 1946, and it was published on December 19, 1948, in *L'Italia Socialista*, a left-wing daily. Between 1946 and 1947 he had the idea for "The Sixth Day," which appeared in the September–November 1958 issue of *Questioni*, a Turin literary journal. Calvino confided to Levi that that story had provided the first inspiration for *Cosmicomics*; that was the reason for the dedication. "Sleeping Beauty in the Refrigerator," broadcast by Italian radio in June 1961, went back to 1952. Finally, Calvino had surely also read "The Versifier" and "Censorship in Bitinia," which appeared in *Il Mondo* on, respectively, May 17, 1960, and June 10, 1961.

These facts demonstrate that the chronology of Levi's writings has some notable surprises for readers and scholars. One of the biggest is that the

need to bear witness to Auschwitz before the world (and to create a language suitable for communicating the experience) was accompanied from the start—from 1946, at least—by another, complementary vocation: one that led Levi to compose fantastic stories based on a vast technical-scientific knowledge, stories that are transparent but complex, in which the spark of invention and the organizing logic have roles of equal importance.

Thus Levi the witness and Levi the writer were born simultaneously, and simultaneously began to function. In fact, after the publication of *Natural Histories* Levi often described himself as a centaur, identifying with Trachi, the most successful character in the collection.

Calvino concluded that 1961 letter to Levi by encouraging him to continue in the new direction. He also advised him to find a proper home for his fantasy stories, so that they could appear with regularity, establishing a dialogue with an audience that would appreciate them. From then on Levi was working mainly on *The Truce*, but in 1962 he published two more stories in *Il Mondo*: "Man's Friend" and "Angelic Butterfly" (August 14). "*Cladonia Rapida*" came out in August 1964 in the Milan monthly *Panorama*, while the last story in the series, "Retirement Package," was published for the first time in *Natural Histories*. In the meantime, however, Levi had found the right home, the Milan daily *Il Giorno*, in which five more stories appeared: "Order at a Good Price" (March 22, 1964), "Some Applications of the Mimete" (August 15, 1964), "The Measure of Beauty" (January 6, 1965), "Versamine" (August 8, 1965), and "Full Employment" (February 27, 1966). It should be noted that in 1965 (a year after Levi, then), Calvino had begun to submit many of his *Cosmicomics* to the same journal: a further reason for the dedication.

In his letter Calvino specified that, rather than "science fiction," Levi's stories were "biological fiction." It was no accident that when, five years later, *Natural Histories* was published, it had a cover band with the blurb "Science fiction?" The reader was supposed to guess that the book contained inventions cast in the future or in a distorted present, but that there was also something very different. Science fiction reached Italy in the early 1950s; the Italian word, "*fantascienza*," had been coined by Giorgio Monicelli, a director of the publishing house Mondadori and the founder of *Urania*, the widest-circulation Italian science fiction magazine. There were many others, but throughout the fifties sci-fi remained a literary genre without much prestige—pure entertainment, like crime novels.

Furthermore, the few attempts at sci-fi on the part of Italian writers appeared weak and far-fetched; *Urania* refused to publish them, accepting only sci-fi in English. A shift occurred in 1959, when Sergio Solmi, an essayist and poet, proposed to Einaudi that he put together a big sci-fi anthology. The book was enormously successful; given that a first-rank publisher like Einaudi was responsible for it, the major Italian literary critics discussed it, and so sci-fi (at least, the best sci-fi) gained the sort of attention usually reserved for mainstream literary genres. In 1961 Einaudi published a second anthology, edited by the writers and translators Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini, which was also successful.

Levi, who for many years had been practicing his peculiar sci-fi, thus had to move within a fast-changing and tumultuous literary scene. His difficulty was twofold: to be accepted as an Italian writer of sci-fi, and to be accepted as a fantasy writer after publishing two memoirs that had their origin in the experience of deportation. Einaudi proposed a compromise, to which Levi agreed: to publish *Natural Histories* under a pseudonym, but let the identity of the author be evident from the jacket copy. As in the case of *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*, it was Calvino who wrote the copy:

> The fifteen "entertainments" that compose this book invite us to enter a future that is increasingly propelled by the frenetic impulse of technological progress, and is hence a theater of disquieting or utopian experiments, in which extraordinary and unpredictable machines act. And yet it's not sufficient to classify these pages under the label of science fiction. Satire and poetry can be found here, nostalgia for the past and anticipation of the future, epic and daily reality, scientific formulation and the pull of the absurd, love of the natural order and a taste for subverting it, humanism and polite malice. The author is a chemist, and his profession filters through in the interest in how things are constructed, how they are recognized and analyzed. But he is a chemist who knows human emotions no less than he knows the law of mass action, and he disassembles and reassembles the secret mechanisms that rule human vanities, winking at us from the ironic allegories, the smiling morals that he offers.

At this point, Calvino introduced a letter sent by the author to the publisher:

> I've written some twenty stories and I don't know if I will write others. I wrote them for the most part straight off, trying to give narrative form to a point of intuition, trying to recount in other terms (if they are symbolic, they are so unconsciously) an intuition that today is not rare: the perception of a gap in the world we live in, of a small or large fault, of a "flaw of form" that nullifies some aspect of our civilization or our moral universe. . . . In the act of writing them I feel a vague sense of guilt, as of one who consciously commits a small transgression.
>
> What transgression? Let's see. . . . I entered the world of writing (unexpectedly) with two books about the concentration camps; it's not for me to judge their value, but they were

> undoubtedly serious books, addressed to a serious audience. To offer this audience a volume of joke-stories, of moral traps, entertaining, perhaps, but detached, and cold: isn't this commercial fraud, like someone selling wine in oil bottles? These are questions that I asked myself, in the act of writing and publishing these "natural histories." Well, I wouldn't publish them if I hadn't noticed (not right away, to tell the truth) that between the Lager and these inventions a continuity, a bridge, exists: the Lager, for me, was the largest of the "flaws," of the distortions I spoke of earlier, the most threatening of the monsters generated by the sleep of reason.

Levi's "polite malice" is demonstrated by the German settings of two stories on the theme of eugenics, "Sleeping Beauty in the Refrigerator" and "Angelic Butterfly": "There are reasons of an autobiographical nature that Germany has remained for me the country of violence. Setting a story of that type in that country is also a civilized form of reprisal." His feelings of both uneasiness and confidence toward *Natural Histories* are revealed in the curious image of wine in oil bottles: why "commercial fraud," if that wine and that oil are both genuine products? Levi's new literary product was simply unexpected; and in Italy some attacked it as bad sci-fi, written, besides, by an author of much more serious books. Yet in 1967 *Natural Histories* received the Bagutta Prize, a long established and important literary award.

It remains to explain the mysterious pseudonym, Damiano Malabaila. St. Damian is, with St. Cosmo, the patron of doctors and pharmacists: the nonbeliever Levi always drew confidently on Catholic religious texts, and two doctors (the younger of whom, Morandi, is around his own age) are the main characters in the earliest story, "The Mnemagogs." As for Malabaila, it means "bad nurse" or "bad nourisher" in Piedmontese dialect. Levi explained it thus: "As for the pseudonym, I thought about it a lot. Then it came by itself. Every morning going to work and every evening returning home I pass . . . a car electrician's called Malabaila. It struck me, I appropriated it. Only later did I realize that it was right on the mark: that there was underneath an almost Freudian significance. We've all had a bad nourisher and we can all be bad nourishers of what we do. In my *Natural Histories* there is this vague odor of food that has become tainted, an evil alchemy."

Starting in 1979, the book was reprinted with Levi's name on the cover. Eleven of the stories in *Natural Histories* were published in English for the first time in 1990 in *The Sixth Day and Other Tales* by Summit Books; "Censorship in Bitinia" appeared in *A Tranquil Star*, published by Norton in 2007; in this edition, which matches the original Italian text, "The

Versifier," "*Cladonia Rapida*," and "*Quaestio de Centauris*" appear for the first time in English.

FLAW OF FORM

Levi wrote the twenty stories in *Flaw of Form* in a short period of time, between 1967 and 1970. For Italy these were years of upheaval in society, in the economy, in politics, in public morality. "Sessantotto"—a date, 1968, written in letters—was the year of the student protests, while 1969 was marked by the union struggles of the so-called hot autumn and, just a little later, on December 12, in Milan, by a neo-Fascist act of terrorism: a bomb went off in a bank, leaving seventeen dead and eighty-eight wounded. Fears of a reactionary coup were widespread, and a period of extreme political tension began: what came to be called the "years of lead." Politics was dominant, yet it doesn't seem to trouble the stories in *Flaw of Form*, where Levi gives voice to other preoccupations. Here is the jacket copy (anonymous but surely written by the author) of the first edition, published by Einaudi in February 1971:

> Will there be historians in the future—even, let's say, in the next century? It's not at all certain: mankind may have lost any interest in the past, preoccupied as it will surely be in sorting out the tangle of the future; or it may have lost the taste for works of the spirit in general, being focused uniquely on survival; or it may have ceased to exist. But, if there are historians, they will not devote much time to the Punic Wars, or the Crusades, or Waterloo, but will instead concentrate on this twentieth century, and, more specifically, the decade that has just begun.
>
> It will be a unique decade. In the space of a few years, almost overnight, we've realized that something conclusive has happened, or is about to happen: like someone who, navigating on a calm river, suddenly observes that the banks are retreating backward, the water teeming with whirlpools, and hears the thunder of waterfalls close by. There is no indicator that is not soaring upward: the world population, DDT in the fat of penguins, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, lead in our veins. While half the world is still waiting for the benefits of technology, the other half has touched lunar soil and is poisoned by the garbage that has accumulated in a decade: but there is no choice, we cannot return to Arcadia; by technology, and by that alone, can the planetary order be restored, the "flaw of form" repaired. Before the urgency of these problems, the political questions pale. This is the climate in which, literally or in spirit, the twenty stories by Primo Levi presented here take place. Beyond the veil of irony, it is close to that of his preceding books: we breathe an air of sadness but not hopelessness, of distrust in the present and, at the same time, considerable confidence in the future: man the maker of himself, inventor and unique possessor of reason, will be able to stop in time on his path "heading west."

At an early point, the book was to be entitled *Anti-Humanism*. In a television interview in the spring of 1971, Levi explained the ultimate title, *Flaw of Form*, saying that, by using that bureaucratic formula, he wanted to allude to an "error of substance": to the failure, serious but perhaps not irremediable, of technology as a factor in progress. And he was careful to emphasize the importance of the science fiction model—visionary inventions based on technical-scientific knowledge—which turned out to be particularly well suited to confronting current sociological problems. Levi declared that he was opposed to despair, which "is surely irrational: it resolves no problems, creates new ones, and is by its nature painful." He continued, rather, to claim a "faith that I would call biological, that saturates every living fiber," but at the same time he said of the language of his new stories that it is "a language that I feel is ironic, and that I perceive as strident, awry, spiteful, deliberately anti-poetic."

Unlike *Natural Histories*, published under a pseudonym, *Flaw of Form* came out with the author's name on the cover. It's an unusually unified work. Only one of the stories, "Observed from a Distance," had appeared earlier, in an anthology, before being collected in the volume. Among the literary models for these stories Levi mentions Samuel Butler, Jules Verne, and H. G. Wells, and he dedicates to Calvino the story "His Own Maker"; Levi had in fact expressed the intention of asking Calvino whether he could borrow the protagonist of *Cosmicomics*, the petulant Ofwfq, to play a role in one of the stories. Although he gave up this idea, the story he alludes to is "His Own Maker," which, like the stories in *Cosmicomics*, has the structure of a monologue.

Twelve of the stories in *Flaw of Form* appeared in English in *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*, published by Summit Books in 1990, and two others in *A Tranquil Star* (Norton, 2007), while six stories appear here in English for the first time: "Protection," "The Synthetics," "Vilmy," "Creative Work," "Our Fine Specifications," and "Written on the Forehead."

THE PERIODIC TABLE

"I tried to write some stories about my life in the factory. They're the worst. No, I'll never succeed," Levi made this gloomy confession to an interviewer in 1966, immediately adding, "It's the other world that is

realized in my books. The world that includes my experiences as a young man, the racial discrimination, my attempts not to be different from my schoolmates, and then my discovery of the Jewish tradition (Judaism as opposed to fascism, as freedom is to terror, because I also discovered that many principles of freedom are found within the substance of the purest Jewish tradition), and the partisan war, and, finally, the Lager."

This passage contains allusions to many of the stories in the future *Periodic Table*, starting with the stories about the factory. The harsh judgment was justified. Shortly after *If This Is a Man* came out, Levi published two stories about work, "Maria and the Circle," in *L'Italia Socialista* (September 19, 1948), and "Night Shift," in the Piedmontese edition of *L'Unità* (August 31, 1950), and although they became chapters of *The Periodic Table*—with the titles "Titanium" and "Sulfur"—he was aware of their weakness. He had always harbored the ambition of writing stories based on his profession, but he lacked the right narrative key, as well as a structure that would provide some consistency. We know that in 1961 Italo Calvino had encouraged him to pursue his particular science fiction, but the rest had left Calvino puzzled: "There are fewer possibilities for the other kind of story. The ones about the Lager are fragments of *If This Is a Man*, which, detached from a broader narrative, have the limitations of the sketch. And the attempt at a Conradian mountain-climbing epic appeals to all my sympathies, but for now it remains an intention." The "Conradian attempt," titled "Bear Meat," was published in 1961, in the August 29 issue of the weekly *Il Mondo*. It's a first draft of the chapter "Iron," less compact than the final version (it can be found in *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980*). Calvino's mention of other "stories about the Lager" leads us to hypothesize that Levi had already showed him what became the chapter "Cerium," whose date of composition is unknown. Speaking about "Cerium" to Turinese readers in 1975, Levi implicitly agreed with Calvino: "I did not put that episode in *If This Is a Man* so as not to contaminate it, because the episode is cheerful. Cheerful . . . well, the background isn't cheerful, but it's the story of a victory, of an audacious and risky undertaking, carried to its conclusion. And so it would have been jarring within that other context, which is, rather, a context of defeats, a context of tragedies, a dramatic context. I didn't exactly reason it out like that; but, intuitively, it seemed to me that it didn't belong in that other place."

When Levi finally had the idea of linking to chemical elements some stories he had already written and other stories that he had wanted to write for a long time, he found the context that had been missing: the periodic table not only was an organizing principle but gave a new coloring to each narrative component. In the 1966 interview cited above, it's not hard to recognize "Argon," "Zinc," "Gold," and "Potassium" (none of which had been published in the fifties or sixties), plus the already mentioned "Iron." We can deduce that at the time Levi didn't think these stories could be part of a cycle that also included the stories about work: they were of a different type, autobiographical tales devoted to his upbringing, to his Jewish identity, to the struggle against fascism. The idea that turned out to be crucial for the new book had therefore two components: first, the bond between each story and a particular chemical element; second, the welding together of Levi's two inspirations, private, autobiographical memory (which produced successful texts) and the experience of work (which until 1966 had produced disappointing texts).

In the space of barely two years, the idea of *The Periodic Table* proved to be effective: in October 1968, Levi confided to another interviewer, his Croatian translator Mladen Machiedo, that he had written "Hydrogen" and a first draft of "Carbon." Among his stories, "Carbon" had the longest journey: from "Gold" we learn that the idea of writing it preceded his deportation to the Lager. And the testimony of Pikolo/Jean Samuel reveals that in Auschwitz Levi told him two stories: the first and better known, Dante's canto of Ulysses, is a literary episode around which Levi constructed one of the finest chapters of *If This Is a Man.* The second was, in fact, the "story of a carbon atom." Levi mentioned it frequently to Samuel, and the scientific idea made a stronger impression on him than did the lines of the *Inferno*.

Levi wrote "Carbon" in 1970 and published it in 1972 (*Uomini e Libri*, October) in a nearly final form, from which we can assume that the structure of the book had by then been established. Two years later, on November 12, 1974, Calvino (who, as an Einaudi consultant and by explicit wish of the author, was always the first to read Levi's books) wrote from Paris, where he was living:

Dear Primo,

> I've looked at the new draft of *The Periodic Table* and it seems to me it's going very well. I read the new chapters "Iron," "Phosphorus," "Nitrogen," "Uranium," "Silver," "Vanadium," which enrich the "chemical" (and moral) autobiography.
>
> Putting "Carbon" at the end, and having it symbolize the experience of the writer, is a good idea. And since the whole structure of the book is now stronger, the heterogeneity of "Lead" and "Mercury" (in italics) doesn't disturb the whole.
>
> As for "Argon," I still have reservations about the fact that it's at the beginning (in spite of its value as a prologue), because it's the only chapter in which the chemical element is metaphorical; here, too, the structural difference wouldn't be so obvious if the chapter were in the middle of the book. (For example: return from deportation; finding that the family has survived; reflection on the meaning of family continuity). But if the chapters are in order by atomic weight (with exceptions, I think) I won't say anything else.
>
> In short, in my view the book now exists, and I'm very pleased about it.

The letter tells us which stories were written last. Calvino, who names them in the same order in which they appear in the final table of contents, was also partly right about "Argon," a story that is different from all the others in the book. Levi told a young student that he had started writing it in 1946, that is, at the same time as *If This Is a Man*. An early version of it, at least, must date from that time; others followed, in 1970 and 1973. Also in 1946, Levi had written the short poem "Ostjuden," in which he paid homage to the Jews of Eastern Europe, whom he had met for the first time in the Lager. The two texts, "Argon" and "Ostjuden," set up a sort of ethical and ethnic pairing.

It was Calvino who called *The Periodic Table* the most "Primo-Levian" of Primo Levi's books. Levi, introducing "Carbon" in *Uomini e Libri*, explained that the future book had its origin in the same vein as *Natural Histories* and *Flaw of Form*: he thus emphasized the fantasy inspiration and the scientific content. Today, owing to the strength of the autobiographical elements, the reader tends to compare it, rather, to *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*. (The chapters "Lead" and "Mercury" are exceptions, but they are

historical fantasies, explicitly presented as youthful efforts; and so they, too, count as autobiography rather than as literary invention.) Perhaps it would be more balanced to conclude that *The Periodic Table* is "Primo-Levian" because, in twenty-one short pieces distributed along a chronological arc of more than thirty years, it gives expression to all of Levi's talents as a writer. And yet, until a fairly late phase of its construction, Levi had an image of the book that was markedly different from the final result.

The Periodic Table was published by Einaudi in April 1975. It received excellent reviews (including one by Natalia Ginzburg, the author of *Family Sayings*, who praised in particular the linguistic and family epic "Argon") and won the Prato Prize. In 2006, a contest sponsored by *The Guardian* awarded it a prize as "the best science book ever written."

The Periodic Table was first published in the United States at the end of 1984 by Schocken Books.

THE WRENCH

When Primo Levi published *The Wrench*, in 1978, he had been writing full-time for more than a year, having given up his job as a chemist in September 1977. The idea for the book had come to him, however, during a journey connected to his work: in the fall of 1972 he had spent several weeks in the USSR, in Tolyatti, where a Fiat plant was under construction, an immense city-factory rising out of nothing in the middle of a forest. In *The Wrench* he pays homage to Russia, stating, "My curious destiny had determined that my life's most decisive moments would occur in that great and strange country."

The Wrench was published by Einaudi in December 1978; two chapters, the first and the eleventh, had appeared independently in *La Stampa* (on March 13 and June 12, 1977, respectively). The book's jacket copy, by Italo Calvino (not signed), reveals its significance with respect not only to Levi's work but to Italian literature and Italian society at the time:

> In recent years a great number of Italians have been spending varying periods of time in remote, exotic countries as skilled workers on projects undertaken by Italian companies. It's a new type of experience that is showing up in our fiction.
>
> *The Wrench* recounts the adventures of a rigger of cranes, metal structures, suspension bridges, oil-drilling installations: a highly trained technician, who is called on to carry out extremely difficult projects on all continents, a superspecialized worker who spends his life

with contracts and international commissions like a great orchestra conductor, and whose work takes place amid flooding rivers in India, Alaskan ice, African forests, Russian tundras. Only Primo Levi could represent this character completely in his two principal guises: the man of impassioned professional expertise for whom every adventure is also the story of a technical performance, a battle (won or lost) with materials and environmental conditions; and the man who leads the picaresque life of the world traveler, confronting every adventure with an amused and ironic attitude, with a foretaste of the pleasure of telling it to his fellow countrymen, of transforming it into dialect and technical language.

For it is always his voice that we hear in these pages: the voice of the rigger Faussone, a Piedmontese whose dialect is enriched by an inexhaustible store of invented jargon and professional metaphors, which Primo Levi records and transcribes and Italianizes just enough. A dual passion for careful work and vivid language animates the book, thanks to which the boldest technology and a confidence in moving through the world come to us through the lighthearted, unpretentious voice of this character with tenacious local roots, who never retreats in the face of the new and unusual but filters every experience through a vernacular, traditional common sense. (Behind him is an old and formal Turin of which Levi gives us a glimpse when he visits the aunts, but also a dynasty of worker-artisans who migrated from the countryside to the city on the waves of our industrial revolution.) And yet this clever, talkative Faussone is also a man who pursues an ideal with obsessive rigor, a stylist with a clear, sharp morality, an inhabitant of the air, up on the pylons that he is building and checking with his "wrench"; a man always ready to enjoy the pleasures of the world below but only after he's sure that the cables will support the tension of their loads.

Primo Levi, who with *The Periodic Table* gave us a book that is not only a model but rare in our literature, a book about the moral education of a man of our era, in this new volume offers an image (happily "outmoded" with respect to the current mood) of that almost unknown civilization of expertise that still exists in Italy, and in which the ancient nobility of the artisan who makes things with his own hands is revived. And the "*allegro*" of his narration has been familiar to us ever since the journey described in *The Truce*, which was also picaresque but against a background of tragic devastation.

The chemist Primo Levi enters the book as well, conversing with his fellow Turinese Faussone, whom he encounters in far-off places, and comparing the experiences of the rigger of cranes with his own, in his two professions, as a "rigger of molecules" and as a "rigger of stories."

The Wrench is better described as a cycle of stories rather than as a novel; Levi noted that the episode of the "sick duct" was entirely autobiographical, while only one story, about the monkey, was completely invented. For the language, he noted among his models Pier Paolo Pasolini, in particular the two novels *The Ragazzi* (1955) and *A Violent Life* (1959), both about the world of the Roman underclass.

In *The Wrench*, Levi filtered the Piedmontese dialect through the Italian language: the result is an Italian conceived in dialect. The syntax, the grammar, and many words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) of the dialect survive, along with a large repertoire of metaphors and idioms. To all this Levi adds humor and technical precision, his particular contribution. In an interview he explained that he had written *The Wrench* in "a demotic language,

perhaps corrupted, which is the Italian of the factories. I had fun writing Faussone's language: I've never written with such ease. . . . It would be very difficult to tell his stories in Italian. There are technical terms, which no one uses, or even understands. Man the maker speaks the language of men who are makers." When, in 1983, Einaudi published an edition of the book for middle-school students, the linguist Gian Luigi Beccaria was brought in to provide notes.

The publication of *The Wrench* coincided with a dark phase of Italian history. A few months earlier, the terrorists of the Red Brigades had kidnapped and killed Aldo Moro, the leader of the Christian Democratic Party, which had headed every government since the war. The student protests against the political system were at their peak, as were the union struggles. Work, particularly factory work, was in those years considered a humiliating labor; that was why Calvino had written in the jacket copy that *The Wrench* was "happily 'outmoded' with respect to the current mood." Levi in fact hinted at the possibility of freedom through work, if it was performed with passion and skill. He was also (in a book in which the Lager is absent) having a form of revenge against the sign *Arbeit macht frei* over the entrance to Auschwitz: Levi tells a story of work that really does make a man free.

The Wrench was very successful with the public and the critics (in 1979 it won the Bergamo Prize and the Strega), but it also stirred discussions and protests; some papers on the left and representatives of the working and union worlds judged it to be conservative. On January 14, 1979, *La Stampa* organized a debate on the book, with some of the most important sociologists and union officials in Italy participating.

The book appeared in English for the first time in 1986, under the title *The Monkey's Wrench*, published by Summit Books.

UNCOLLECTED STORIES AND ESSAYS: 1949–1980

The majority of the texts that Primo Levi wrote between the late forties and the late seventies, and which at his death had not been published in collections, look like a swarm of meteorites out of the head of the comet *If This Is a Man*. Even in a story like "The End of Marinese" (1949), about the Resistance—the partisan struggle that Levi took part in for only a few

weeks—the role of the witness has a decisive importance. And it should be remembered that the first ten or fifteen years after the war were, for the former deportees, a desert: in Italy public memory of the war was fading, political life was slipping into a moral swamp in which the former Fascists swam confidently, and the specific horror of the extermination of the Jews held no interest for historians or for civilian society. Thus, in the fifties, a tone of grim disappointment dominates, as in the essay "The Deported. Anniversary" (1955), yet we also find unfailingly two enduring qualities of Levi the witness: the persistence of his commitment and the precision of his gaze, his moral judgment.

Gradually, during the sixties and seventies, the themes that Levi took up became more varied. Newspapers and periodicals continued to approach him about writing on subjects related to the Lager, to the Germany of yesterday and today, to totalitarianisms other than that of the Nazis, to the violence spreading through Italian society and in Europe (the terrorism of the Red Brigades, new episodes of anti-Semitism, the first incursions of the Holocaust deniers), while publishers asked him for prefaces to works of *littérature concentrationnaire*—concentration-camp literature—and in fact in some cases it was Levi himself who proposed that a book be published. Notable among these initiatives was the Italian translation, from Dutch, of *The Night of the Girondists* (1976), by Jacques Presser, in whose foreword we can glimpse for the first time the notion of the "gray zone," the subject of the second chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved*. Two years later, in 1978, Levi wrote an obituary for Jean Améry, who in the same book becomes a posthumous interlocutor, both empathetic and polemical. Finally, in this period, Levi gave a talk that, starting with its paradoxical title—"The Non-Writer Writer"—should be placed among his most illuminating self-definitions.

Meanwhile, Levi's books began to travel in geographic space (German editions of *If This Is a Man*, 1961 and 1979, both with prefaces by him), in the temporal space between generations (the school edition of *The Truce*, 1965), and between different literary genres (a dramatic version of *If This Is a Man*, 1966). And Levi himself traveled; in 1968 he published his impressions of Israel. Starting in the midseventies, his presence in the pages of the daily newspapers became more regular. When he decided to put together a collection of his essays, *Other People's Trades* (1985), he chose to document his passion for an encyclopedic knowledge, and he left out the

texts—many written on commission—having to do with Auschwitz and its legacy. Thus, this first part of the uncollected essays might compose a new work of Levi's on the Lager, a companion to the greater testimonies—from *If This Is a Man* to *The Truce* and the autobiographical chapters of *The Periodic Table*. This new book might even be titled, emulating an editorial that appeared on the front page of *La Stampa* in 1975, *This Was Auschwitz*. The last essay here is the text that Levi wrote in 1978 for the Italian Memorial at Auschwitz. It's a succinct and powerful reconstruction of the depraved political acts that made possible fascism, then Nazism, and finally the Shoah. Here at last it can be read and reflected on in its entirety: in 1980, the project for the memorial was modified and only the concluding paragraph was posted at Auschwitz.

The pages of this section are translated and collected for the first time in English as a unit, based on the Italian edition of Levi's complete works, *Opere*, published in 1997 by Einaudi and edited by Marco Belpoliti.

LILITH AND OTHER STORIES

Lilith and Other Stories was published by Einaudi in October 1981. Primo Levi wrote the concise jacket copy himself: "These stories, written between 1975 and 1981, have a variety of subjects and tones. I tried to sort them, and though I sometimes had to force the terms, I've made them into a first group that takes up themes from *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*; a second that continues *Natural Histories* and *Flaw of Form*; and a third in which the characters are, to a certain degree, flesh and blood. I hope that each story properly fulfills its task, which is simply to condense into a few words, and convey to the reader, a precise memory, a state of mind, or even just a thought. Some are happy and some sad, because our days are happy and sad. As far as I know, there are no vital messages or revelations in them; if the reader finds them, it's of his own goodwill."

There are thirty-six stories: twelve in the first section, "Present Perfect"; fifteen in the second, "Future Anterior"; and nine in the last, "Present Indicative," whose title partly refutes the intention not to send messages, since "indicative," in this context, could also have the sense of "pointing to" something. Twenty-nine of the stories appeared in *La Stampa* or its cultural supplement *Tuttolibri*, eighteen of them—half the book—in the years 1977–

78. The most recent (August 23, 1981) was “The Soul and the Engineers,” but Levi had subjected the two earliest stories to intense revisions. “Capaneus,” the story that opens *Lilith*, came out in *Il Ponte* in November 1959. That first version was saturated with literary references, including the title. Rappoport, the story’s protagonist, is compared to Dante’s Capaneus (*Inferno* XIV:63–72), the proudest and most hostile to God among the seven kings who attacked Thebes.

But in the few pages of the first draft of “Capaneus” there were also quotations from François Villon, Rabelais, and the Edda, and even a brief burlesque in Latin, confidently performed by Rappoport. In the new version that appeared in *La Stampa* on May 28, 1978, all this had disappeared, along with the first version’s singular opening: “Me, you know me. It may be that at that time and in that place, in those zebra-striped rags, with my beard rougher than usual and my head shorn, I looked very different from the way I do today; but it’s not important, the essence hasn’t changed.” Thus, before describing Rappoport, the narrator Primo Levi introduced himself, a man proud of no longer being the Auschwitz deportee (Levi was sending readers back to *If This Is a Man*, which in 1959 was the only book he had published) but also of having been that deportee without losing his dignity and his faculty of attention. Those initial words, which in Italian sound abrupt, colloquial, and proud—“Me, you know me”—recall another book very dear to Levi, *Moby-Dick*, and its opening: “Call me Ishmael.”

“A Disciple,” originally published in 1961 in *Secondo Risorgimento*, an anthology intended to commemorate both the Resistance and the centennial of the unification of Italy, was also rewritten, appearing in *La Stampa* on June 1, 1975. When, that year, Levi gave Calvino a group of stories to read (see the section on *Natural Histories*, above), “Capaneus” and “A Disciple” were undoubtedly among them. Calvino told him sincerely that the stories about the Lager were merely “fragments of *If This Is a Man*, which, detached from a broader narrative, have the limitations of the sketch.” Levi must have thought he was right, since he rewrote them; and later, signing a copy of *Lilith* for a friend, he described the stories altogether as “slightly faded.”

Even though “Tantalum” (*Il Mondo*, December 27, 1973), the third story in *Lilith* chronologically, has the name of a chemical element as its title, it wasn’t put into *The Periodic Table*, because it was really a science fiction tale that strayed humorously toward the supernatural, and would

have been out of place in a work anchored in reality, autobiography, and factory work.

Seven stories did not appear in *La Stampa*; besides "Tantalum," they are "Gladiators," which appeared in *L'Automobile* (June 15, 1976); "Decoding," in *Prospettive Settanta* (July–September 1976); "The Sorcerers," "Children of the Wind," and "Weekend," in *Notiziario della Banca Popolare di Sondrio* (April and December 1977; August 1978); and "The Return of Lorenzo" (see below). But it would be worthwhile to look more closely at the last two stories of "Present Perfect," a section whose twelve pieces are all moral portraits of characters—a type of writing at which Levi excelled.

"The Return of Lorenzo" is the only story that was published directly in *Lilith*, as if Levi felt ashamed to reveal in a newspaper the end of the man who had saved his life in Auschwitz. Lorenzo Perrone, upon returning to Italy, became voluntarily one of the "drowned," letting himself die. This and the story that follows are in fact the only ones about the "drowned" in the whole collection. And they are symmetrical, because, unlike Lorenzo, Chaim Rumkowski, the "king of the Jews," did everything possible to save himself, even if it was harmful to his people.

"The King of the Jews," which appeared in *La Stampa* on November 20, 1977, is certainly the most important story in *Lilith* and is a first draft of what became the final episode of the chapter "The Gray Zone" in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Levi had for some years wanted to tell the story of Rumkowski. He spoke of it in a letter of March 9, 1975, to his cousin Anna Yona, who lived in the United States. The scholar Martina Mengoni has traced the sources of Levi's interest. Levi read an article by Solomon F. Bloom, "Dictator of the Lodz Ghetto: The Strange History of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski" (it appeared in English in the December 1948 issue of *Commentary*); it was the first detailed account of the elder of L'viv (as Lodz is called in the text), and he drew on various passages from it in his own text. But he also knew *The Rats*, a collection of stories by the Polish Jewish writer Adolf Rudnicki, translated into Italian in 1967; one of the stories, "The Merchant of Lodz," painted a historical-psychological portrait of Rumkowski. Finally, in the seventies, thanks perhaps to Anna Yona, Levi got in touch with the writer Leslie Epstein, who in 1979 published *King of the Jews*, a novel whose protagonist is Rumkowski.

“The King of the Jews” suggests that the twelve portraits of “Present Perfect” in *Lilith* are in reality pointing toward the future: toward the complexity of Auschwitz, toward the subtlety of the moral attention necessary to describe it with precision, toward the new concept of the “gray zone,” which Levi was elaborating in those years and which was to mark a turning point in the international debate on the Shoah.

This is the first full version of *Lilith* in English, conforming to the original structure of the Italian volume. However, the twelve stories in the section “Present Perfect” were published in 1986 (with the addition of three stories of the same type written after 1981, and the poem “The Survivor”) under the title *Moments of Reprieve*, by Summit Books; Levi wrote a preface for it, which appears here in *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1981–1987*. Four stories in “Future Anterior” (“A Tranquil Star,” “Gladiators,” “The Fugitive,” and “Tantalum”) and two in “Present Indicative” (“The Sorcerers” and “The Girl in the Book”) appeared in 2007 in *A Tranquil Star*, published by Norton. The eighteen other pieces are here collected in English for the first time.

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Right after leaving Munich, near the end of the journey described in *The Truce*, Primo Levi was surprised to observe that the train he was traveling on now had sixty-one cars rather than sixty. At the end was “a new car, crowded with young Jews, boys and girls from all the countries of Eastern Europe. None of them looked more than twenty, but they were extremely determined and confident: they were young Zionists, they were going to Israel, taking any route they could and by any means they could.” Levi admired them: “They felt immensely free and strong, masters of the world and of their destiny.”

This was the initial inspiration for *If Not Now, When?*, which was published by Einaudi in April 1982. Levi imagined the adventures that brought the youths to that point, and wrote his first and only book of pure invention: a “Western” about the Jewish partisan war, as he himself called it. He revealed a second inspiration in the Author’s Note that ends the novel: sometime in the midsixties, a friend, Emilio Vita Finzi, had told him about groups of young Jewish partisans whom he had helped in Milan, just

after the war, on their aliyah to the Promised Land. In the Author's Note Levi also explains the origin of the title, and specifies which characters and episodes are real and which are made up. This attitude of caution and responsibility is striking, and is motivated by the role of writer-witness he assumed whenever he spoke about historical events or on subjects related to Judaism. For the same reason, he concludes the Author's Note by sheltering his inventions in a library of readings, thanks to which he was able to document the anti-Nazi struggle in Eastern Europe, Jewish traditions, the Yiddish world: peoples, historical events, rituals, languages—all of which were remote from the sensibility of Italian Jews and even further from the culture of non-Jewish Italian readers. Thus, before he started writing, he took some time to study the history books and even to learn Yiddish as well as he could: "eight months of preparation and total immersion." At the end of the book Levi notes the period of the writing precisely, "Turin, January 11–December 20, 1981," saying, in an interview, "It seemed to me appropriate to indicate what was for me a happy year."

Levi knew that he was taking a risk with this first novel. He had written an introductory page, but at the last minute he eliminated it. Here is a passage: "The actors are ready, or almost. Their outlines are still veiled, they have not yet emerged from the blur, from the universe of things that don't yet exist but wish to exist. They move about weakly, gray on a gray background; they speak softly, or maybe they don't even speak but gurgle and wail, like newborn puppies: they wait, hope, and fear to make their entrance." Levi must have felt that this preface was ingenuous, and in the end he launched into the narrative without preamble. He also discovered that the characters of a novel, endowed with a nature and a life of their own, at a certain moment decide independently what to do and where to go: "I had an outline, which I then ignored completely. I wanted to make [the characters] into Racinian heroes, whereas they preferred common, average roles, made up more of hard work than of memorable deeds."

Once again, Levi delivered to Italian readers—transformed into language—a world they didn't know: he had begun in 1947, with *If This Is a Man*, and continued with the strange science fiction of *Natural Histories*, the Jewish-Piedmontese dialect of "Argon," in *The Periodic Table*, and, finally, the technological and dialect language of Faussone, in *The Wrench*. Now, thanks to him, Yiddish culture entered Italian literature, translated into Italy's native language. In this novel Levi reflected on history, on its

sufferings, and on the moral stature of ordinary men. His desire for epic and for a richness of representation probably owes something to the great example of Elsa Morante's *History* (1974); also, Morante, in a 1965 essay, "For or Against the Atomic Bomb," discussed the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944), who, like Levi's Martin Fontasch, composed his last lines a few moments before he was killed by the Nazis.

Levi drew on the painting of Marc Chagall for *If Not Now, When?* but he also claimed a great number of literary sources. He confessed that he had taken some landscapes from Turgenev and from Tolstoy, while the violent impulse of his partisans can be traced to the stories of Isaac Babel anthologized in *The Search for Roots*. The opening episode—in which the hours are marked by gunshots because the belltower has been destroyed—is taken from Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, but it's also (very likely) an homage to the painter-writer who shared his name, Carlo Levi, and his political novel *The Clock*, of 1950. Most important, Levi declared, "among the great works that I kept before me while I was writing this book was the Bible. It was useful to me as secular reading."

Levi wanted to be the first Italian writer of Yiddish inspiration. The experiment was well received in his homeland: *If Not Now, When?* sold 110,000 copies the first year and won two big literary prizes, the Viareggio and (for the second time, after *The Truce*) the Campiello. The novel was less successful in the United States, where authentically Yiddish literature was well-known and where his linguistic ideas seemed less original.

Although Levi could not have wanted or predicted it, *If Not Now, When?* came out at a bitter historical moment, shortly before the Israeli Army invaded Lebanon. He and other intellectuals of Jewish origin distanced themselves from those acts of war. Levi went so far as to call for the government of Menachem Begin to resign. On July 11, 1982, advertisements for the novel came out with the headline "Tyre Sidon Beirut, June–July 1982," referring to the cities where the bloodiest clashes between Israelis and Palestinians had taken place. A Biblical quotation was addressed to each of the two peoples. To Palestine: "Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. . . . But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace." To Israel: "Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, which hast drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury. . . . How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth

good tidings, that publisheth peace!" The title of the novel thus became a troubled question addressed to both sides in the conflict.

If Not Now, When? was published in English for the first time in 1985 by Summit Books.

COLLECTED POEMS

Primo Levi's first literary publication was a poem, "Buna Lager," which appeared on June 22, 1946, in *L'Amico del Popolo*, a Communist weekly published in Vercelli, outside Turin, and edited by his friend Silvio Ortona. Nine months later, the paper published the first of five episodes of *If This Is a Man*. Levi dates "Buna Lager" (later titled simply "Buna") December 28, 1945; in the same month, he wrote "The Story of Ten Days," the final chapter of *If This Is a Man*, which is presented in the form of a diary. As we know, in that chapter he describes a Lager abandoned by the Germans: Auschwitz in ruins. "Buna Lager," on the contrary, describes an extermination factory that is working at full capacity, and it does so in hammering lines, full of assonances and alliterations, with pressured, mangled syllables.

Only recently did the publication of "Buna Lager" emerge, indicating that he initially shaped in verse the Lager that he had just begun to depict in prose. Between the last days of 1945 and the first weeks of 1946, Levi wrote a dozen poems, which he called (in the chapter "Chromium," of *The Periodic Table*) "short" and "bloody." Those poems, written before most of *If This Is a Man*, have a voice very different from that of his great first work. They are the book's introductory chords, high-pitched and strident compared with the prose that follows.

On May 31, 1947, the fifth and last episode of *If This Is a Man* to appear in *L'Amico del Popolo* was accompanied by a poem, then titled "Psalm": the book's future epigraph. Levi retitled the poem "Shemà" when, in August 1964, he published it again, in the second issue of *Sigma*, a university journal in Turin; and it's the title by which it is known today. Both "Psalm" and "Shemà" are religious titles, both from the Old Testament. "Shemà" has a clearer Jewish connotation, as the first word of the fundamental prayer of Judaism: "*Shemà* Israel," Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one alone. The first lines Levi wrote in 1945–46 are

presented as verses of a sacred text, and, as Alberto Cavaglion, in his commentary on *If This Is a Man*, writes, in "Shemà" Levi lets us hear the "voice of God" evoked at the end of the chapter "The Canto of Ulysses." And yet Levi himself called the poem his "blasphemous interpretation of a Yiddish prayer." That epigraph poem, a solemn, angry voice of command, is an atheist prayer, a counter-prayer that affirms the uniqueness of the extermination rather than the uniqueness of God, and scourges the indifference of the reader-spectator.

"Buna" was not Levi's first poem; as a boy he wrote singsongs, satiric verses about his friends, humorous rhymes with scientific subjects. But there is also the poem, dated February 1943 and titled "Crescenzago," that Levi always considered his first successful poem; in fact it opened all three collections of poetry that he published. If the texts of 1945–46 (and many poems written in the following years as well) contain the kernel of stories and even essays that Levi later wrote in prose, "Crescenzago" secretly preserves other chromosomes of the future writer. The poem, composed of six stanzas of six lines each, is based on a simple yet intelligent mathematical game: $6 \times 6 = 36$, a perfect square, in which 2 and 3 (an even and an odd) are prime factors, $2^2 \times 3^2$. Deliberately Pythagorean, the numerological structure projects into poetry the structural formulas of organic chemistry: the double bonds that, constructed in the form of regular hexagons, branch out from the hydroxyl groups and the carbon atoms.

Already during the war years and the period of semi-clandestine life under the racial laws, the young chemist had confided to his friends that he would like to write the story of a carbon atom. Not until 1970 did he actually write "Carbon," but it contains a passage about hexagonal structures, the molecular chains into which the carbon atoms are inserted as a result of the synthesis of chlorophyll. And in February 1943, long before writing "Carbon," Levi implicitly expressed his desire to do so by arithmetical means in the thirty-six lines of "Crescenzago." He was already planning his periodic table.

Yet the chemical, structural, and mathematical game wasn't the only one Levi played in "Crescenzago." He was manipulating words and sounds and was aware of it. The twenty-three-year-old author was an agile, rhythmical poet, cheerful, but with a tinge of melancholy: "*A Crescenzago ci sta una finestra, / E dietro una ragazza si scolora. / Ha sempre l'ago e il filo nella destra. / Cuce e rammenda e guarda sempre l'ora, / E quando*

suona l'ora dell'uscita, / Sospira e piange, e questa è la sua vita." (In Crescenzago there's a window, / And at it stands a girl who's going pale. / She always holds her needle and her thread, / She sews and mends and always eyes the clock. / And when the whistle blows at the day's end / She sighs and weeps; this is her life.)

In the filigree of these lines an Italian reader can recognize Leopardi (the Silvia of the *Canti*), Guido Gozzano (the Piedmontese seamstresses of "The Colloquies"), and the sorrows of Giovanni Pascoli. But the stanza begins with a parodic line, which Levi has skillfully stolen from a popular and prestigious art form, the classic Neapolitan song. It's a musical passage known all over the world: "*A Marechiare ce sta na fenesta*" (1891), words by Salvatore Di Giacomo, music by Francesco Paolo Tosti.

Shortly after *If This Is a Man* came out, Levi tried twice—without success—to publish some of his poems: in 1948 in the monthly *Il Ponte*, in Florence, and in 1949 in the influential international journal *Botteghe Oscure*, as documented by a correspondence with Giorgio Bassani, its editor in chief. Before the fifties, Levi had written no more than fifteen poems altogether, among them "Get Up," which became the epigraph for *The Truce*. One remarkable poem is "Epitaph," dated 1952, which evokes an episode of violence among comrades in the partisan struggle. Levi was, with Beppe Fenoglio and Cesare Pavese, among the first writers who had the courage to confront, early on, that ungrateful subject; he devoted a powerful passage to it in the chapter "Gold," in *The Periodic Table*. "Epitaph" and "Shemà" open the group of five poems that Levi published in *Sigma* in 1964; the other three are "Singing," "Avigliana," and "Crescenzago."

Six years passed before Levi decided to collect his works in verse. In December 1970, he published a small volume, in a printing of just three hundred copies, without a title or the name of the author. The cover was cardboard, the twenty-three poems were typed on a typewriter. (Seventeen of them were previously unpublished; the last was "Lilith.") In this completely anonymous object, Levi's imprint is recognizable in that each poem is accompanied by a date—a habit not widespread among lyric poets. Since the poems are in chronological order, the book was like an intimate diary in which the "uncertain hour" of each poem was fixed with precision: Levi was a writer who had faith in uncertainty but sought exactness.

Five years later, Levi's poems were brought out by a small, prestigious publisher, Vanni Scheiwiller, in Milan, who, starting in the thirties, with his All'Insegna del Pesce d'Oro editions, had published such writers as Montale, Quasimodo, Ungaretti, Auden, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Cummings, Seferis, Guillén, Michaux, and Benn. The elegant *plaquette*, in fifteen hundred numbered copies and this time with Levi's name on the cover, included twenty-seven poems (the twenty-three of the earlier collection plus four that were previously unpublished); the date of the printing was April 25, 1975, the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the war in Italy. The last two poems were "The Dark Stars" and "Farewell," and the title, *L'osteria di Brema* (*The Beer Hall in Bremen*), came from the poem "Arrival," a translation-imitation of a lyric from the *Buch der Lieder* of Heinrich Heine.

"In the Beginning," dated August 13, 1970, is one of the four new poems in *The Beer Hall in Bremen*. It ends, just like the story "Carbon," with a "hand that writes": the hand of Primo Levi. It's a link between different kinds of writing but it's also an announcement, because, starting in the second half of the seventies, Levi wrote poetry much more consistently. In 1976 and 1977, he published in *Tuttolibri* translations from Heine and from an anonymous Scotsman of the seventeenth century, and in the summer of 1978 his poems began appearing in the paper itself: the first, on July 28, was "Huayna Capac." Of the thirty-six poems that Levi published between 1978 and 1984, thirty-four appeared in *La Stampa*; the exceptions were "Annunciation" (in *L'Almanacco dell'Arciere*, 1980) and "2000"(in a volume titled *Vent'anni al Duemila; Twenty Years Until 2000*).

Levi's publisher, Einaudi, wasn't interested in Levi as a poet, but his collected poems easily found a different home, with Garzanti, in Milan. The book's title, *Ad ora incerta* (*At an Uncertain Hour*), was, significantly, drawn from Coleridge's ballad of witness, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. It came out in October 1984 and included sixty-three poems and ten translations. Previously unpublished were seven of the translations and three poems of a private nature, two of them dedicated to his wife, Lucia ("February 11, 1946" and "July 12, 1980"), and one with a Jewish-religious inspiration ("Passover"). On the other hand, Levi did not include in the book three poems that had already appeared in *La Stampa*: "To the Muse" (September 5, 1982), "Casa Galvani" (May 3, 1984), and "The Decathlete" (September 7, 1984). In this volume, they open the section "Other Poems."

Levi wrote jacket copy for *At an Uncertain Hour* that he signed with the initials P.L., and which appears at the start of the poems in *Opere*, and here.

In 1985, *At an Uncertain Hour* won the Abetone Prize, given by the province of Pistoia, and the national Giosuè Carducci Prize, in Pietrasanta. Ironically, the penultimate poem in the collection, "Pious," consists of a parodic reversal of Carducci's famous "Il bove" ("The Ox"), a poem that all Italian children of Levi's generation learned by heart in elementary school.

In 1976, Menard Press, in London, published an English version of *The Beer Hall in Bremen*, under the title *Shemà*: *Collected Poems of Primo Levi*. In 1988 Faber & Faber published, in both Great Britain and the United States, a *Collected Poems* that included all the poems of *Ad ora incerta* except "The Last Epiphany" (a translation, going back to 1960, from the cycle "Dies Irae" of Werner Bergengrün) and "Pious"; obviously it did not include Levi's translations. The volume ended with "Date Book" (*La Stampa*, January 2, 1985), which was written after the publication of *Ad ora incerta*. In the 1992 reprinting of *Collected Poems* by the same publisher, a section of eighteen "Previously Uncollected Poems" was added, opening with "Gedale's Song," from the novel *If Not Now, When?* For the present edition, Jonathan Galassi has retranslated and annotated all of Levi's poems.

Thus, *Collected Poems* fully reflects the original structure of *Ad ora incerta*, with one significant exception. The latter ends with a group of translations of the following works: the ballad "Sir Patrick Spens"; eight poems from Heine's *Buch der Lieder*: "Junge Leiden," 4 ("Im Traum sah ich ein Männchen, klein und putzig"); "Lyrisches Intermezzo," 33 ("Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam"); five poems from "Die Heimkehr": 19 ("Ich trat in jene Hallen"), 20 ("Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen"), 54 ("Teurer Freund, du bist verliebt"), 58 ("Zu fragmentarisch ist Welt und Leben!"), and "Donna Clara"; and "Die Nordsee" I, iv, "Die Nacht am Strande"; and "L'Envoi," also known as "The Long Trail," from Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads*. These have been omitted here, as have the three "Other Poems" ("A Valley," "The Thaw," and "To My Friends") that are part of *Stories and Essays*, and "Gedale's Song" from *If Not Now, When?*

Galassi (who has expressed his indebtedness to his predecessors, Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann) writes:

> Levi makes no great claims for his work in verse in the introduction to his collected poems, yet some see his poems as the place where he gave voice to his deepest, least repressed

fears and concerns. As one of his biographers, Carole Angier, puts it, Levi's poetry, which often reflects the clear influence of one of the greatest Italian pessimists, Giacomo Leopardi, "was where his darkness found expression: his sadness and isolation, his anger and fear—everything his moral and rational self suppressed."

Levi once said that poetry simply came naturally after Auschwitz and after the publication of his novel about partisans and resistance fighters, *If Not Now, When?*, in 1982. Angier suggests that he wrote poems "in his ancient mariner moments, whenever 'that agony returned'" and he felt the overwhelming need "to tell," as he puts it in "Get Up."

The telling came at a significant cost. Angier comments: "To write, he said, was to bare oneself to the world, even in one's most careful, polished work. How much more must this be so, for him, in poetry . . . which 'caught him in flagrante,' which struck him like 'a rash,' like 'an infection'?" Indeed, his friend and biographer Giovanni Tesio asserted that Levi's collected poems should be paired with *The Drowned and the Saved*, his late meditation on the meaning of the Nazi exterminations, as representative of the writer's dark side.

OTHER PEOPLE'S TRADES

Two books bear witness to the fact that, by the mideighties, Levi was considered a legitimate writer, as much by his publisher, Einaudi, as by the general reading public (academic criticism was the last to acknowledge this), and not only as the witness to a tragedy who later published works of fiction.

The first of these books, *The Search for Roots: A Personal Anthology*, appeared in 1981. The idea came from Giulio Bollati, the editorial director of Einaudi, who asked certain Einaudi writers (Italo Calvino, Leonardo Sciascia, and Paolo Volponi, in addition to Levi) to draw a map of the books that had shaped them. The project was intended for students, but Levi—who was the only one to complete it, and did so rapidly—delivered a work so personal and so "adult" that Einaudi decided to publish it for the general public.

The second book, *Other People's Trades*, was published by Einaudi in February 1985. It is a collection of fifty-one essays, on a broad range of subjects. The two books are, like *If This Is a Man*, *The Truce*, and *The Periodic Table*, autobiographical, but in this case they make up an intellectual autobiography. This autobiography includes praise of François Rabelais, of the precision of the language of chemists, and of clear writing, along with an interest in rites and games, in adventure (in an active life as

well as in novels or epic poems), in the behavior of animals and the mysteries of the cosmos, and, finally, in the moral choices of human beings.

One theme is noticeably absent from *Other People's Trades*: the Lager. Levi did not include in the new book the various writings on the Shoah that he had not yet collected, such as his many reviews of books on the subject. In *Other People's Trades* Auschwitz is a sensory memory that appears only in the essay "The Language of Odors."

Other People's Trades is a book that originated almost entirely in the pages of newspapers. The oldest piece is the one on Rabelais: it dates to October 7, 1964, when Levi was contributing science fiction stories and literary articles to the Milan daily *Il Giorno*. Three other essays—on Huxley, *Tartarin of Tarascon*, and the moon landing—are from the sixties. Forty-three of the essays first appeared in *La Stampa* between 1969 and January 1985; "Ex-Chemist" came out in the spring of 1980 in a trade paper, *Noi Chimici*, and three pieces ("Novels Dictated by Crickets," April 1976; "Why Do We Write?" August 1981; and "Going Back to School," April 1983) in the house organ of a bank, *Notiziario della Banca Popolare di Sondrio*.

The essay that opens the book, "My House," had not been published before. Levi probably wrote it for the occasion, as a last, eccentric autobiography, constructed through the rooms and objects of a life. The "involuntary interruptions" in living in the house he was born in, which he mentions in the first lines of the text, are an ironic allusion to the calamity of the Lager and to his professional travels as a chemist.

It might be said that in the first essays of *Other People's Trades* Levi wanted to bear witness to his own prehistory as an essayist and, at the same time, set out the themes that were important to him. Then, from "*Leggere la Vita*" (August 29, 1979) to the end of the volume, the sequence is almost perfectly chronological. The book's final essay, "The Eclipse of the Prophets" (July 8, 1984), is a warning, and its tone is more solemn than that of the rest of the book.

Many of the essays in *Other People's Trades* touch on several subjects at the same time. The scientific element and the literary citation—often precious and odd—are almost always present, as is the synthesis of a moral. Perhaps the book's most characteristic piece is "The Squirrel," an ethical meditation wrapped in an autobiographical tale, whose subject is an animal, and which starts off from the language of the city of Turin. Nineteen of the

essays contain autobiographical elements, and in seven Turin appears. Levi's Jewish roots are visible in only two pieces, but they are among the most memorable: "Ritual and Laughter" and "The Best Merchandise." He discusses science and technology in eleven essays, work in seven, and chemistry in six. But the fact that in this book Levi prefers to focus on professions that are not his is confirmed by his interest in animals (eleven essays), games (eight), literature (ten) and, especially, language as such, with eighteen essays.

The history of words, linguistic oddities, games connected to verbal expression are the most surprising aspect of *Other People's Trades*, and, significantly, the first part of the collection culminates in a stand against "obscure writing," published in *La Stampa* on December 11, 1976. The themes and the language of the book confirm Levi's choice of clear but not simplistic writing, limpid but complex, accessible but precise—writing that is democratic, in every sense of the word.

The first edition of *Other People's Trades* in English came out in 1989, published by Michael Joseph (London) and Summit Books (New York). It contained thirty-nine essays from the Italian volume, plus four taken from *Stories and Essays*. The twelve essays that were left out, perhaps not unexpectedly, all have to do with language ("Aldous Huxley," "*Tartarin of Tarascon*," "Congested Air," "Guncotton Stockings," "*Leggere la Vita*," "The Squirrel," "To Translate and Be Translated," "Queneau's *Cosmogony*," "Inspector Silhouette," "Masters of Our Fate," "Fossil Words," and "The Language of Odors"), and here they return to their places for the first time in English.

STORIES AND ESSAYS

In the 1970s, some Italian daily papers began to put together collections of articles by their most prestigious contributors. Some, like *La Stampa*, to which Primo Levi had contributed regularly since 1968, even created a book series: *Stories and Essays* was the second volume of the series Third Page. (The series took its name from the fact that, from the start of the twentieth century, page 3 in Italian newspapers was traditionally devoted to culture and books.) Appearing in November 1986, this is the last book that Levi published in his lifetime. Apart from the review of the memoirs of

Rudolf Höss (1960) and the article on Apollo 8 (1968), the fifteen stories and twenty essays in the volume had all appeared in the paper between 1977 and 1986 and are placed in chronological order in each of the two sections. But in the first edition of the book there were twenty stories as well. Levi reintroduced five stories that had already appeared in *Lilith*: "Disphylaxis," "Bridge Builders," "The Molecule's Defiance," "In Due Time," and "The Soul and the Engineers." They were placed in chronological order, between "Made for Each Other" and "The Great Mutation." Here, the decision was made to avoid the repetition.

Including poems in a book of prose had been Levi's habit ever since *If This Is a Man*. The three in *Stories and Essays* had appeared first in *La Stampa*: the book's epigraph, "To My Friends," on December 31, 1985, "The Thaw" (which opens the section "Stories") on April 3, 1985, and "A Valley" (which opens the section "Essays") on February 20 of the same year. These translations are by Jonathan Galassi.

Eleven of the stories and sixteen of the essays were published in English by Schocken Books in 1986, under the title *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays*, and two stories appeared that same year in *Moments of Reprieve*, published by Summit Books. Two stories ("An Erector Set Made with Love" and "Frogs on the Moon") and two essays ("A Bottle of Sunshine" and "The Hidden Player") from the original Italian edition were included in the English version of *Other People's Trades*, published in 1989 by Michael Joseph, in London, and Simon & Schuster, in New York. Two stories ("Peroxide Blonde," and "'Fair as a Flower'") are collected here for the first time.

The first Italian edition of *Stories and Essays* was reserved for readers of *La Stampa* and was not sold in bookstores. This circumstance means that *The Drowned and the Saved* remains Levi's true "last book": it is such because of its value as an ultimate reflection on Auschwitz, and it is in fact. For this reason it has been placed after *Stories and Essays*.

THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED

On May 13, 1960, Levi wrote a letter to Heinz Riedt, who had just completed the German translation of *If This Is a Man*: "I am glad, and satisfied with the result, and grateful to you, and at the same time, a little

sad. You see, this is the only book I wrote, and now that we have finished transplanting it into German I feel like a father whose son has come of age and leaves, and no longer needs his care." The Preface that Levi wrote specifically for the German edition, which came out in November 1961, ended with a passage from that letter. In the year after the book's publication, Levi received dozens of letters from his new German readers, and soon had the idea of collecting them in a book, along with his replies. In late 1962, he proposed to Einaudi what he called the "German project"; there wasn't enough material for an entire book, however, so the idea was never realized.

"Letters from Germans," the eighth and final chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved*, is thus at the origin of what we could consider Levi's last book. This is not the only inversion of chronology and structure. The title itself—which comes from the opening of Canto XX of Dante's *Inferno*: "*Di nova pena mi conven far versi / e dar matera al ventesimo canto / de la prima canzon, ch'è d'i sommersi*" ("I must make verses of new punishment / and offer matter now for Canto Twenty / of this first canticle—of the submerged")—had been conceived initially as the title for *If This Is a Man*. It was still useful, and even more appropriate, decades later.

The Drowned and the Saved was published by Einaudi in May 1986. Right at the start of "Letters from Germans" Levi observes: "*If This Is a Man* is a book of modest dimensions, but, like a nomadic creature, it has left behind a long and tangled trail for forty years now." It's no coincidence that the sentence comes here, given that the final chapter is the earliest nucleus of the work. But it will be useful to ask when the idea of a postscript to *If This Is a Man* was transformed into the idea for a new book, and to reconstruct the steps that, in the course of twenty-five years, from 1961 to 1986, led Levi from the "German project" (that is, documenting his dialogue with the readers he was most eager to have) to a completely new reflection on Auschwitz, one that treated themes that were new or barely touched on in *If This Is a Man*, and which, emerging within a new historical-political context, found a public belonging to a new generation.

In the interviews that Levi gave after the publication of *The Truce* (1963), he frequently vowed that he would write nothing more about Auschwitz. Fortunately, he didn't keep his promise. But those statements attest to the fact that he considered the "German project," which he had not yet set aside, something that had to do mainly with his German readers and

their relationship to the legacy of Nazism. It would have been a book written by others rather than by Levi. Paradoxically, we have to look farther back in time for the earliest source of *The Drowned and the Saved*.

"The Deported. Anniversary" (in *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980*) was published in 1955, in a small-circulation review, at a time when the memory of the Shoah had faded, in Italy as in Europe. In the essay, Levi examined the silence of the few survivors of the Lagers, pointing courageously to the root of that silence: "It is shame. We are men, we belong to the same human family that our executioners belong to. Before the enormity of their crime, we feel that we, too, are citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, and cannot be exempted from the charge that an otherworldly judge, on the basis of our own testimony, would bring against all humanity." Shame was a new subject for reflection. In the following decades, others were added to it.

New ideas were likely suggested to Levi by the radio and theater versions of *If This Is a Man* (1964 and 1966). Both focused on the confusion of languages and the deadly harm that came to those who, like the Italians and the Greeks, didn't know German, Yiddish, or Polish. Here should be sought the roots of the chapter "Communication." Another new element was the fact that in the 1960s Italian publishers were bringing out more books that dealt with the Shoah. Levi himself proposed to Einaudi a translation of the most important of these—*Menschen in Auschwitz*, by Hermann Langbein (1972)—even before it came out in German, the original language. Einaudi didn't listen. The book was published elsewhere, with a foreword by Levi, only in 1984, but, three years earlier, he had included a passage in his personal anthology, *The Search for Roots*, translating it himself. *Menschen in Auschwitz* was important because it drew the moral map of Auschwitz: it described the acts and the persons, the rules and the roles, the order and the disorder. Langbein confirmed for Levi that the inhabitants of the Lagers were a varied population, difficult to describe and to judge, and Levi was encouraged by this to elaborate the idea of what would ultimately be called the "gray zone."

A key theme of *The Drowned and the Saved*, the collaboration of the Jewish prisoners with the German oppressors, emerges in the chapter "The Drowned and the Saved" in *If This Is a Man*, and, later, in *The Truce*, in characters like Henek and old Thylle and the Kleine Kiepura. In 1967 Levi heard of a short novel that in the original Dutch version, *De nacht der*

Girondijnen (*The Night of the Girondists*), published in 1957, had appeared anonymously. The author was Jacob Presser (1899–1970), a historian who later published the most thoroughly documented history of the Nazi extermination in his country (*Ondergang*, 1965). Translated into German as *Der Nacht der Girondisten*, the novel was published, under the author's name, by Rowohlt, in Hamburg, in 1959, together with another Dutch story of the war, *Het bittere kruid* (*The Bitter Herb*), by Marga Minco, the pseudonym of Sara Menco, which had also first appeared in 1957. According to Marco Belpoliti, on April 30, 1967, in a letter to Hety Schmitt-Maas (Levi's principal interlocutor, Hety S., in the chapter "Letters to Germans"), Levi declared that he would get that volume directly from Rowohlt, and advised Hety to read it and then hand it on to others who might be interested.

It's very likely then that Levi read *De nacht der Girondijnen* for the first time in German. In 1976 he presented it to Italian readers with these words: "I came across this story by accident, many years ago; I read it and reread it many times, and it stayed with me." He had translated it into Italian himself, although he didn't know Dutch; but he knew German, the language in which he had read it. In his foreword to Presser's story Levi observes, for the first time, "There are many signs that the time has come to explore the space that separates the victims from the executioners." Although these words return almost verbatim, ten years later, in the chapter "The Gray Zone" of *The Drowned and the Saved*, the new definition is not yet there.

The spring of 1974 saw the release of Liliana Cavani's film *The Night Porter*, which misunderstood the gray zone in advance, so to speak. In the published screenplay, Cavani recounted that, years earlier, she had spent an entire afternoon talking to Levi: "I had the impression that Levi could, or rather could manage to, speak only about that period of his life, as if in spite of everything he had always remained there." Levi's work contradicts that impression, as the reality of the Lagers contradicts Cavani's film, which Levi called "fine and mendacious." Presser's work contained more truth, although it was fiction; Levi suggested it to Einaudi in January 1975, and was rebuffed yet again. He fell back on Adelphi, because Luciano Foà, one of its cofounders, had been editor in chief at Einaudi when, in 1958, the definitive edition of *If This Is a Man* was published.

The translation of *The Night of the Girondists* occupied the last months of 1975. When the work was finished, Levi wrote to Gabriella Poli: "The

whole time I was gripped by a violent emotion. Westerbork was the camp that the Dutch had set up for Jews who had fled Poland; under the Nazi occupation it became a sorting camp through which the convoys for the east passed. As I worked, I experienced Auschwitz again. And writing the Foreword cost me a great deal. But it's time to confront even the subjects that are painful. The space between executioners and victims is a gray zone, not a desert." As far as we know, this passage contains the earliest use of the expression "gray zone."

Almost four years passed before Levi publicly articulated the new category: in a conversation with Giuseppe Grassano—which took place on September 17, 1979, but was not published until March 1981—he called it the *fascia grigia* ("gray band"). Between the nouns "band" and "zone" is a connection that goes back to the Greek origin, *zōnē*, of the Latin *zona*, meaning "belt" (a synonym for "band," or *fascia*) and linked—in Levi's high school memory—to the poetry of Catullus, who in his Odes uses *zona* to indicate the band-belt of the beloved: "*Tam gratum est mihi quam ferunt puellae / pernici aureolum fuisse malum / quod zonam soluit diu ligatam*" ("As pleasing to me as, they say, to the swift girl was the golden apple, which loosed the long-tied belt"). "The space between executioners and victims *is* a gray zone," Levi wrote to Poli. And the italics help to advance the hypothesis that the use of the expression *zona grigia* (gray zone) has a possible origin also in the idiomatic English expression "gray area": referring to a region with an indeterminate color (moral as well). As he pointed out in the letter to Poli, such a region is not a desert, which would be left blank on a map.

"*È tempo di affrontare* (It's time to confront)," Levi writes to Poli. "The time has come to explore," he repeats, in the Foreword to Presser. Thirty years had passed since the liberation of Auschwitz. The hope was that the public was prepared to listen to more subtle, complex, and disturbing truths. Young people, with fresher minds, immune to the traumas and compromises of the past, would be able to do so. And by now the old should be able to as well, if they were willing to look at their own history calmly. In fact, the year 1975 turned out to be decisive for the future *Drowned and Saved*. In a letter of March 9 to his cousin Anna Yona, Levi declared his intention to write the story of Chaim Rumkowski, the president of the Lodz Ghetto. (The story appeared in *La Stampa* on November 20, 1977, under the title "King of the Jews," and was collected in the fall of 1981 in *Lilith and Other*

Stories.) Although Levi somewhat modified the style to make it suitable for a work of nonfiction, he used it again, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, where it concludes "The Gray Zone" chapter with a crescendo.

What is crucial is that, in the first draft of the text, in its short story version, Levi articulated, in a complete form, the new theme that was preoccupying him: corrupting—rather than inhuman—regimes like Nazism are endowed with the power "to create a broad band of gray consciences that stands between the potentates of evil and the pure victims: in this band Rumkowski should be placed." It's a description and, at the same time, an axiom. And it's a law of moral science that, in its linguistic aspect, shows us how the word "band" precedes the word "zone," and even suggests a possible reason for the replacement. Compared with "band," the word "zone" implies a less uniform coloration and hazier borders: it implies, in other words, a more complex casuistry in the manifestation of evil, and prompts us to sharper attention and more vigilant caution in judging it.

From various hints we can deduce that around 1975 a period of reflection began that led to the writing of *The Drowned and the Saved*. A disquieting story like Presser's and a misleading one like the tale brought to the screen by Liliana Cavani are intertwined with the political events of those years, during which, in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, the threat of a new fascism was perceived. Levi denounced it explicitly in the editorial "This Was Auschwitz," which appeared in *La Stampa* on February 9, 1975, and again in "To the Visitor," a text written in the autumn of 1978 that was to be displayed on the Italian Memorial at Auschwitz, and in which the existence of the extermination camps is presented as the extreme and logical result of European fascism (both are in *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980*). Also, in the late seventies the works of Holocaust deniers began to circulate, and Levi wrote several articles combatting their hypotheses. He also wrote an article about the death of a man who became in *The Drowned and the Saved* the opponent-interlocutor of the chapter "The Intellectual in Auschwitz" ("Jean Améry, the Philosopher-Suicide," also in *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980*).

From the perspective of today, the year 1975 was decisive for another reason. The school edition of *If This Is a Man* had appeared three years earlier, but in 1975 Levi decided to write an appendix that would satisfy the curiosity of his readers by answering their recurring questions, especially those of the students he met in the schools: this was his true audience, the

one that most excited him and, at the same time, made him anxious. In early 1976 the Appendix was ready. At first it was included only in the school edition, but beginning in 1979 it was printed in all editions of the book, including those meant for general readers. The eight questions and answers that Levi prepared are meant to offer a general historical-political framework, but they also express his moral life after the book's publication: the opening two questions concerned the possibility of forgiveness for the executioners (which Levi had no intention of granting), and the German people's knowledge of their own history. A large part of the Appendix, however, was devoted to those who in *The Drowned and the Saved* are defined as "stereotypes," and whom Levi tried here, for the first time, to describe and to analyze with the power of common sense and the precision of historical information.

In the intricate history of *The Drowned and the Saved*, we can observe certain fundamental ideas, starting with the "gray zone," an expression that has become so popular, so widespread in every intellectual discipline, that it is by now detached from Levi's text and—above all—from its original meaning. In the interviews of 1979 in which Levi spoke of his future book, there are two elements that help define the gray zone more precisely. In one of them Levi explains: "There is a theme, having to do with the Lager, that appeals to me and also seems relevant, and that is to look again at the experience after thirty-five years: to see it through my eyes, through the eyes of the indifferent, through the eyes of the young people who don't know these things, and also through the eyes of the adversary. It seems to me that it could produce a sociological analysis about which I think I have something personal to say. That is, taking a stand in the face of ambiguity." In the book that he was thinking about, Levi therefore intended to confront and develop very different, even irreconcilable points of view toward the Lager. Certainly he didn't mean to declare that they were all equally legitimate: they were, rather, to be carefully distinguished, in such a way that one would arrive at "*taking a stand* in the face of ambiguity" (italics added). His reasoning continued: "Above all, the most simplistic interpretation should be rejected; that is, on one side the pure oppressor, without doubts, without hesitations, and on the other side the victim sanctified by his role as victim. It's not like that. The human machine, the human animal is more complicated. There are intermediate stages. Those who have been called torturers were not torturers in a pure state: they were

men like us, who took on the role of torturers for some reason. I intend to explain these reasons in a future book." Analyzing the "intermediate stages" (an illuminating definition, which was not taken up in *The Drowned and the Saved*) does not mean accepting everything, and absolving everything; it means to understand and make distinctions with the most acute moral attention.

Levi sent a first draft of the essay on the gray zone to his friend Bianca Guidetti Serra on March 19, 1980: "Dear Bianca, this would be the first chapter of the book I am supposed to be writing." The structure of the book was therefore different, at the time, from what it ultimately became. And it is telling that in the end Levi decided to place the chapter on memory first. The witness of Auschwitz—who, forty years later, returns to discuss the events with the tools of the essayist and (in some passages) the historian—first subjects his principal tool, memory itself, to a rigorous analysis. Only after completing this operation does he go on to examine the theme of "ambiguity." A first draft of the chapter "The Memory of the Offense" was published in late 1982, in an anthology put out by the Campiello Prize of unpublished writings of five of the prizewinning authors (Levi won first prize that year, for *If Not Now, When?*).

It has already been said that the germ of the ideas fundamental to *The Drowned and the Saved* can be traced back to Levi's first two books. The censors of the German Democratic Republic realized this, in their way, when between 1979 and 1982 they examined *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce* to evaluate the advisability of publishing them in Communist East Germany. Authorization was denied. *The Truce* offered an unorthodox image of Soviet Russia and the Red Army, while the description of the Lager that emerged from both books raised subtle ethical questions rather than presenting two clearly contrasting faces: of victims (noble, heroic, politically aware, ready to resist until death) and torturers (evil and disgusting, without nuances). In fact, the Ministry of Culture had granted a cautious assent to the books' publication, but asked for a definitive opinion from the Committee of Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters, an East German organization charged with "safeguarding the tradition of anti-Fascist resistance" and vigilant about the representation of the GDR as a German and anti-Fascist state. Its judgment was extremely negative, mainly because of Levi's depiction of the role of the political prisoners, the majority of whom behaved toward the Jews as all the other Prominentz did. The

committee objected: “An absurd accusation, which denies and slanders the heroic behavior of many political prisoners.” As if that were not enough, Levi ignored the incidents of resistance that occurred in Auschwitz.

Although the political censorship that Levi endured in East Germany appears grotesque, it’s an indication of how disturbing the ideas that he was articulating in *The Drowned and the Saved* might be elsewhere, too, and not only in Italy. Two more sources of distress and of encouragement that acted on Levi in those years can be pointed out. There is a hint of the first at the start of “Conclusion,” where Levi says that the events of the Lager are, for the young people of the time, “things of their grandparents: distant, blurry, ‘historical.’” The distance, the lack of interest, the incomprehension, even incredulity, that Levi more than once faced in his encounters with schoolchildren had a wearing effect on him, and at times this discouragement even led him to suspend his school visits; then, after an interval, refreshed, he would return to them. But if this was a new source of distress, connected to the present, old, painful memories were also working on him, from the inside.

There is an episode that was not included in *If This Is a Man*, and which Levi recounts in *The Drowned and the Saved*, as the culmination of the chapter “Shame.” He discovers some drinking water during an air raid and shares it with a single companion, keeping it hidden from a second. This man much later rebuked Levi for that failure, and Levi was ashamed. Before publishing an account of the incident, Levi had sketched it by allusion in “The Survivor,” a poem dated February 4, 1984. The poem begins with a line from Coleridge, “Since then, at an uncertain hour” (the line that provides the title for the Garzanti collection of Levi’s poems published that year). The crucial allusion (and literary source), however, is not *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* but, as in *If This Is a Man*, the *Divine Comedy*.

“The Survivor”—a desperate entreaty to the poet’s drowned companions—ends: “*Non è mia colpa se vivo e respiro / E mangio e bevo e dormo e vesto panni*,” “It’s not my fault if I live and breathe / And eat and drink and sleep and put on clothes.” The reference is to the deepest places of the *Inferno*: Canto XXXIII, the ninth circle, in the so-called Ptolomea, where the traitors to guests serve their eternal punishment: they lie supine, fixed in an expanse of ice. Frate Alberigo de’ Manfredi di Faenza addresses Dante, a pilgrim in the world of the damned. Like the Ancient Mariner, he,

too, wishes to pour out the grief that saturates his heart. He tells the story of the damned soul next to him, Branca Doria, who, in order to take over Logudoro (a region of Sardinia), had his father-in-law, Michele Zanche, killed after inviting him to a banquet. Alberigo reveals that, as soon as a sin of such gravity is committed, the soul of the traitor is removed from his body and descends to Ptolomea, while in its place a demon occupies the body, until the day of natural death. Thus Branca Doria, an infernal being, can still inhabit the Earth, "*e mangia e bee e dorme e veste panni*": "and eat and drink and sleep and put on clothes."

In the nineteen lines of "The Survivor," Levi intended to refute the suspicion that he had survived in Auschwitz at the expense of others. And the reference to Dante—in which he identifies himself with a man-demon who, already damned, leads a virtual life on Earth, after traitorously taking the life of his neighbor—was probably a deliberate slip on his part. In this poem Levi therefore offered a summary of the chapter "Shame"; and in justifying himself before the mirror of his own conscience he used a line of the *Inferno* that was equivalent to an atrocious, and undeserved, self-accusation. This contradiction is enough to indicate what it cost him—to use the same word with which he defined the shame that, decades after the episode of the water, he still felt when he was confronted by his companion Daniele—to write *The Drowned and the Saved*.

The first English edition of *The Drowned and the Saved* was published in 1988 by Summit Books, New York.

UNCOLLECTED STORIES AND ESSAYS: 1981–1987

Scarcely more than six years separate the start of 1981 and the day of Primo Levi's death. The uncollected essays of that brief span of time have an aspect completely different from those of the three preceding decades: they are products of a spacious, versatile workshop, overflowing with talent and, at a superficial glance, disorganized. On April 11, 1987, this workshop suddenly lowered its shutter, leaving on its shelves dozens of texts—stories, essays, poems, testimonies, portraits of friends and of other writers, strong opinions on political and historical events—that, if Levi hadn't died, would certainly have found their place in future books, assembled with care.

We can be sure, for example, that sooner or later Levi would have published a new collection of poems. For that reason those which appeared after the publication of *An Uncertain Hour* are placed as a separate section, "Other Poems," in the 1997 Einaudi edition of the *Opere* (here, they are in *Collected Poems*). As for the fiction, some of the stories were already arranged in a series that, in two years at most, would be ready to be published, including the stories on animals that in his last months, and even his last days, Levi wrote for the zoology and ecology monthly *Airone*.

In *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1981–1987* we find an extension of *Other People's Trades* and *Stories and Essays* (in which, just a few months before his death, Levi had arranged a number of the pieces published in *La Stampa*). Levi the culturally omnivorous yet refined essayist can be found in pieces like "Our First Ancestors Weren't Animals" and "The Brute Power" but also in the strange recollection "When They Drank Methanol in the Lager" and in the pieces on Jack London and on Calvino as the translator of Raymond Queneau. These essays document for us Levi the translator into Italian of Kafka's *The Trial* (for a series thought up by Giulio Einaudi and entitled Writers Translated by Writers) and the memorialist of two loved and admired figures, Emanuele Artom and Leonardo De Benedetti.

In the rich panorama of these writings, four points of reference in particular might be noted. The first, which goes back to 1982, is the tortured but fully convinced polemic against the Israeli government's military conduct in Lebanon ("Who Has Courage in Jerusalem?"), also documented in many interviews and public statements that year. The second, which confirms Levi's belonging to a people (or, rather, to an ethical ideal of being in the world) is "The Path of a Jewish Writer" (1984). The two should be read together in order for us to grasp entirely Levi's moral energy and his awareness of his asymmetrical identity.

The other two are in the areas of science and history. The essay "Asymmetry and Life" is a complex reflection (published in *Prometeo,* a scientific monthly with a popular approach) on the chemical-physical structures of living matter and its behavior at the molecular level. The subject is directly connected to that of Levi's doctoral thesis in experimental physics at the University of Turin. The final reference point here is "The Black Hole of Auschwitz," in which, forty years after the events—as in *The Drowned and the Saved*, which preceded it by a few months—Levi

reflected on the Shoah, in an argument against the historical revisionism that was beginning to invade Europe. This could be called Levi's true moral testament; it appeared on January 22, 1987, as an editorial on the first page of *La Stampa*. It's one of the last essays that Levi signed, and though its tone may seem wearier than usual, the logic is as inflexible as ever.

The pages of this section are translated and collected for the first time as a unit based on the Italian edition of Levi's complete works, *Opere*, published in 1997 by Einaudi and edited by Marco Belpoliti.

DOMENICO SCARPA

The list of sources for the citations and part of the information in this essay—writings and interviews by Primo Levi, critical literature on him and on his work—can be consulted at the websites of Liveright/W. W. Norton (http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=4294988470) and the International Center for Primo Levi Studies in Turin (http://www.primolevi.it/Web/English).

Select Bibliography

These three volumes of Primo Levi's *Complete Works* make available to the Anglophone reader the essential information on the author and his writings. This bibliography is intended to serve as a guide for further study, so, in addition to works in English, it includes critical literature in other languages, principally in Italian.

There is another reason to put texts in different languages side by side. Apart from the origin of an author, scholars tend to cite works in their own languages: on Levi, in particular, Italian studies almost exclusively cite critical literature in Italian, while English and American scholars cite mainly texts in English, and so on. These are barriers that this bibliography intends to help remove.

The richest bibliography in the world can be found online, in Italian and English, on the website of the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi (International Center for Primo Levi Studies), www.primolevi.it. It contains more than six thousand entries, including both the primary literature (Levi's individual writings and works in Italian and in translation) and the secondary literature in various languages (after Italian, the most well represented are English, French, German, and Spanish). This tool, which is updated monthly, is easy to use and can be consulted in many different ways. One can search on the basis of the works (for instance, what has been written on *The Truce* or on *Other People's Trades*, or on the theater version of *If This Is a Man*) or on the basis of several dozen key words that allow the user to discover, for example, everything that has been published on Levi as an anthropologist, on his ordeal during the Resistance, or on his literary style. With some exceptions, the works cited in this essay are monographs or collections entirely or largely devoted to Levi; only occasionally are individual articles published in a review or a book noted.

The most immediately useful books are the editions of Levi's works that the author himself undertook to edit and to annotate for readers in the Italian middle schools. They are all published by Einaudi, in Turin: *The*

Truce (1965), *If This Is a Man* (1973), and *The Periodic Table* (1979, with an introduction by Natalia Ginzburg); a school edition of *The Wrench* (1983), similarly annotated, was entrusted to the linguist Gian Luigi Beccaria. In 2012 Einaudi published, in collaboration with the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin, a new, annotated version of *If This Is a Man*, edited by Alberto Cavaglion.

In addition, Levi commented on his work in many of his uncollected essays and in interviews; the former have now been collected in *The Complete Works*, while dozens of interviews remain scattered in various journals and newspapers. However, numerous excerpts from the uncollected interviews can be read in the extensive notes put together by Marco Belpoliti in the Italian edition of Levi's *Opere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997, with a fine introductory essay by the writer Daniele Del Giudice) and also in certain sections of *Conversazioni e interviste 1963–1987* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997). *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961–1987* (New York: The New Press, 2001), an English-language version of the latter book, edited by Robert S. C. Gordon together with Belpoliti, has a different structure from the Italian. A volume that contains a substantial number of scattered texts on Levi, along with useful biographical information, is *Echi di una voce perduta: Incontri, interviste e conversazioni con Primo Levi* (Milan: Mursia, 1992), edited by Gabriella Poli and Giorgio Calcagno. Other important conversations with Levi that have been published in book form are Primo Levi and Tullio Regge, *Dialogo* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989; revised Italian edition, 1984); Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi* (Marlboro, Vt.: Marlboro Press, 1989; original Italian edition, 1987); and Milvia Spadi, *Le parole di un uomo: Incontro con Primo Levi* (Rome: Di Renzo, 1997); *Intervista a Primo Levi, ex deportato*, edited by Anna Bravo and Federico Cereja (Turin: Einaudi, 2011; original edition, 1983). Levi's conversation with Philip Roth deserves a place of its own: it appears in Roth's essay collection *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (1986; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

Finally, five long conversations can be found in the issue of the journal *Riga* devoted to Primo Levi, again edited by Marco Belpoliti (*Riga*, no. 13; Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1997). This volume also contains a selection of contemporary reviews of Levi's works, in many cases by writers, and

twenty-four critical essays, by as many scholars, whose readings continue to be illuminating.

Examination of the secondary literature on Primo Levi begins necessarily with the biographies. The most concise and easy to read is that of Ernesto Ferrero (*Primo Levi*; Turin: Einaudi, 2007), which was used as the basis for the Chronology that can be found in volume 1 of *The Complete Works*. *Echi di una voce perduta*, the book edited by Poli and Calcagno cited above, is equivalent to a biographical profile. But the first proper biography was in French: Myriam Anissimov's *Primo Levi: The Tragedy of an Optimist* appeared in 1996 (English translation, Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1999). Although superseded by the biographies that appeared later, it is recommended for some of the biographical testimony, like that of Resnyk (see the chapter "The Work," in *If This Is a Man*).

The two most thorough biographies in print, the fruit of years of research and both in English, are Carole Angier's *The Double Bond: Primo Levi* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) and Ian Thomson's *Primo Levi* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003). It should be noted that the Italian translation of Angier's work, *Il doppio legame: Vita di Primo Levi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), was revised by the author herself and is definitive; the book should be read with caution, however, when it ventures deeply into Levi's private and interior life). For a discussion of both these biographies, see Alexander Stille, "Secrets of Primo Levi," *The New York Review of Books* 49, no. 13 (August 15, 2002).

A shorter biography is Philippe Mesnard's profile, *Primo Levi: Una vita per immagini* (Venice: Marsilio, 2008); the French version that followed is much expanded: *Primo Levi: Le passage d'un témoin* (Paris: Fayard, 2011). Also concise is a recent essay by Berel Lang, *Primo Levi: The Matter of a Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), which focuses mainly on Levi's ethics, philosophy, and Jewish roots. On the subject of Levi's Jewish background, see also Alberto Cavaglion, *Notizie su Argon: Gli antenati di Primo Levi da Francesco Petrarca a Cesare Lombroso* (Turin: Instar Libri, 2006), which is one of the best works on Levi, along with two other books by the same author: *Ebrei senza saperlo* (Naples: L'Ancora del Mediterraneo, 2002) and *Il senso dell'arca* (Naples: L'Ancora del

Mediterraneo, 2006). Another good monograph on the subject is Sophie Nezri-Dufour's *Primo Levi: Una memoria ebraica del Novecento* (Florence: Giuntina, 2002); and for a detailed essay on the Jewish element in contemporary Italian literature, see Luca De Angelis, *Qualcosa di più intimo: Aspetti della cultura ebraica del Novecento italiano; da Svevo a Bassani* (Florence: Giuntina, 2006). See also the pages on Levi in Sergio Parussa, *Writing as Freedom, Writing as Testimony: Four Italian Writers and Judaism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

Finally, there are the meticulously documented *Prisoners of Hope: The Silver Age of the Italian Jews, 1924–1974* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), by H. Stuart Hughes, and Judith Butler's *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). (For a reconstruction of the opinions that Levi expressed in 1982 on the politics of the government of Israel, see "Le vere parole di Levi," *Il Sole 24 Ore* [April 8, 2012]; "Le parole di Levi: *The New Yorker* e *Il Sole*," *Il Sole 24 Ore* [June 9, 2013]; and Arturo Marzano and Guri Schwarz, *Attentato alla sinagoga: Roma, 9 ottobre 1982; il conflitto israelo-palestinese e l'Italia* [Rome: Viella, 2013]). Two indispensable tools on Jewish themes are *Gli ebrei in Italia*, edited by Corrado Vivanti, in the series *Storia d'Italia: Annali 11* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996); and *The Holocaust Encyclopedia,* edited by Walter Laqueur and Judith Tydor Baumel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

Biographical material on Levi's adolescence and youth can be found in *I luoghi di Levi tra letteratura e memoria*, edited by Giorgio Brandone and Tiziana Cerrato (Turin: Liceo Classico D'Azeglio, 2008) and in Eugenio Gentili Tedeschi, *I giochi della paura: Immagini di una microstoria; libri segreti, cronache, resistenza tra Milano e Valle d'Aosta 1942–1944* (Aosta: Le Château, 1999). On Levi's brief partisan experience, see Sergio Luzzatto, *Partigia: Una storia della Resistenza* (Milan: Mondadori, 2013), and Frediano Sessi, *Il lungo viaggio di Primo Levi: La scelta della Resistenza, il tradimento, l'arresto* (Venice: Marsilio, 2013). Levi is included in the anthology *Writers on World War II*, edited by Mordecai Richler (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992). Bianca Guidetti Serra, a friend of Levi from youth, wrote, with the help of Santina Mobiglia, an autobiography, *Bianca la rossa* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009). Nicola Dallaporta, the "assistant" of the chapter "Potassium" in *The Periodic Table*, has written an affectionate account of Levi's university years: "La mia

esperienza di studio e di vita," *Annali di storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche* 5 (1998).

Memoirs published by Levi's fellow deportees are extremely useful. The most significant is by Jean Samuel, written with Jean-Marc Dreyfus, *Il m'appelait Pikolo: Un compagnon de Primo Levi raconte* (Paris: Laffont, 2007), which contains part of his correspondence with Levi. The man who is called Henri in the chapter "The Drowned and the Saved" in *If This Is a Man* also published a memoir: Paul Steinberg, *Speak You Also: A Survivor's Reckoning* (New York: Picador, 1999; original French edition, 1996). Luciana Nissim Momigliano, who was deported to Auschwitz in the same boxcar with Levi, in 1946 published her *Ricordi della casa dei morti*, which has now been reprinted in a version edited by Alessandra Chiappano (Florence: Giuntina, 2008); see also Chiappano's *Luciana Nissim Momigliano: Una vita* (Florence: Giuntina, 2010). Testimony and documents are collected in Anna Segre, *Un coraggio silenzioso: Leonardo De Benedetti, medico, vissuto ad Auschwitz* (Turin: Zamorani, 2008). Also see the collection of trial depositions and similar texts by Primo Levi with Leonardo De Benedetti: *Così fu Auschwitz: Testimonianze 1945–1986*, edited by Fabio Levi and Domenico Scarpa (Turin: Einaudi, 2015), which contains extensive historical documentary material. Hermann Langbein's *People in Auschwitz* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; original German edition, 1972) is a volume that Levi greatly prized and would have liked to translate into Italian himself; it quotes him and comments on him on many of its pages. Similarly valuable is the essay by Jean Améry *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980; original German edition, 1966); a second edition, with an introduction by Alexander Stille, was published in 1990 by Schocken Books, New York. On the Levi-Améry relationship see also W. G. Sebald, "Jean Améry und Primo Levi," in *Über Jean Améry*, edited by Irene Heidelberger-Leonard (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1990).

On matters relating to the publication of Levi's works, see Marco Belpoliti, "Levi: Il falso scandalo," *Rivista dei Libri* 10, no. 1 (January 2000); Giulia Boringhieri, *Per un umanesimo scientifico: Storia di libri, di mio padre e di noi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010); Italo Calvino, *Letters, 1941–1985,* edited by Michael Wood (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); Severino Cesari, *Colloquio con Giulio Einaudi,* 2nd edition (Turin:

Einaudi, 2007; original, 1991); Guido Davico Bonino, *Incontri con uomini di qualità: Editori e scrittori di un'epoca che non c'è più* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013); Ernesto Ferrero, *I migliori anni della nostra vita* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005); *I verbali del mercoledì: Riunioni editoriali Einaudi, 1943–1952*, edited by Tommaso Munari (Turin: Einaudi, 2011); and *I verbali del mercoledì: Riunioni editoriali Einaudi, 1953–1963*, edited by Tommaso Munari (Turin: Einaudi, 2013). On the relationship between Levi and Italo Calvino, see Giorgio Bertone, *Italo Calvino: Il castello della scrittura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994).

On Levi's work as a paint technician, the most detailed record is that of his colleague Renato Portesi: "Primo Levi. Un chimico, un impiantista . . . un uomo," an interview by Ferruccio Trifirò in *La Chimica e l'Industria* 83, no. 5 (June 2001). The best works on Levi and science are, in addition to Massimo Bucciantini's Primo Levi Lecture (see below), the pages devoted to the science fiction stories in Enrico Mattioda, *Levi* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2011); Mario Porro's essay collection *Letteratura come filosofia naturale* (Milan: Medusa, 2009); and these three monographs: Antonio De Meo, *Primo Levi e la scienza come metafora* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2011); Charlotte Ross, *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment: Containing the Human* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Angela Di Fazio, *Altri simulacri: Automi, vampiri e mostri della storia nei racconti di Primo Levi* (Pisa: ETS, 2012). Pierpaolo Antonello provides a wide-ranging analysis in *Contro il materialism: Le "due culture" in Italia; bilancio di un secolo* (Turin: Aragno, 2012). The story "Carbon" (from *The Periodic Table*) is included in *The Faber Book of Science*, edited by John Carey (London: Faber & Faber, 1995). Finally, there is Pietro Scarnera's graphic novel *Una stella tranquilla: Ritratto sentimentale di Primo Levi* (Bologna: Comma 22, 2013), which is not only an imaginative translation of a life into images but a careful reading of Levi through his own words.

The vast secondary literature on Levi is increasing every year, not only in Italian but in other languages. Yet until Levi's death, only a few short, popular works were available (and only in Italian), and there was very little of an academic nature. Writing about Levi consisted mainly of reviews, in Italy as elsewhere. Groundbreaking works have appeared in America,

including Risa B. Sodi's *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); a short essay by Anthony Rudolf, *At an Uncertain Hour: Primo Levi's War Against Oblivion* (London: Menard Press, 1990); the pages on Levi in an early work by Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), and Rosenfeld's more recent *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); the essays by Irving Howe, Lawrence L. Langer, and Cynthia Ozick in *Writing and the Holocaust,* edited by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988); and the two volumes containing the proceedings of conferences held in 1989 at Cornell (*Reason and Light: Essays on Primo Levi*, edited by Susan Tarrow [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990]) and at Princeton (*Primo Levi as Witness*, edited by Pietro Frassica [Fiesole: Casalini, 1990]), both of which contain brilliant contributions by a scholar who died prematurely, Gian Paolo Biasin. Among the works just cited, the most widely read has been Irving Howe's essay, which originally appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, March 28, 1985, introducing the first American edition of *If Not Now, When?* There are also influential articles by Victor Brombert, "Primo Levi: The Flawed Design" (1996), available in *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), and by Clive James, "Last Will and Testament" (1988), now in *As of This Writing: The Essential Essays, 1968–2002* (New York: Norton, 2003).

In 1997 Einaudi published the volume *Primo Levi: Un'Antologia della Critica*, edited by Ernesto Ferrero, which contains much of the best writing on Levi up until then. A section devoted to contemporary reviews of the individual works includes, among others, Italo Calvino's 1948 review of the first edition of *If This Is a Man*. This anthology reprints the essays that introduced the three volumes of the first, pioneering Einaudi edition of Levi's complete works (1987–1990): the essay by Cesare Cases, a scholar of German who had been a friend of Levi since Levi lived in Milan (1942–43), offers a comprehensive, acute, and idiosyncratic reading of the works; the essay by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo remains the most attentive analysis of Levi's style; and, finally, there is Cesare Segre's essay on the novels and the poems. The anthology also contains an analytic reading by Segre of *If This Is a Man*, and brief but illuminating critical portraits by Norberto Bobbio, Giulio Einaudi, Claudio Magris, Massimo Mila (a profile of Levi the

humorist), and Franco Fortini, who offers an extremely subtle reading of the poetry. Three other highlights are essays by Stefano Levi della Torre on Levi's ethics; Paola Valabrega on the Eastern European Jewish inheritance; and Alberto Cavaglion on the "termite nest" of characters in *If This Is a Man*. Finally, it contains Cynthia Ozick's "The Suicide Note," which can also be found in *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

In addition to the works of Alberto Cavaglion, Ernesto Ferrero, and Marco Belpoliti—among Belpoliti's many contributions are a Levian dictionary, *Primo Levi* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1998), and the narrative *La prova* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), in which he retraces the route of *The Truce*—another fine monograph is Robert S. C. Gordon's *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Another work available in English is Tzvetan Todorov's discussion of ethics in Levi, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997; original French edition, 1991). A basic tool for every Anglophone reader of Levi is *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, edited by Robert Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), which includes essays by Anna Laura and Giulio Lepschy on language, by Charlotte Ross on Levi's science fiction, by David Ward on Turin, by Mirna Cicioni on humor (Cicioni is also the author of *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge* [Oxford: Berg, 1995]), and by Nancy Harrowitz on Jewish identity. Gordon is the author of the most wide-ranging and up-to-date volume on reception studies and the memory of the Shoah in Italy: *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010* (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012); on the same subject, see Risa Sodi, *Narrative and Imperative: The First Fifty Years of Italian Holocaust Writing, 1944–1994* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

In the fall of 2009, Gordon gave the first annual Primo Levi Lecture, organized by the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin and published the following spring by Einaudi in a bilingual Italian-English edition. The subject chosen by Gordon was "*Sfacciata fortuna": Luck and the Holocaust* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010). This lecture was followed in subsequent years by Massimo Bucciantini, *Auschwitz Experiment* (2011); Stefano Bartezzaghi, *A Phone Conversation with Primo Levi* (2012); Mario Barenghi, *Why Do We Believe Primo Levi?* (2013); Anna Bravo, *Narratives for History* (2014); and Ann Goldstein and Domenico Scarpa, *In Another Language* (2015). Each volume contains an appendix of texts for students.

Another book by Bartezzaghi, *Scrittori giocatori* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010), also has a brilliant essay on Levi.

On the connections between Levi and historiography, see the anthology *Primo Levi testimone e scrittore di storia*, edited by Paolo Momigliano Levi and Rosanna Gorris (Florence: Giuntina, 1999). Many essays with a historiographic approach, entirely or partly about Levi, can be read in the two volumes of *Storia della Shoah in Italia: Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni* (volume 1, *Le premesse, le persecuzioni, lo sterminio*; volume 2, *Memorie, rappresentazioni, eredità*), edited by Marcello Flores, Simon Levis Sullam, Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, and Enzo Traverso (Turin: UTET, 2010). *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), an anthology edited by Saul Friedlander and based on a symposium held at UCLA in the spring of 1990, contains essays relevant to Levi by Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, John Felstiner, Carlo Ginzburg, and Hayden White. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) was published soon afterward.

On questions of historical method relative to testimonies, these two volumes are noteworthy: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012; original French edition, 2003), and Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012; original Italian edition, 2006). Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999; original Italian edition, 1998) has had an enduring international influence; Stefano Levi della Torre counters Agamben in "Il sopravvissuto, il musulmano e il testimone" (2000), an essay published as an appendix to a new Italian edition of *The Drowned and the Saved* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003).

The critical literature on themes related to bearing witness is extremely rich. Notable works in English include Lawrence L. Langer's survey "The Literature of Auschwitz" (1991), in *Admitting the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), and the works of Dominick LaCapra: *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); and *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

There are interesting contributions by Berel Lang and Robert Gordon in the anthology *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, edited by Andrew Leak and George Paizis (New York: St. Martin's, 2000). The same year, Gillian Banner published the essay collection *Holocaust Literature: Schulz, Levi, Spiegelman and the Memory of Offence* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2000).

Among the most recent monographs in English are Jonathan Druker, *Primo Levi and Humanism After Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Lina N. Insana, *Arduous Tasks: Primo Levi, Translation and the Transmission of Holocaust Testimony* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Carole J. Lambert, *Ethics After Auschwitz? Primo Levi's and Elie Wiesel's Response* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

Works in French include Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps* (Paris: Belin, 1995); Enzo Traverso, *L'histoire déchirée: Essai sur Auschwitz et les intellectuels* (Paris: Cerf, 1997); Renaud Dulong, *Le témoin oculaire: Les conditions sociales de l'attestation personnelle* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1998); and Jean-François Chiantaretto, *Le témoin interne* (Paris: Aubier, 2005). In Italian: David Meghnagi, *Ricomporre l'infranto: L'esperienza dei sopravvissuti alla Shoah* (Venice: Marsilio, 2005); Elisabetta Ruffini, *Un lapsus di Primo Levi: Il testimone e la ragazzina* (Bergamo: Assessorato alla Cultura Comune di Bergamo, 2006); Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *La vendetta è il racconto: Testimonianze e riflessioni sulla Shoah* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007); and Raffaella Di Castro, *Testimoni del non-provato: Ricordare, pensare, immaginare la Shoah nella terza generazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2008).

In German, a notable work on the subject of memory is Harald Weinrich, *Lethe: Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens* (Munich: Beck, 1997).

On Levi's language and style, in addition to the works by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo already cited and those by Giovanna Massariello Merzagora on the Jewish-Piedmontese dialect, there are stylistic analyses anthologized by Giovanni Tesio in *Piemonte letterario dell'*

Otto-Novecento: Da Giovanni Faldella a Primo Levi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991); the quantitative analyses of Jane Nystedt, *Le opere di Primo Levi viste al computer: Osservazioni stilolinguistiche* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993); a detailed analysis by Enrico Testa in *Lo stile semplice: Discorso e romanzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997); and an essay by Paolo Febbraro in *Primo Levi e i totem della poesia* (Lucca: Zona Franca, 2013). A recent monograph devoted to Levi as a newspaper columnist is Andrea Rondini's *Anche il cielo brucia: Primo Levi e il giornalismo* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012). There are numerous studies of Levian intertextuality and the best tool, again, is the online bibliography on the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi website.

The following works should also be mentioned: Thomas Taterka, *Dante Deutsch: Studien zur Lagerliteratur* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1999); Anne Henry, *Shoah et témoignage: Levi face à Améry et Bettelheim* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005); C. Fred Alford, *After the Holocaust: The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Lisa Regazzoni, *Selezione e catalogo: La costruzione narrativa del passato in Omero, Dante e Primo Levi* (Bologna: Clueb, 2010); Giuliana Cacciola, *I generi della memoria e la memoria di genere: Primo Levi, Ruth Klüger e la Shoah* (Rome-Acireale: Bonanno, 2013); and *Hannah Arendt e Primo Levi: Narrazione e pensiero*, edited by Natascia Mattucci and Andrea Rondini (Lecce: Pensa Multimedia, 2013).

For the international reputation and history of Primo Levi's works, translations of them, and the relevant critical works, see the essay by Monica Quirico in this volume (page 2805). In addition, one of the best comprehensive essays in English is Tony Judt's 1999 "The Elementary Truths of Primo Levi," in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008). Among the valuable introductions to editions of Levi's books, two are in French: *À une heure incertaine*, preface by Jorge Semprún (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) and *Œuvres*, introduction by Catherine Coquio (Paris: Laffont, 2005); and one is in Spanish: *Trilogía de Auschwitz: Si esto es un hombre; La tregua; Los hundidos y los salvados*, foreword by Antonio Muñoz Molina (Barcelona: El Aleph, 2005).

The following is a list, in chronological order of publication, of other important collections of essays on Levi: "Scritti in memoria di Primo Levi," *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 56, no. 2–3, May–December 1989; *Primo*

Levi: Il presente del passato; giornate internazionali di studio, edited by Alberto Cavaglion (Milan: Angeli, 1991); *Primo Levi*, a collection of papers from a January 1993 conference, edited by Marie-Hélène Caspar (Nanterre: Université Paris X–Nanterre, 1993); *Primo Levi: Memoria e invenzione*, edited by Giovanna Ioli (San Salvatore Monferrato: Edizioni della Biennale *Piemonte e Letteratura*, 1995); *Insegnare Auschwitz: Questioni etiche, storiografiche, educative della deportazione e dello sterminio*, edited by Enzo Traverso (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995); *Primo Levi: La dignità dell'uomo*, edited by Rosa Brambilla and Giuseppe Cacciatore (Assisi: Cittadella, 1995); *Shoah, mémoire et écriture: Primo Levi et le dialogue des savoirs*, edited by Giuseppina Santagostino (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997); *Primo Levi, il mestiere di raccontare, il dovere di ricordare*, edited by Ada Neiger (Fossombrone: Metauro, 1998); *Al di qua del bene e del male: La visione del mondo di Primo Levi*, edited by Enrico Mattioda (Milan: Angeli, 2001); *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, edited by Roberta S. Kremer (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2001); *Primo Levi, le double lien: Science et littérature*, edited by Walter Geerts and Jean Samuel (Paris: Ramsay, 2002); *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist*, edited by Joseph Farrell (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004); *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, edited by Stanislao G. Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005); *Primo Levi: Scrittura e testimonianza*, edited by David Meghnagi (Florence: LibriLiberi, 2006); *Voci dal mondo per Primo Levi: In memoria, per la memoria*, edited by Luigi Dei (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2007); *Scrittori italiani di origine ebrea ieri e oggi: Un approccio generazionale*, edited by Reinier Speelman, Monica Jansen, and Silvia Gaiga (Utrecht: Igitur, Utrecht Publishing and Archiving, 2007); *Tra storia e immaginazione: Gli scrittori ebrei di lingua italiana si raccontano*, edited by Hanna Serkowska (Kraków: Rabid, 2008); *Mémoire oblige: Riflessioni sull'opera di Primo Levi*, edited by Ada Neiger (Trento: Università degli Studi di Trento, 2009); "Special Issue: Primo Levi," *NEMLA Italian Studies* 32 (2009–2010), edited by Francesco Ciabattoni and Simona Wright; *Answering Auschwitz: Primo Levi's Science and Humanism After the Fall*, edited by Stanislao G. Pugliese (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); and *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Primo Levi*, edited by Nicholas Patruno and Roberta Ricci (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2014). A collection of essays from Universiteit Utrecht, published online in November 2014 (www

.italianisticaultraiectina.org), should also be noted: *Primo Levi lettore—Lettori di Primo Levi: Nuovi studi su Primo Levi*, edited by Raniero Speelman, Elisabetta Tonello, and Silvia Gaiga.

Other important monographs are Nicholas Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); Françoise Carasso, *Primo Levi: Le parti pris de la clarté* (Paris: Belin, 1997); Anne Sizaire, *Primo Levi: L'humanité après Auschwitz* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1997); Jean-Philippe Bareil, *Exil et voyage littéraire dans l'œuvre de Primo Levi* (Paris: Messene, 1998); Wolfgang Beutin, *Die Revolution tritt in die Literatur: Beiträge zur Literatur- und Ideengeschichte von Thomas Müntzer bis Primo Levi* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999); Sylvia Tschörner, *"Il binocolo aristotelico": Naturwissenschaft, Philosophie und Intertextualität im Werk von Primo Levi* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999); Daniela Amsallem, *Primo Levi au miroir de son œuvre: Le témoin; l'écrivain; le chimiste* (Lyon: Éditions du Cosmogone, 2001); Frederic D. Homer, *Primo Levi and the Politics of Survival* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Judith Woolf, *The Memory of the Offence: Primo Levi's "If This Is a Man"* (Market Harborough, U.K.: Troubador, 2001); Hélène van Camp, *Auschwitz oblige encore: Tentative pour penser le mal absolu à partir du bien toujours relatif* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003); Massimo Giuliani, *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2003); Claire Quilliot, *Primo Levi revisité* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004); Giuseppina Santagostino, *Primo Levi: Metamorfosi letterarie del corpo* (Moncalieri: C.I.R.V.I., 2004); Lucie Benchouiha, *Primo Levi: Rewriting the Holocaust* (Leicester, U.K.: Troubador, 2006); Sam Magavern, *Primo Levi's Universe: A Writer's Journey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Enrico Palandri, *Primo Levi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2011); and Rivkah Zim, *The Consolations of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance from Boethius to Primo Levi* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

This bibliography would not be complete without a brief mention of the gray zone, a theme that has had a resonance beyond the literary. Levi's term has been adopted by philosophers, historians, and anthropologists, and has now entered the language of journalism and ordinary speech. In addition to the works already cited and the writings on the subject in many monographs and anthologies, there are two collections of essays devoted entirely to the

subject: *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, edited by Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), and *La zone grise entre accomodation et collaboration*, edited by Philippe Mesnard and Yannis Thanassekos (Paris: Kimé, 2010). Furthermore, the "Auschwitz" section of the website of the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi has a subsection called "On the 'Gray Zone,'" in progress. So far, there are essays, in Italian and in English translation, by Marco Belpoliti, Anna Bravo, Carlo Ginzburg, and Martina Mengoni.

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English translation of the story "*Quaestio de Centauris*" first appeared in *The New Yorker.*

English translation of the essay "To Translate and Be Translated" first appeared in *Yale Review.*

About the Translators

ANN GOLDSTEIN (*The Truce*, *The Periodic Table*, and *Lilith and Other Stories*) is the editor of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, an eleven-year undertaking that began in 2004. She also edited and was one of the translators of *A Tranquil Star*, a 2007 collection of Levi short stories (all of which appear in *The Complete Works*) published by W. W. Norton & Company.

Goldstein has been involved with Italy and the Italian language for nearly thirty years. She has translated works by, among others, Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Petrolio*), Alessandro Baricco (*Silk*, *Emmaus*, *Mr. Gwyn*), Romano Bilenchi (*The Chill*), and Elena Ferrante (*The Days of Abandonment* and the tetralogy *My Brilliant Friend*), and was part of the team that translated Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*.

An editor at *The New Yorker*, Goldstein has worked with such writers as John Updike, Janet Malcolm, and Ian Frazier. She is the recipient of a PEN Renato Poggioli translation award and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

ANNE MILANO APPEL (*Stories and Essays*) has translated many works from the Italian, including Paolo Giordano's *The Human Body*, Andrea Canobbio's *Three Light-Years*, Goliarda Sapienza's *The Art of Joy*, Claudio Magris's *Blindly*, and Giovanni Arpino's *Scent of a Woman*. Most recently, her work was awarded the John Florio Prize for Italian Translation (2013) and two consecutive Northern California Book Awards Translation Prizes for Fiction (2013 and 2014).

FRANCESCO and ALESSANDRA BASTAGLI (*Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1949–1980* and *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1981–1987*) are a father-daughter translation team. Francesco is a former assistant secretary-general at the United Nations and the former head of the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine. He lives in Milan. Alessandra is the translator of Jurek Becker's *The Boxer*. She works as a book and news editor in New York.

JONATHAN GALASSI (*Collected Poems*) is a publisher and writer who has also translated the poetry of Eugenio Montale and Giacomo Leopardi. He is currently working on a translation of Montale's later work.

JENNY McPHEE (*Natural Histories* and *Flaw of Form*) is the author of the novels *A Man of No Moon*, *No Ordinary Matter,* and *The Center of Things*. Her translations include Paolo Maurensig's *Canone Inverso*, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by Pope John Paul II, and *A Family Lexicon* by Natalia Ginzburg. She also contributed to the translation of Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*.

MICHAEL F. MOORE (*The Drowned and the Saved*) is the chair of the PEN/Heim Translation Fund. His most recent translations from the Italian include the novels *Lost Words* by Nicola Gardini, *Agostino* by Alberto Moravia, and *Live Bait* by Fabio Genovesi. He has recently completed a new translation of the nineteenth-century classic *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni.

NATHANIEL RICH (*The Wrench*) is the author of two novels, *Odds Against Tomorrow* and *The Mayor's Tongue*. His essays and journalism appear regularly in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic*, and *Harper's*.

ANTONY SHUGAAR (*If Not Now, When?* and *Other People's Trades*) is a translator from Italian and French, as well as a writer with a special interest in Mediterranean culture. He is currently working on a book about translation for the University of Virginia Press and is a contributing editor to *Asymptote*. His work has appeared, in print or online, in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Review of Books*, and many other publications.

STUART WOOLF translated *If This Is a Man* directly with Primo Levi in Turin in the late 1950s. The current translation is of the final, definitive text, into which Levi introduced minor changes.

About the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi

The research activities of the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi (the International Center for Primo Levi Studies) are aimed at all readers and scholars of Levi's work, in every part of the world. Based in Turin, the city where Levi lived, the center has an ever-growing repository of editions of his works, including the numerous translations published in dozens of languages; critical and biographical works; and every form of written and audiovisual documentation of Levi and the reception of his work. It offers assistance for scholarly research and also undertakes its own initiatives, such as the Primo Levi Lecture, which is presented every year to foster debate on themes important to the writer and their connection with the world of today; the text of the lecture is regularly published in an Italian-English bilingual edition.

The center is an association established in 2008. Its partners are the Piedmont Region; the Commune and City of Turin; the Company of San Paolo; the Jewish community of Turin; the Foundation for Books, Culture, and Music; and the children of Primo Levi.

For more information, go to www.primolevi.it/Web/English.

About the Author

Born in Turin, Italy, in 1919 and trained as a chemist, Primo Levi was arrested during the Second World War as a member of the anti-Fascist resistance and, in February 1944, was deported to Auschwitz. After spending eleven months in Monowitz, one of the three main camps in Auschwitz, Levi was liberated by the Red Army, and was eventually able to return home, after a circuitous odyssey through Eastern and Central Europe, which he wrote about in *The Truce*. Upon returning to Turin, he resumed his career as a chemist, and met his future wife, Lucia. They married in 1947, and eventually had two children, Lisa and Renzo. He also began to write about his wartime experiences. *If This Is a Man*, initially published in Italy in 1947, was one of the first books to document the experience of the Nazi death camps; in time, it was recognized as one of the most important books not only of the Holocaust but also of twentieth-century literature.

Although his first book was translated into English and published in America in 1959, Primo Levi, while already recognized as a distinguished writer in Italy, rose to international prominence only in the early 1980s, after his autobiographical *The Periodic Table* was championed by, among others, the critic Irving Howe, the literary scholar Alvin Rosenfeld, the translator Raymond Rosenthal, and Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow. Writing of this work, in which Levi frames his life through the elements of the periodic table, Bellow remarked, “There is nothing superfluous here, everything this book contains is essential.”

As a result of this new attention, Levi’s other major literary works—including the novel *The Wrench*; a collection of poems; and his most philosophical work, *The Drowned and the Saved*—were all published in English. Italo Calvino called Levi “one of the most important and gifted writers of our time.” Levi died in Turin in April 1987.

Levi’s collected works were first published in Italian in 1987–1990 by his Italian publisher, Giulio Einaudi Editore, and, in a new edition, in 1997. After his death, his fame continued to grow with the publication of

biographies by Carole Angier and Ian Thomson; the appearance of *Primo*, a theatrical work and film, adapted and performed by Antony Sher; and the serialization of two of Levi's short stories in *The New Yorker* in 2007.

The Complete Works of Primo Levi, which is based on the 1997 Einaudi edition, contains writings that have never appeared before in English, and presents Levi's entire body of work in English for the first time.

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